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A Laying on of Hands: Toni Morrison and the Materiality of *Love*

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It is almost impossible not to read *Love*, Toni Morrison's most recent novel, intertextually with *Beloved*, as *Love/love*, linguistically and thematically, are part of *Beloved/beloved*. While a dead baby's ghost may be at the center of *Beloved*, it is the depth of mother love and its manifestation that haunts the novel. *Beloved* challenges the reader to consider the ethics of love. Does love play by different rules at different times or in different situations? How do we ensure the safety of our beloved? Is it possible that Paul D is right—Sethe's love is too thick? Or does the novel ultimately redeem Sethe's position: "thin love ain't love at all" (*Beloved* 164)? Morrison's commentary on the novel is likewise cryptic as she holds that Sethe did the right thing, but questions whether she had the right to do it. Even a cursory reading of Morrison's canon reveals that she is as fascinated with love as she is with death, exposing them as close allies. As she works, Morrison reframes, problematizes, and plumbs the depths of love not merely in what she has labeled her love trilogy—*Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*—but beginning with her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (Matus 155-56).¹

The Bluest Eye concludes with a treatise on love: "Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a free man is never safe. There is no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possesses his gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover's inward eye" (206). While love is described as a "gift," it is not one

bestowed on the beloved. Indeed, the beloved is bereft: “shorn,” “frozen,” and “neutralized.” The power, then, rests with the lover, who is active, choosing the expression of love. The beloved are static, incapacitated if not immobilized, by the love itself. Heeding Morrison’s words in her debut novel, it is worth remembering that love is not beautiful or inherently good; it is, instead, no better than the lover. In fact, it is only hatred, “so pure, so solemn,” that is described in *Love* as “beautiful, almost holy” (177). In *Love*, Morrison continues her exploration of this topic by literalizing love not merely as an emotion, not what one purportedly feels towards another; rather, she portrays love as an act, leading to the question: how does one “do” love?² Morrison’s repeated use of hands as a leitmotif in *Love* foregrounds the action of love, the materiality of love, love as verb, not as noun.

Of all Morrison’s work, *Beloved* best illuminates the practice of love, its power to heal, save, redeem, as well as devastate. Baby Suggs, holy, preaches that love, which had been denied to the enslaved, must be reclaimed in order to actualize freedom:

“Here,” she said, “in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face ’cause they don’t love that either. *You* got to love it, *you!*”

(*Beloved* 88)

Not only does Baby Suggs exhort the members of the community to cherish their flesh, but she reminds them to use their hands for intimacy, support, care, and praise. Throughout *Beloved*, it is the actions of the hands that materialize love. Literalizing her sermon, Baby Suggs puts her hands on Sethe:

Sethe remembered the touch of those fingers that she knew better than her own. They had bathed her in sections, wrapped her womb, combed her hair, oiled her nipples, stitched her clothes, cleaned her

feet, greased her back and dropped just about anything they were doing to massage Sethe's nape when, especially in the early days, her spirits fell down under the weight of the things she remembered and those she did not. . . . If she lay among all the hands in the world, she would know Baby Suggs' just as she did the good hands of the white-girl looking for velvet. (*Beloved* 98)

The whitegirl, Amy Denver, serves as midwife to Sethe en route from Kentucky to Ohio: Amy Denver rubs Sethe's swollen and bloody feet, creates makeshift shoes for her, tends to her scarred back, and most dramatically, delivers her baby girl on the banks of the Ohio River. Though unexpected, the whitegirl begins the healing that Baby Suggs will continue. While Baby Suggs's love for Sethe is unquestioned and Amy Denver's medicinal treatments are fraught with dehumanizing remarks and racist epithets, Morrison conjoins the actions as both sets of hands, though radically different, are imprinted with care and compassion.

The recurrence of healing hands in Morrison's canon gestures to the laying on of hands ritual: "In biblical times the laying on of hands was an action which conferred blessing or authority. . . . Jesus laid hands on children to bless them, and on the sick to heal them" ("Laying on of Hands"). As part of a prayer for healing, this physical act of love and curing has continued in many religious faiths, including that of Black Christian churches. One such church explains the significance of hand raising during the service: "Throughout the liturgy you will notice the Raising of Outstretched Hands. The basic gesture of praying with hands raised and outstretched, a natural posture expressing one's openness to help from a transient presence, was a gesture common among ancient Jews. When the posture was adopted by the Christians, they related it to Christ praying with outstretched arms on the Cross" (Gobolde 245).

Likewise, Monya Stubbs in "'Be Healed': A Black Women's Sermon on Healing through Touch" considers hands as a vehicle for healing.³ In recounting her childhood illness of impetigo, in which her face and head were covered with pus-filled sores, she remarks on her mother's healing hands: "The doctor told my mother, 'Mrs. Stubbs, use gloves, gently wash your daughter's sores every night, and bathe them with the medicated salve that I

prescribe.’ But my mother never used gloves. For three weeks, each night, her bare hands bathed my infection” (305). Stubbs not only chronicles her physical healing, but uses this loving exchange between mother and daughter, the healer and the sick, to consider the healing ministry of African American women:

As I further reflect on my mother’s touch, the lives of other Black women flood my thoughts. Women, who through the centuries, nurtured and sustained generations with their firm soothing voices, their courageous loving eyes, and their gentle healing hands. As I reflect on my mother’s touch, I see an old midwife, not in a hospital, but in a one-room shack, aiding in the healthy birth of a young Black child. As I reflect on my mother’s touch, I notice, in my mind’s eye, a woman rubbing salve on the back of a beaten slave. . . . (Stubbs 312)⁴

It is apt that Stubbs would conjure the image of a midwife, for it was the hands of these healing figures that were regarded as particular sites of power

In *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers*, Valerie Lee considers the ability of midwives’ touch to minister and restore, spiritually and physically. Historicizing African American midwives in the South, Lee considers the campaign waged to discredit these women from “catching babies,” which centered on the supposed dirtiness of their hands, a conflation of blackness with filth: “Her hands were too large, too ashy, too dirty. . . . She was unclean” (36). Given the import of midwives’ hands as instruments of healing, this was a particularly damaging and dehumanizing portrayal. African American women writers, according to Lee, position hands as “metonyms for black women’s experiences” (53); they have, in short, given “back to the grannies their hands” (52). In this way, Morrison’s novels, including *Love*, can be read through the paradigm of healing hands, an embodied form of love and nurturance.

As in *Beloved*, in *Love*, the murdered dead is at the center of the novel. Bill Cosey, the former owner of Cosey’s Hotel and Resort, was a wealthy and powerful man whose acts of love and violence, generosity and cruelty, structure the novel.⁵ As a “free man,” his love is “never safe,” and indeed he and his legacy ruin the lives of the women in his inner circle. Years after Cosey’s death, the

women are still obsessed with him, suggesting that death does not stop love: "Those you have loved deeply and who have died live on in you, not just as memories but as real presences" (Nouwen qtd. in hooks 189). Further, Brenda Marie Osbey contends that "[e]ven when people are dead, we maintain relations with them" (105). She goes on to assert that, at times, we are able to love better, more freely and openly, our dead than our living (105). Of course, how we mourn, commune with, and love our dead is tricky business in Morrison's work, for the balance between remembering and disremembering the past is a fragile one.

Heed the Night, the child bride of Bill Cosey, and Christine Cosey, his granddaughter, were best friends as children and are now bitter enemies occupying the family home on Monarch Street, a house haunted with the spectral presence of Bill Cosey, who is "everywhere [a]nd nowhere" (189). Likewise, Cosey occupies a similar position in the novel, as it begins twenty-five years after his death, yet each chapter references only him: "Portrait," "Friend," "Stranger," "Benefactor," "Lover," "Husband," "Guardian," "Father," and "Phantom." That "Portrait" and "Phantom" bookend these descriptions reveals that he is no longer alive (his visage is frozen in a portrait and his spirit roams the house on Monarch Street), yet the seven names bracketed by these two ossified descriptors suggest Cosey's continuation of the identifying roles of father, husband, and so on. The presence of both being and non-being forces the question of whether one ceases being a lover or a friend in death. According to hooks, "[l]ove is the only force that allows us to hold one another close beyond the grave" (202).⁶ Indeed, death has done very little to stop the Cosey women from having intimate relations with this powerful patriarch. He overshadows their lives, their home, and their relationship with one another.

Cosey's strong presence is matched only by the compelling figure of L, whose animated and opinionated voice, which punctuates the novel with candor and insight, overshadows the reality that she, like Cosey, is dead, a phantom who haunts Up Beach (73). Given her import in the novel, the fact that she speaks after death is all but irrelevant. Considering Morrison's revelation that an earlier title for *Love* was *L* ("Star Power" 43), it is reasonable to read L as

the embodiment of love in the text. Just as the word “love” is almost never uttered in this novel, L’s full name is withheld, as is her voice in the community. From the outset, L claims, “My nature is a quiet one, anyway. As a child I was considered respectful; as a young woman I was called discreet. Later on I was thought to have the wisdom maturity brings. Nowadays silence is looked on as odd and most of my race has forgotten the beauty of meaning much by saying little” (3). While her voice is critical to the narrative, the community knows her primarily through action, not proclamation.

L’s status as cook, first at Cosey’s Hotel and Resort and later at Maceo’s Café Ria, signifies a performance of nurturance that is understood as an act of love. Indeed, throughout Morrison’s work, hands that cook and offer food to family and community are depicted as healing figures.⁷ Historicizing African American food preparation and production unearths a vexed relationship between food and culture. The economy of slave plantations was such that African American captives were both the cultivators and the cooks. Mintz argues that “it was the slaves themselves, who commonly emerged as the major food producers, working in family groups and on their own time, producing the bulk of the food of free people, and their own as well” (41). The ruling class was well provided for and dependent on their cooks to feed them. The irony here is that those who were forced to cultivate and prepare food were often without: “We have seen that the slaves were poorly provided, often half starved. Despite the many laws prescribing cultivation or rations, slaves commonly died of hunger, and a prime reason for *marronnage*—running away—was hunger” (45).

As Shange asserts, “[w]e came here hungry, trying to fill our souls and stomachs with anythin’ll sustain us ever since” (*If God Can Cook* 1). African American cuisine, then, both pre- and post-emancipation, constituted the essence of survival: soul food “includes within itself pride, excitement, attitudes which do not take food for granted, and genuine love” (Joyner 178). Read through the prism of soul food preparation, L’s status as the cook materializes her “genuine love.” Indeed, even her acts outside of the restaurants pair food with healing. After a family quarrel in which a teenaged Heed was humiliated by her husband, Heed sets fire to Christine’s bed. It is L who douses the flames with sugar: “they

found L smothering the blackened sheets with a twenty-pound sack of sugar, caramelizing evil" (*Love* 134).⁸ This loaded act symbolizes L's position in the Cosey family, as that of cook and its concomitant roles of healer, savior, and peacemaker.

L is reminiscent of the narrator of *Jazz*, for both are straightforward, opinionated, and knowledgeable about their communities. Morrison's claim that *Love* is a "perfect" book, an honor she bestows only on only one of her other novels, *Jazz*, invites a comparative analysis, especially since *Jazz* is part of her love trilogy ("Star Power" 43). Moreover, the Cosey women's graveside brawl recalls Dorcas' funeral, at which Violet Trace disfigures the corpse of her husband's teenage lover. Like Violet who uses a knife to cut Dorcas' face, but only manages to make "a dent underneath her earlobe" (91), Christine carries a switchblade, yet her weapon is not intended for the dead. These are but two of several instances in Morrison's oeuvre which foreground her treatment of the dead as occupying material and emotional space with the living. Often the dead provoke the strongest emotional response. The grave, as L maintains, doesn't "change a thing" (106).

It is the conclusion of *Jazz* that provides the ground for Morrison's most subtle intertextual play with *Love*. *Jazz* concludes with a riff on intimacy, as the narrator explores the contours of mature love through the hands' quiet gestures: "But there is another part, not so secret. The part that touches fingers when one passes the cup and saucer to the other. The part that closes her neckline snap while waiting for the trolley; and brushes lint from his blue serge suit when they come out of the movie house in the sunlight. I envy them their public love" (229). This passage abounds with references to hand motions, which become pronounced in the final lines: "look, look. Look where your hands are. Now," high-lighting intimate, tactile forms of connection between husband and wife, reader and book. That the narrator implores readers to look at their hands suggests that the actions of the body are more indicative than emotions.

Morrison, likewise, uses the hands as a primary symbol in her *Nobel Lecture in Literature*, as children ask the old, blind woman whether the bird in their hand is alive or dead. The bird, Morrison's metaphor for language, is the overarching symbol in the No-

bel Lecture, yet the hands should not be overlooked. The old woman first responds: “I don’t know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands” (*Nobel* 11). Morrison concludes her treatise on the properties of language with the old woman’s final instruction to the children to “Look” (30). In both instances, it is requisite to look at the hands since they are more revelatory than language.

Morrison amplifies this argument in *Love* in which hands—their materiality, their work, and their transformation—bespeak characters. The twelve diamond rings—“two on three fingers of each hand” (20)—function as a synecdoche of Christine.⁹ Her hands, “bedizened” by the jewels, are mentioned throughout the novel: “Christine spread her fingers for the familiar jolt the diamonds gave her” (24); the rings “snatched light from the ceiling fixture and seemed to elevate her task from drudgery to sorcery” (20). Diamonds have long been thought to hold special properties: these icons of sentiment have, in addition to their role in courtship and marriage, epitomized the “ideals of royalty and nobility” and were even thought to prevent poisoning (Scarbrick 61, 8). Christine claimed the diamond rings won by her grandfather in a poker game, ostensibly to place on Cosey’s hands in the coffin.¹⁰ On the surface, decorating Cosey’s hands for the afterworld is a loving gesture, but pairing death with diamond engagement rings, imprinted with “other women’s hopes” (*Love* 74) suggests the subterfuge of sentimental love. The rings, themselves a commodification of women’s dreams, romanticize heterosexual relationships, which, as Cosey’s poker game unmasks, are easily bargained—bought, won, and lost—by men. Christine’s bold assumption of the rings is a commentary on Bill Cosey, whose sins of the past were obscured by the dazzling opulence of his resort and his wealth. In this way, the diamonds, representative of Cosey’s assets, are a small part of his inheritance, for which both Christine and Heed vie. Christine’s bold assumption of the diamonds makes visible her claim to Cosey’s property. In antiquity the exchange of rings signified the transfer of power, and in the Bible rings were given to designate an heir (Scarbrick 6). In this instance, too, the rings display Chris-

tine's desperate desire to prove that she is the sole inheritor of Cosey's power and capital.

Heed's hands, deformed, useless, burned, and arthritic, map the pain of the Cosey women's lives. As Cosey's child bride—her impoverished family was happy to make the deal—Heed was thrust into adulthood, had no access to education, lost her best friend, suffered the humiliation of Cosey's affairs, and was broken-hearted that a man, for whom she intended to leave Cosey, did not share her affection. Heed's hands, "small, baby-smooth except for one scarred spot, each one curved gently away from its partner—like fins" (28), are a testament to her disempowerment. These "fins" are alternately described as "wings" (99) that "fold" (141). While Heed's marriage to Cosey brought financial and socio-political gain, the uselessness of her hands, which are described through animal imagery, disclose her powerlessness.

The exercising of power is further illustrated through the hands of a teenaged boy, Romen. The reader is introduced to Romen through his act of compassion towards a girl he would have "strangle[d]" (*Love* 47). The teenaged Romen, with six other boys, is involved in a gang rape of a young girl named Faye, yet he refuses to take his turn with this girl, shunning the brutal display of hypersexuality and machismo. Morrison uses Faye's hands, which are "curved down from the snow white shoelaces that bound them" to epitomize her helplessness. Romen, intending to strengthen his phallogocentric bonds, steps up to the bed, yet "watched in wonder as his hands moved to the headboard. The knot binding her right wrist came undone as soon as he touched it and her hand fell over the bedside. She did not use it at all—not to hit or scratch or push back her hair. Romen untied the other hand still hanging from the Pro Ked laces" (46-47). Romen's hands, seemingly detached from his body and will, free the young girl in an act that, within the confines of this novel, suggests goodness if not love. Since he "couldn't stand the sight of her," a reminder, as she is, of his lack of so-called manhood, Romen is not ennobled by this act of compassion and humanity. He shares his friends' "disgust" with his "girlish" behavior and even accepts the brutal beating that follows three days later. His act of love belies its presumed emotional corollary.¹¹

The preeminent manifestation of love, or its absence, in Morrison's latest novel, is Cosey's composition of his last will and testament. Cosey's will, at the center of the legal and personal battle between Christine and Heed, leaves all his possessions to his "sweet Cosey child." Each woman believes the reference is to herself: Christine is, after all, the remaining blood relative to Bill Cosey, and Heed, who called her husband "Papa," claims that the term is her husband's endearment. Here, the will, scribbled on L's menu, is an example of the word made material, as it inaugurates action, the transference of property and goods. Beyond receiving Cosey's wealth, each woman vies to hold the position of Bill Cosey's sweet child: "The process of will making operated in a context in which the transfer of property was interpreted as a communicative event: the giving of gifts made statements about past, present, and future relationships and was, therefore, implicated in the reproduction of relationships beyond the grave" (Hallam and Hockey 164). If wills, then, not only comment on previous relationships but bespeak further connections, it is not surprising that the women's competition for Cosey's affection is fierce.

Given the importance of hands in the text, the handwriting of the will extends this relationship between body, self, and text. In fact, during the early modern period, the hands, "as the agent of writing and a site for the display of identity," were afforded special status: "handwriting acquires a special weight as indicative of 'character'. . . . The signature effectively becomes a substitute for the person. . . also an assertion of truth or of consent" (qtd. in Hallam and Hockey 168). To further imprint wills and other official documents, they were personalized with wax seals, complete with impressed signs associated with particular individuals. Often, rings with embedded shapes, known as signet rings, were employed as identifying stamps. The signet ring, popular through the seventeenth century, guaranteed the authenticity of a document and "because it was indispensable for business the signet was always on the finger" (47). While diamonds were not frequently used in this capacity, "sovereigns with a taste for luxury, commissioned diamond signets" (80). Read historically, then, the vast number of diamond rings on Christine's fingers takes on greater meaning as

they function as multiple inscriptions of the self, registering a personal, legal, and aristocratic presentation.

Morrison gestures toward the significance of handwriting on a larger scale as the guests in Cosey's Hotel and Resort, the black elite, were marked by their signatures:

But most folks I seen had perfect hands, you know, because that's the way we was taught. But Papa didn't let them print it the way they do now, right alongside the signature. Didn't need to anyway, because he knowed everybody who was anybody and could recognize a signature even if it was a X, but no X-type people came, of course. Our guests, most of them, had gorgeous handwriting because, between you and I, you had to be more than just literate, you have to have a position, an accomplishment, understand? You couldn't achieve nothing worthwhile if your handwriting was low. Nowadays people write with they feet. (*Love* 26-27)

According to Thornton, "since the spread of print, script had been linked with self" (113), and so Heed's conflation of signatures with identity is historically salient. Throughout the nineteenth century, for example, the neatness of handwriting was thought to reveal traits such as trustworthiness, industry, and self-discipline; in short, writing was the sign of character (Thornton 43). This notion continued throughout the twentieth century as graphology experiments were done to test for sex, age, intelligence, and morality (Thornton 133). Handwriting analysis became a cultural craze from the 1930s to the 1950s, with newspaper advice columns promising to disclose readers' character and personality through writing samples and graphologists setting up booths in Atlantic City and elsewhere to capitalize on its commercial appeal (Thornton 119, 120). It should be noted, though, that graphology was simultaneously an academic discipline, with psychologists and other practitioners regarding it as a legitimate science.

In addition to the larger cultural narrative of graphology, Heed's reference to "X type of people" simultaneously references the post-emancipation history of illiteracy, as people routinely signed documents with Xs, while also speaking to the Black Arts Movement when some Black Muslims adopted the surname X to designate the absence of familial history and to accentuate the ancestral

losses wrought by the slave trade. Given the exclusivity of the Black elite who populate Cosey's resort, neither the history of slavery, nor the mid-century's militant resistance is palatable, all of which is implicit in Heed's derisive remarks.

The relationship between handwriting and character accumulates layers of textual meaning when it is revealed that the 1958 menu is not the official will of Bill Cosey. The absence of a formal will was not questioned, for as Holloway notes, "Countless numbers of envelopes were carefully placed in dresser drawers with these poignant instructions written on the outside: 'To be opened on the occasion of my death.' As African Americans were less likely than most to prepare wills, the instructions in these envelopes did not constitute legal documents, nor did they serve as formal dispositions of goods or personal effects" (107). It did not arouse suspicion, then, that there was no evidence of a more legalized document. L, who witnessed Cosey's authentic will, in which he gave all his worldly possessions to Celestial, a "sporting woman" with whom he has been engaged in a lengthy affair, forged the informal will in order to protect the Cosey women. It was an act, L admits, designed to keep the women "connected" (*Love* 201). L's good intentions resulted in her murder of Bill Cosey, the destruction of his will, and the creation of its substitute, textualized on a menu. While it could be argued that L's murder is part of a larger pattern of oppressive power relations endemic in the text, her exploit should be read in the spirit of Sethe's—acts of protection and love, which are nonetheless morally suspect. Again, it is the work of L's hands that materialize her love for the Cosey women, yet this act encompassed, if not necessitated, murder.¹²

L's menu did indeed suture the Cosey women's lives. Sworn enemies nurtured and cared for one another until the time of their deaths. Heed, though verbally abused and taunted by May (Cosey's daughter-in-law), physically tends to her: "I sat at the foot of May's bed or on top of her dresser sometimes and watched Heed soap her bottom, mash badly cooked food to just the right consistency. She cut May's toenails and wiped white flakes from her eyelids. The girl May lived to mistreat was the one she depended on to hold her head over the slop jar. Nagging her every second, but doing it: airing, cleaning, spooning, rubbing, turning

her over to the cooler side of the bed on nights hot enough to make you cry" (*Love* 140). Not only does Heed tend to May, but Christine does likewise for Heed, whose arthritis incapacitates her from performing daily tasks. Christine cooks and serves Heed's food each day, although grudgingly. It is while the women are living together that each hatches a plan for claiming Cosey's inheritance—Christine hires a lawyer, and the semi-illiterate Heed, whose "grasp of handwriting skills was limited," pays an assistant, Junior, to forge a second will, printed on another of L's menus stored in Cosey's Resort and Hotel. This will was to identify herself, without question, as the sweet Cosey child. It is fitting that Heed's trip to this memorial site would end with her death, a noteworthy confluence of handwriting, love, and death. This time, it is Christine and Heed, former best friends, who must confront the ghosts of their pasts, their love and its continuation after death.

While the love of and for a dead man haunts the novel, it is the depth of female friendship that substantiates love. In this way, the conclusion of the novel echoes Morrison's *Sula*, her most sustained exploration of the profundity of female companionship. Heed and Christine's intimacy mirrors Nel and Sula's. The girls' opposite complexions—"their faces, as different as honey from soot, looked identical" (34)—are recalled in *Sula* as Nel is the color of "wet sandpaper" whereas Sula is "heavy brown" (52). And like Nel and Sula, whose "friendship was as intense as it was sudden" (53), so too do Christine and Heed fall quickly in love as children, as the narrator of *Love* reveals: "It's like that when children fall for one another. On the spot, without introduction. . . . If such children find each other before they know their own sex, or which one of them is starving, which well fed; before they know color from no color, kin from stranger, then they have found a mix of surrender and mutiny they can never live without. Heed and Christine found such a one. Most people have never felt a passion that strong, that early" (*Love* 199).

Heterosexual relationships destroy both sets of friendships: Sula's affair with Jude, and Heed's marriage to Christine's grandfather, Bill Cosey. Both sets of women come to realize, though late in life, that their strongest desire is for one another, not the men.¹³ Heed and Christine's anger transforms to sadness at this realiza-

tion, and Christine, notably, invites Heed to “hold my. . . my hand” (194). In both novels, this understanding comes near or even after death. In the moments following Sula’s death, she is thinking of her beloved friend: “Well, I’ll be damned. . . it didn’t even hurt. Wait’ll I’ll tell Nel” (*Sula* 149). This brief postmortem reverie is amplified in *Love* as Christine and Heed have a deathbed conversation about friendship that extends even after Heed’s death. Neither registers surprise at their ability to commune subsequent to death and continue talking, a gesture that reinforces the seamless connection between love and death. The old women come to realize that they should have disallowed Cosey’s destruction of their friendship: “We could have been living our lives hand in hand instead of looking for Big Daddy everywhere” (*Love* 189). This reinforces hands as the preeminent site of intimacy, which is highlighted in Christine and Heed’s postmortem embrace: “Both look asleep but only one is breathing. One is lying on her back, left arm akimbo; the other has wrapped the right arm of the dead one around her own neck and is snoring into the other’s shoulder” (195). As this death pose graphically depicts, love transcends the body’s demise. Approaching death can foster self-realization and emotional clarity, allowing the dying to “unlock their truth” and “discover the freedom of being true to themselves,” a “recognition of love’s power,” which, according to hooks is “a moment of ecstasy” (198).

Love emphasizes even in its title the bankruptcy of the term. Morrison, recognizing that we are anaesthetized to the word, simultaneously foregrounds and withholds love, seeking to illustrate both the failure of language and the power of love’s embodiment. As readers struggle to find love in a novel replete with pain, suffering, child abuse, pedophilia, gang rape, arson, paranoia, murder, betrayal, and hatred, we realize that love is not an identifiable emotion, not a hallmark sentiment or an absent-minded wish. Moving away from word and theory, Morrison leaves readers with hands, as damaged, dying people reach out to minister and to heal. They grasp, reach, and hold on to one another in desperate acts of connection, practicing the art of love. Moving out of the emotional sphere and retreating to the material, “love as action rather than. . . feeling” (hooks 13), it is apt that the novel ends with foxglove, a beautiful plant that is as medicinal as it is deadly.¹⁴ L, the cook,

confesses by the novel's end to killing Cosey with foxglove, an herb that simultaneously heals the heart and, in high dosages, stops it. Foxglove is perhaps Morrison's perfect metaphor for love, as the plant both restores and destroys, its beauty belying its poison. Rather than seek love's perfection, Morrison examines love's work, work that renews, recovers, and heals. Substituting hand for word, deed for speech, Morrison's *Love* answers the call of *Jazz*, as we "look, look. Look where [the] hands are" to find love's expression.

Notes

1. *Beloved*, which examines mother love, *Jazz*, romantic love, and *Paradise*, a treatise on the love of God, are part of a single project, according to Morrison, about the nature of "the beloved" (qtd. in Bouson 209).
2. Here, I take my cue from Morrison's *Nobel Lecture in Literature*, where she offers, "[w]e do language. That may be the measure of our lives" (22).
3. The importance of hands in African American spirituality is manifest on the cover of *My Soul is a Witness: African American Women's Spirituality*, an anthology of diverse African American spiritual practices, which features a photograph of outstretched hands. Hands guide the reader to this multifaceted collection of essays, poetry, and prayer, showcasing that despite the varying spiritual traditions, it is hands that heal (Wade-Gayles).
4. Shange's choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*, contains one of the tradition's most powerful examples of healing through hands. After each woman shares a poem of pain, concluding with a devastating narrative of a father's infanticide, the women reach out to one another in a moving gesture of healing, "a layin on of hands" that is "strong, cool, moving, makin [them] whole" (61). The women heal one another through the sharing of song in concert with "fingers near [their] forehead" (60), affirming one another through hands. The laying on of hands is also ritualized in *The Women of Brewster Place*, in which Mattie's maternal rocking and bathing of a grief-stricken friend formalizes healing.
5. Morrison's description of Cosey as an icon for the African American community who "goaded them into thinking that with patience and savvy, they could do it too" (*Love* 40) echoes the characterization of Macon Dead in *Song of Solomon*. Macon's successful farm was an embodiment of hope: "Sixteen years later he had one of the best farms in Montour County. A farm that colored their lives like a paintbrush and spoke to them like a sermon. 'You see?' the farm said to them. 'See? See what you can do? Never mind you can't tell one letter from another, never mind you born a slave, never mind you lose your name, never mind your daddy dead, never mind nothing. Here, this here, is what a man can do if he puts his mind to it and his back in it'" (235).

6. It should be noted, though, that the definition of love hooks puts forth in *All About Love: New Visions*, namely, that it is “the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth” (4), cannot be used to describe any relationship in Morrison’s latest novel. Further, given hooks’s insistence that “abuse and neglect negate love” (22), it would be difficult to characterize the characters’ relationship with one another as truly loving. Some key aspects of love in hooks’s work, though, do manifest in the novel and are applied accordingly.

7. Although there are various characters in Morrison’s oeuvre who are connected to food, Pilate in *Song of Solomon* provides a particularly illuminating example of healing through food. Upon meeting her nephew Milkman and his friend Guitar, she offers them a perfect soft-boiled egg and provides an unconventional, but bountiful array of food for Reba and Hagar. Unlike Pilate, Ruth’s preparation of unpalatable food—including the “red at the bone” chicken—amplifies her inability to nourish her family.

8. While the “evil” in this sentence ostensibly refers to Heed’s pyromania, the sugar itself is an embodiment of evil as the cultivation of this cash crop evokes a particularly brutal chapter of plantation history. Tomich offers an economic reading of sugarcane commerce and human capital: “sugar production was virtually synonymous with slavery—more specifically, African slavery. . . . As sugar migrated to Brazil and the Caribbean, the social relations of slavery not only transformed Africans into commodities to be bought and sold but provided a means through which they were forcibly concentrated as the mass of cheap, coerced labor required for the large-scale commercial production of sugar in the New World” (2). Using sugar, then, to douse the flames is ironic, for that which saves is, itself, a site of destruction and death.

9. Morrison’s authorial presence in *Love* is made visible in her large photo printed on the back of the book jacket. What is arresting about this photo is her sporting of a diamond ring, a loaded symbol in the novel, which takes on additional layers of meaning in its regal presentation on Morrison’s hand. Reviewing Morrison’s other publicity photographs, her hand is not regularly featured, which makes this inclusion particularly significant.

10. That Bill Cosey owned these rings implicitly signals back to the Roman Empire when “a man’s professional status and success were judged by the number of rings on his fingers” (Scarisbrick 6).

11. Romen demonstrates kindness again by the novel’s end as he attempts to rescue Heed and Christine from Cosey’s old hotel and, though too late to save Heed, he carries both women in the car with ultimate care and compassion. Again, his act of compassion is not premeditated; rather, he “found himself scooping up the car keys” and traveling to the hotel (195).

12. While hands that materialize love recur throughout Morrison’s canon, *Sula* provides key illustrations. The pairing of love with death and violence is exemplified in Eva’s treatment of her son, Plum. As a baby, Plum’s bowels were obstructed. Eva, struggling to keep her son alive, took lard and “shoved the last bit

of food she had in the world (besides three beets) up his ass" (34) to relieve him. Although this selfless act of mother-love is understandable, years later she materializes her love for him in a far more dramatic and troublesome way: Eva performs a mercy killing of her beloved son, who returns from war a drug addict. Importantly, she holds her son in her arms, in her hands, before setting him on fire. The verbal economy of these scenes forces the reader to consider the graphic action of Eva's hands as a manifestation of love. Throughout *Sula*, hands disclose emotion. Indeed, at Chicken Little's funeral, the adult women mourn the loss of this little boy with their hands: "As Reverend Deal moved into his sermon, the hands of the women unfolded like pairs of raven's wings and flew high above their hats in the air" (65). Although unable to grasp the gravity of the situation, Nel and Sula, children at the funeral, are also described through their hands: the girls "held hands and knew that only the coffin would lie in the earth." Later, "during the walk back home their fingers were laced" (66).

13. In "The Art of Fiction," Morrison comments on the primacy of men in women's lives. Female friendships, she argues, are conceived of as lesser and even "discredited": "When I was writing *Sula*, I was under the impression that for a large part of the female population a woman friend was considered a secondary relationship. A man and a woman's relationship was primary" (107). Morrison continues, arguing that "[t]o have heterosexual women who are friends, who are talking only about themselves to each other, seemed to me a very radical thing when *Sula* was published in 1971. . . but it is hardly radical now" (108). Despite Morrison's statement that such a concept was "hardly radical" in 1993 (the year of this interview), she returns a decade later to this very subject, which suggests her continued interest in the way women's friendships, though vital to survival, are undermined if not eviscerated by male involvement.

14. This healing herb is also known by the nickname, "dead man's thimbles," a direct reference to Cosey.

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