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## “Not Even in the Language They Had Invented for Secrets”: Trauma, Memory, and Re-witnessing in Toni Morrison’s *Love*

TONI MORRISON MAKES MANY CLAIMS ABOUT THE NATURE OF MEMORY AND time in her nonfiction, and her novels reveal how these abstract concepts function in terms of actual human experience. In “The Future of Time,” an address given in 1996, she claims that contemporary literature has been losing a sense of the future and that with an obsessive focus on the past, the future is devalued. From her point of view, art is capable of “fierce resistance to . . . dehumanization and trivialization” (176) only inasmuch as it posits a future to move towards. This is an ethical function of art, “where the journey into the cellar of time does not end with a resounding slam of a door, but where the journey is a rescue of sorts, an excavation for the purposes of building, discovering, envisioning a future” (181). We might see Morrison’s body of work as such an enterprise, as she re-witnesses the past in order to uncover possible futures. These visions are never final, never complete, and never utopian, and her focus on the past is only one tool for exploring human potentiality. Because her attention remains on African American experience, often in the South, she emphasizes the need to examine the ways in which the past holds power and yet also how the contemporary world necessitates a re-visioning of place and of personal and communal history. For her, literature can serve as a “witness to the light and shade of the world we live in”(185), and gesture toward what *might* arrive—that is, of course, if we pay attention to what has already appeared.

In fact, understanding Morrison’s treatment of memory in relation to trauma in *Love* contributes strongly to an understanding of her ethics and approach to literature.<sup>1</sup> This novel, set in the southeastern United

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<sup>1</sup>This work extends prior discussion of ethics in relation to form, as found in the works of JaeEun Yoo, Jean Wyatt, and Mariangela Palladino.

States, primarily in the twentieth century, indicates an expansion of her historical and theoretical concerns. I will focus on concepts of witnessing, primal scenes, screen memories, and testimony, as well as the contrast between productive and unproductive (or cyclic) memory, to show how Morrison constructs a world in which only those who break free of the cycle of unproductive memory can heal and look forward to the future. *Love* elucidates what Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub have identified as the primary characteristics of testimony, a form that shows language as “in process and in trial,” and which “does not possess itself as a conclusion, as the constatation of a verdict or the self-transparency of knowledge. . . . [it is] a discursive *practice*” (5). In *Love*, this practice of testimony prompts a suspension of judgment or of narrative, linear time, allowing access to a kind of timelessness or an outsider’s perspective that provokes a reconsideration of the self in relation to the other. Paying attention to what this process arouses fosters a kind of witnessing that is an ethical function of literature. Morrison’s *Love* explores this function with a kind of allegory built into its very form—the novel depicts a world where “*all is known and nothing understood*” (*Love* 4), moves toward a re-witnessing of the past that creates “*ways to contradict history*” (103), resulting in a “gift [that is] unmistakable” (60), or a new perspective, for both the characters in the novel and for Morrison’s readers. My focus on Morrison’s treatment of memory and trauma shows how the movement past unproductive memory is essential to her ethics, not only in terms of the characters and their experiences, but also in terms of her manipulation of readers’ memories and their experiences of vicarious trauma.

Morrison achieves this movement toward healing by creating characters who must face their traumatic pasts and formulate viable testimonies regarding the truth of those events, and by creating L, a figure of timelessness and communal memory who provokes other characters to move beyond their traumatic memories and their entrapment in the past, providing a new sense of hope for the future. The future is ultimately changed by an act of re-witnessing and renewed understanding provoked by a stepping outside of the self in a moment of timelessness and suspension that is not traumatic, so that what was buried as traumatic memory can be faced. Morrison had previously framed trauma through the concept of rememory in *Beloved*, where the memory of trauma lingers in one place and can be re-experienced by others who “run into” it. *Love* represents a kind of progress past

rememory, then, for whereas memory in *Beloved* is formulated as threatening, lying in wait to impose continued trauma, here Heed and Christine reclaim their stories from the dominant patriarchal discourse and defuse the trauma of abuse and betrayal.<sup>2</sup> In *Love*, Morrison's attention to *redeeming* memory on a personal and cultural level reveals her sense of ethics. Her narrative brings forth the past for reexamination and leaves a space of potentiality for the future to come.

Of course, the methods by which an author deals with the past affect the power and potential of the futures envisioned by the reader. Morrison states, "There is a necessity for remembering the horror, but of course there's a necessity for remembering it in a manner in which it can be digested, in a manner in which the memory is not destructive" ("In the Realm" 247-48). While Morrison is speaking here about *Beloved* and slavery, such statements are also applicable to the trauma experienced by the characters in *Love*, which includes separation, betrayal, rape, and murder, as well as the collective trauma of racial injustice and its lasting impact in the southeastern United States. These characters, through no fault of their own, engage in often fruitless (and misleading) giving of testimony that arises from false emphasis on certain aspects of the past. Their misleading testimony is "composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition" (Felman and Laub 5). They are unable to move past unproductive memory on their own, and it takes the arrival of a young woman (Junior), the supernatural agency of L, and an encounter with death to provoke new understanding.

In this way, Morrison constructs a world that exposes the inner workings of trauma and memory. Her work frequently shows her awareness of trauma theory and its implications. As she stated in an interview with Gail Caldwell, "The past, until you confront it, until you live through it, keeps coming back in other forms" ("Author" 241). Literature is a means of re-witnessing the past, identifying what "is useful from the past and that which ought to be discarded." This does not mean "avoiding problems and contradictions" but examining them

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<sup>2</sup>As Lily Wang Lei remarks, "rememory first relates to memory as a replica of the original; secondly and significantly, it refers to the traumatic symptom emerging as the indelible residue of the original trauma; thirdly, it points to the writer's trickster-like signifying upon both her antecedents and her own works in order to revise American slave history and heal its trauma" (84-85).

closely; Morrison states that the novel should “not . . . attempt to solve social problems, but it should certainly try to clarify them” (“Memory” 389). Clarification is an ongoing process, subject to revision, and the author is responsible for confronting the past in such a way that the work is not regressive. *Love*, the title itself, points back to *Beloved*, and perhaps signals a new level of progress. While the word “beloved” signifies a passive state of existence or objectification, the word “love” as a title can be seen as a verb, as a state of existence, or as a noun. This later title may indicate the wider range of ethical and emotional responses available to Morrison’s characters in the twentieth century, as opposed to those of *Beloved*’s Reconstruction period.

Despite this putative progress, Morrison’s novels highlight the continuing legacies of slavery and racism and show the psychological ramifications of such experiences—a fact frequently noted by scholars.<sup>3</sup> Her literature allows a vicarious experience of trauma that can “translate the historical into the personal” (Morrison, “Art” 103) and allow the reader to “experience . . . what it *felt* like. The kind of information you can find between the lines of history” (103). In this way, the reader vicariously experiences another’s memory (whether fictional or not), and this can be a disconcerting experience. As Palladino argues, this narrative technique “denies the reader any ethical guidance” (336). Morrison’s novel presents the journey of the characters and forces the reader to confront rememory, suspend judgment, and assemble information over time, culminating in a healing re-integration of past and present. Of course, the content of the novel also explores the healing power of re-witnessing the past and the redemption that comes from a shifting of perspective. In the end, the reader becomes a kind of listener, an important figure in trauma theory—as Felman and Laub remark, the “hearing” of a narrative is how “the cognizance, the ‘knowing’ of the event is given birth to. The listener, therefore, is a party to the creation

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<sup>3</sup>Morrison’s open-ended form in this novel has provoked widely different critical approaches. Critics have analyzed *Love* as a rewriting of the gothic romance (Ferguson); performed psychoanalytic readings (Mellard, Feng, Wyatt, Wang Lei); used deconstructive approaches (Burr, Yoo); examined justice in the novel (Sweeney); broken down its form and its effects on the reader (Wyatt, Yoo, Wardi, Palladino); uncovered Morrison’s classical references (Palladino, Roynon); analyzed African American survival, history, or spiritual traditions (Yoo, Gallego, Zauditu-Selassie); explored L and wild female characters (Wardi, Ho, Bouson); investigated concepts of trauma and home (Schreiber); and focused on the men in *Love* (Mayberry).

of knowledge *de novo*. . . [and] a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event" (57).

### **"I wanted to be with you": Separation, Trauma, and Primal Scenes of Memory**

The form of Morrison's novel is inherently connected to issues of memory—circling around primal scenes of trauma, the story is narrated by L (who was a cook at Cosey's resort, but is now dead), and the reader has access to more information than L would have had while she was alive. L's narration is not infallible—indeed, as Jean Wyatt states, "From the start L disqualifies herself as reliable narrator" (206). From the beginning, Morrison establishes a tension between the timeless and the temporal.<sup>4</sup> L narrates from an "outsider's" position, both in terms of time and space, and she delays recounting Christine and Heed's primal trauma for much of the novel. The story describes two childhood friends, Christine and Heed the Night, whose world is torn apart when Christine's grandfather, Bill Cosey, marries Heed when she is only eleven years old. The friendship is broken by this intrusion, and the girls remain estranged into old age, when they occupy the same house and battle each other over the family inheritance until their final reconciliation, which is triggered by the arrival of Junior, a lost young woman who has an affair with the women's hired boy, Roman. The novel is set in the 1990s, although its scope encompasses a period from 1890 through the twentieth century. It follows a non-linear trajectory and circles what Ashraf Rushdy calls a primal scene, which is based on Freud's concept of the primal scene but is not *necessarily* sexual; this scene is "the critical event (or events) whose significance to the narrated life becomes manifest only at a secondary critical event, when by a preconscious association the primal scene is recalled" (303). By withholding this information, Morrison emphasizes the cyclical nature of the characters' relationships to time and memory, for they repeat thoughts and behaviors. Christine and Heed show how traumatic memory may be inherited or shared, and how it is possible to become so caught up in the past that no growth is possible. Only by giving accurate testimony regarding what happened to them both do they finally break

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<sup>4</sup>This tension also arises because, as Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber notes, "three levels of distress—cultural, communal, and personal—operate in *Love*, illustrating the complexity of working through trauma embedded in the social fabric" (140).

free of their cycles of hate and blame, but this happens only upon the point of death. In contrast, Romen's primal scene occurs when he is a teenager, in the present of the narrative, and he makes better progress toward self-understanding, which perhaps signals a new generation's capacity for adaptation.

The bulk of the narrative centers on the broken relationship between Christine and Heed. The reasons for their separation are related in pieces, reflecting the shattering nature of their broken bond. These women possess only a fragmented understanding of the past. Though they have constructed narratives that support their own senses of disenfranchisement and that are full of screen memories which help them suppress their primal scenes, they are unable to move forward and are stuck in a process of unproductive memory. Their lives are entangled due to their early attachment, the innocent love and friendship of children, the most powerful form of love according to L. They are so close that they have a secret language called "idagay," full of "words they had invented for secrets" (188). Until Bill Cosey takes Heed as his child bride, however, they do not really have secrets from one another. Because they are each other's "*first chosen love*" (199), Cosey's interference is deep and scarring. In the present of the narrative, when both women are elderly, they have spent decades of their lives spiting one another, fighting for a last bit of recognition from Bill Cosey and a place to belong. As L notes, "*They battled on as though they were champions instead of sacrifices*" (141); neither woman recognizes that she has sacrificed herself for Cosey's selfish dream. Each has lost "the friend of her life" (198), and this loss of female friendship goes far beyond other losses of romantic relationships in the novel. Indeed, at the end of the novel, after Christine and Heed reconcile, they remember "a time when innocence did not exist because no one had dreamed up hell" (190): the foundational relationship for each of them was with the other before Bill Cosey interfered.<sup>5</sup>

The reason for their loss of friendship is a pair of primal scenes that neither woman can process for most of the novel. They are caught up in

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<sup>5</sup>Indeed, James Mellard argues that in this novel Morrison turns away from the Oedipus myth to focus on "that of Narcissus" ("Families" 701). Mellard shows how these two girls (in different ways) see themselves in the other and also are drawn to being seen by the other. With this "paradox of love and identification" (706), they ultimately have a relationship where both love and aggression form the foundation of their joint identities.

unproductive cycles of blame focusing not on Bill Cosey, who perpetuated their traumas, but on each other. The nature of Bill Cosey's interest in Heed—his sexual interest in children—is only hinted at through much of the novel, as when Heed calls Cosey "Papa—my husband" (61), and we discover that Heed's wedding dress was "falling from her shoulders" (60) because it was too large. The facts concerning this marriage are related in fragments, through triggered memories of the past. Heed thought that marriage meant that she would be able to live with her friend, saying, "I wanted to be with you. Married to him, I thought I would be" (193). Christine rejects Heed after the marriage, thinking that Heed had replaced her with adult "nastiness." The real reason for their separation is that Cosey has traumatized each and insinuated himself between them; each is convinced that her "particular shame was different and could not tolerate speech—not even in the language they had invented for secrets" (192). Each has experienced a primal scene that is repressed and only exhibited in hate and rivalry. Here Morrison uses a structure much like that of *Beloved* and *Jazz*, in which she circles around the murder of a child and the murder of a lover and demonstrates the dangerous power of memory. For Christine and Heed, the full recollection and understanding of their primal scenes arrives during their final confrontation in the hotel, as they battle each other for control.<sup>6</sup> The scene draws the reader into their act of rememory, and as Yoo notes, when Morrison shows these women being damaged by "their psychological as well as social subjection to their fathers," the reader "partly experiences the harm her/himself, as the fracture in the representation of the black American women characters troubles her/his reading experience" (154). Thus, Morrison's text facilitates reconsideration not only of the characters, but also of the relationship between reading and ethics.

The critical event that triggers a new perspective on the past occurs when Heed falls through the floor at the hotel. At this moment, which is precipitated by Junior's failure to stop the fall and L's ghostly presence, the women realize (in a moment beyond linear time) how much they love one another. The reader witnesses what Wyatt calls an "abrogation

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<sup>6</sup>Wyatt views this moment and others as emblematic of a kind of Freudian belatedness that characterizes Heed and Christine's relationship, arguing that they are "chronically out of phase with the time of their lives, because of the trauma that stunted their lives" (200).

of chronological time;” she argues that these women come “too late” to this realization, so there “*is no future*” (197). However, despite the tragic loss of so much time together, and the fact that Heed appears to die from her injuries, I would argue that this moment comes just in time and that in fact, the two women are just beginning to see a new future for their relationship.<sup>7</sup> They finally achieve a joint remembrance of their primal scenes (which simultaneously disrupts the reader’s understanding of the entire narrative). They say the words “Hey, Celestial” (190), signaling audaciousness and shared admiration that allows them to face their primal scenes together. Indeed, this is a moment of testimony—they become an “*addressable other*” for one another, a figure who “can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness” (Felman and Laub 68). At the same time, the reader fulfills this function outside of the narrative itself, for Morrison’s larger testimony regarding the psychological ramifications of racism and prejudice, and the nature of love.

At this moment of testimony, the primal scenes are revealed in a third-person narration, as the reader is told that in 1940 Heed encountered Cosey in the hallway of the hotel and he fondled her, awakening her sexually and making her feel that “the wrong was already there. . . . And she had started it—not him” (192). Heed mistakenly believes Christine knows that this happened, because when she returns to her friend she is rebuffed. In fact, Christine had just witnessed her grandfather masturbating in the window of her bedroom, and is sickened by this introduction to adult sexuality. Each primal scene is sexual in nature and makes the girls feel guilty; Christine’s acknowledgment that Cosey “introduced her to nasty and blamed it on her” and that he left behind a “wreck” (165) reveals the long-lasting trauma of the event, especially since “Each one thought the rot was hers alone” (190). The recollection of this moment is a kind of shared “rememory,” as they are actually situated in the hotel where the trauma originally happened. Morrison shows how this trauma caused the girls to project hate for the self as hate for the other as they attempted to repress primal scenes that would not disappear.

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<sup>7</sup>Though Morrison leaves it unclear which woman actually dies after the accident, most critics see Heed as the one who dies. Since the relationship continues to flourish anew even after the death of one woman (she remains as a ghostly presence), the actual identity of the one who dies is somewhat beside the point.

Indeed, prior to their final recuperative testimony, both women, in the attempt to repress these primal scenes, fabricate stories of betrayal by the other. These stories are often triggered by physical reminders, such as a burn on a hand, and are examples of what Freud would call screen memories: they shelter the women from the actual, primal trauma they experienced. Freud saw screen memories as a kind of safety mechanism of the unconscious. Screen memories substitute for a previous traumatic or repressed memory that is preserved intact in the unconscious, but not made available for re-examination. Instead, what emerges is what James Strachey explains as "an image of something which is not the repressed memory itself but . . . though unimportant and irrelevant, *is closely related to the repressed memory*" (Freud 291, emphasis added). Freud shows how it is difficult to understand which memories are genuine and which are fictional (screen memories may be of actual events, though their interpretation is misleading). Most often, screen memories serve as markers that perpetuate avoidance of the original traumatic memory. Heed and Christine do not create fictitious memories (though there is bias in their individual recollections); rather, they displace trauma onto later events. Such displacement is needed because, as L remarks, their separation "*Cleaved the ground they stood on*" (141). L's comment evokes the mental barriers they established, the physical separation they endured, and the emotional distance between them. To cope, both women often re-tell incidents from the period after the event of their separation, relating screen memories from the early part of Heed's marriage to Cosey.

For the most part, both women focus on negative or misleading screen memories. Heed attempts to create a reconstructed memory of a romance with Cosey, that they had "Almost thirty years of perfect bliss" (62) together, which most of the narrative reveals to be false. Despite Heed's claim, the significant relationship of the novel is clearly between Christine and Heed, not Heed and Cosey. When the two women begin sharing the home they are both claiming ownership of, in 1975, they physically battle one another once or twice a year because of their bitter screen memories, an act that "was as much rite as fight" (73). Each woman is fighting herself as much as she is fighting the other, reenacting the primal event of separation and blame. They cause pain with "personal information, things they remembered from childhood" (74). Heed represses any acknowledgment of the fact that she was used by Cosey, trained as someone "he could educate to his taste" (110). Instead

of blaming Cosey, Heed repeatedly refers to *Christine's* betrayal, as when she tells the story of her return from her honeymoon, one screen for the earlier trauma. She is met with scorn and a "smirk" (127) from Christine, and "Her friend's eyes were cold, as though Heed had betrayed her, instead of the other way around" (128). When Heed offers to let Christine wear her wedding ring as a token of peace, the "kitchen explode[s]" (129) in recrimination, a reaction to the threat of incest. Perhaps expressing a shared sense of shame related to Cosey, Christine calls Heed a "slave" and tries to run away, and when she is brought back by the police, "Heed did not speak one word to her" (129). These memories are connected to a sense of betrayal that is closely linked to but also redirects attention away from what Cosey did to each girl. This fight precipitates a lifetime of hating one another, but it is based upon the earlier scenes of shame, in which each girl internalized guilt about things she could not control.

There are other versions of this story of abandonment and betrayal. Christine remembers Heed looking out the window of the car taking her away on her honeymoon, and she remembers Heed's "wild eyes, grin, and confusion" (170), as well as her fear: "There ought to be blood. There must be blood somewhere, because the sunlit child on the porch is holding herself stiff against the possibility" (170). This statement shows the violence of the separation of the girls as well as the violence of Cosey's taking Heed from childhood to womanhood too early. The threat of blood and the stiffness of Christine as she sees her friend drive away reveal their shared trauma, highlighting why neither girl heals from this experience. Another screen memory referenced by both girls is that of Christine's sixteenth birthday party, when Cosey spanked and shamed Heed, and she then retaliated against Christine by setting "fire to Christine's bed" (86). Christine remembers this incident when she is worried about losing her home, her present insecurities recalling similar emotions from the past. Heed refers to it when she accidentally stumbles into a rememory as she tries to tell a story of hosting a victory party in 1945. She is overwhelmed by the associated memory of "A sixteenth-birthday-plus-graduation party for Christine" (125), where she was shamed publically by the spanking. Both women repeatedly rehearse these memories of betrayal; they have internalized certain notions of truth regarding the past, but their memories only perpetuate a cycle of pain. Christine feels the world is "barren dark ugly without remorse" (132). Memory and rememory have become stagnating forces. Neither woman is willing or able to change, and the fear of being displaced drives

Christine nearly mad when Junior arrives (95). For Heed, who pretends that her marriage was ideal, there is a brief moment approaching an honest reappraisal of the past when she says to Junior that one should be "careful" in entering marriage, and that it caused her own personal Vietnam (129). However, neither Heed nor Christine truly faces the past, and therefore neither lives a full life in the present, or imagines much of a future.

Morrison repeatedly emphasizes the long-term effects of this trauma and the cyclic nature of time and memory. Wyatt accurately states that here, "Time is presented not as a linear sequence, but as a dialectic that produces new meanings" (198). A tension exists between the moment when Cosey chose Heed, which "*laid the brickwork for ruination*" (104), and the present of the novel, when the effects of this choice are still visible. The two women live "in a spotlight separated—or connected—by the darkness between them" (25). This "darkness" encapsulates their memories of sexual initiation and the later betrayals that they connect to those moments. And yet, both women still remember moments of joy from when they were friends. Christine uses a tiny coffee spoon for every meal she can "just to hold close the child it was given to, and hold also the pictures it summoned"(22). The spoon prompts memories of happier times—it was used to eat peach ice cream the first time the girls met on the beach. Christine remembers how she "fought for" (132) the right to call Heed her friend, a fight necessary due to their class differences, sharing with her "stomachache laughter, a secret language . . . one's dreaming was the same as the other one's" (132). Despite these brief flashes of longing, Christine and Heed remain caught up in their bitterness until Junior and L interfere. In this way, Morrison emphasizes how we must identify what "is useful from the past and that which ought to be discarded" ("Memory" 389), implying that repression and blame are unhealthy. For both Heed and Christine, life has been predicated on a primal scene of shame, connected to sexuality, that is repressed and refracted in their continually recited memories of later betrayals, and the depth of this repression requires a drastic intervention for change to occur.

#### **"[T]he wreck he left behind": Romen's Escape from "Punkhood" and Destructive Love**

In contrast to Heed and Christine, Romen eventually deals positively with the past, which shows hope for the future. He succeeds in part

because of his grandparents, who take the time to give him advice and wisdom, fulfilling the ancestral role of passing on essential knowledge. Romen's identity is threatened in the beginning of the novel when he "punk[s] out" (46) from a gang rape and helps the girl escape, but only after he has already watched her get raped repeatedly. Thus, much as Cosey had a "wreck he left behind" (165) with Christine and Heed's broken relationship, Romen leaves Pretty-Fay, the girl, after she has been irreparably traumatized, and similarly, he later abandons Junior for her selfish behavior just as she acknowledges that she has fallen in love with him. However, while Romen's abandonment of Fay is reactionary, characterized by disgust at himself and at her, his leaving of Junior represents a mature decision based on responsibility, a recognition of her character, and a refusal to let his traumatic memories of "punkhood" dictate his current behavior.

In the traumatic scene in which he is invited to participate in the gang rape, Romen struggles with his masculinity. He sees the invitation as an opportunity to become "the Romen he'd always known he was: chiseled, dangerous, loose"; instead, he becomes "girlish" (46) and is later beaten for his actions, which he feels he deserves. He does not fight back, for that might show that "he *and* her had been tied to a bed; his legs *and* hers forced open" (48). With this transference of the female rape to his own identity and body, Romen is struggling to define himself as a man and as an individual. He cannot understand what made him "melt at that moment" (49), and he takes his act of mercy as a sign of weakness. This is his primal scene, a foundational moment in his sense of identity, and one that he must face in order to move on with his life.

Romen's relationship with Junior is, at first, simply an act of self-reification that allows him to repress the memory of his "weakness." When she makes it clear that she desires him sexually, and they start sleeping together, he develops "a kind of strut to replace his former skulk" (109). After using Junior to establish his manhood, Romen can state that "Anybody who needed to get drunk, or tie somebody up, or required the company of a herd, was a punk" (114). Unfortunately, the repression of his primal memory also threatens to make him into a violent, abusive man, as he feels free to take greater liberties with Junior, who encourages him to be rough with her. Vida and Sandler serve as ancestral figures as they speak to him about his behavior; Vida notes that "Romen had a natural tendency to care for people, but he seemed, nowadays, not to know what to do with it" (150). Romen admits that he

has been drawn into a cycle of violence with Junior, where he sees himself "cold, unsmiling, watching himself inflict and suffer pain above scream level where a fresh kind of joy lay." Metaphorically speaking, he goes from "black to red" (153) in a kind of haze of power and violence. Sandler accurately remarks that Junior "bothers" Romen and makes him "feel uneasy" (154), telling him that this is essential information, but Romen is still enticed by the power Junior brings out in him. Unlike the qualities of love and mercy, which he characterizes as weak and feminine, power and violence take him away from that feminized self and create a Romen who is dominant and in control. Therefore, Romen represses his memories of powerlessness and tries to deny the ways in which fear dominates his current relationship.

At the same time, Romen is unable to entirely repress his kind side or his feelings of tenderness for Junior, and he demonstrates how the choice to face the past can heal the present. He shows Junior love by licking her "hoof" in the bath, and feels her "soften, give," but her "sci-fi eyes" are still dead and lifeless, showing that her transformation has not yet been completed (179). She is, however, honest with him about abandoning the Cosey women at the hotel at the end, making Romen choose what kind of man he will become. Once he remembers Sandler's advice that he is not helpless regarding his life, he comes to a realization that "the sniveling one who couldn't help untying shoelaces from an unwilling girl's wrist, was hipper than the one who couldn't help flinging a willing girl around an attic" (195). Thus, he faces his repressed memory, decides that mercy is not weak, and rejects Junior for her apparent inhumanity. At this point Romen moves past "the pressing needs of men" (92) and his own traumatic memories to consider the position of the other from a mature standpoint; he can now pay attention to what his grandfather told him was "information you can count on" (154)—one's own intuition about what is right and what is wrong.

**"No past, no history but her own": Junior's Disruption of Time, Place, and Memory**

In order to understand how both the Cosey women and Romen reach their moments of healing and reconcile with the past, some consideration of Junior's character is essential. Junior's identity is also predicated on a primal moment of trauma, and when she arrives in the middle of Heed and Christine's accelerating battle for dominance, she is

very similar to Heed. She is a modern-day child, raised in a lower-class, abusive household, and she is uneducated, street smart, but also “lost” (14). After spending time in Correctional for killing an abusive administrator, she responds to Heed’s advertisement for a companion, not realizing that she is actually being hired to forge a new version of Cosey’s will. She looks like “an underfed child” (23) and was raised at the Settlement, a place that is “unevolved and reviled” (54). Junior leaves the Settlement after being threatened with sexual abuse and after she has her foot run over by her uncles, paired events which together form her primal scene. Another parallel between Junior and Heed is that Junior runs away at the age of eleven, the same age at which Heed was married. The two women share the sense of being outcasts—Heed had always “believed stomachs turned in her company” (79) and that she was “safe” (78) with Cosey, an impression shared by Junior, who calls Cosey her Good Man. (Cosey is dead, but Junior forms an attachment to his portrait and ghostly presence.) Junior is additionally linked to the wild woman Celestial, the prostitute who is actually Cosey’s true love, and whose name Christine and Heed use when they are young as a byword for anything audacious (67).<sup>8</sup> Unlike Christine and Heed, Junior does not acknowledge her past except to note that it made her into a survivor: she has “no past, no history but her own” (169). Still, she is caught up in a cycle of unproductive recklessness and does not think beyond the temporal (in Correctional, she learned that “real time is not spent; it is deposited, bit by manageable it” [118]). Thus, in many ways, she is blind to possibilities for the future (beyond the satisfaction of physical and monetary desires) and to her own self-development.

Junior functions as a disruptive force in the novel, and Morrison uses her to effect change. Though Palladino states that Junior represents “the return of the repressed” (347) in terms of L’s hidden desire for Cosey, in mnemonic terms she more directly represents what Stephane Robolin calls “loose memory,” which he claims is represented in Morrison’s fiction through an uncontrollable woman who disrupts masculine and

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<sup>8</sup>Sweeney notes that there are several examples of these wild women in Morrison’s fiction: in this novel,

L herself, Heed, Junior, and Celestial challenge the powers of the police, the law, and the state to authorize, and to author, what counts as crime and who counts as what kind of criminal. Each woman serves as “something rogue” that disrupts standard disciplinary and legal equations, and each commits a crime that remains largely unpunished within the novel’s economy of justice. (455)

nationalistic discourses.<sup>9</sup> For example, Junior reads the faces and voices of others, not trusting anyone's version of the truth, and she points to a "strategic narrative practice that disrupts—indeed, loosens" (Robolin 301) the unproductive and stale versions of the past recycled by Heed and Christine. We are told that these women care only about how Junior "simplified or complicated their relationship with each other" (119); they are wholly invested in protecting the memory of Bill Cosey and their own inheritance. Junior is a woman who takes what she wants and who is used to protecting herself against anything, including tenderness. She creates a sounding board for Christine and Heed's trauma, and with her falling in love with a fantasized version of Cosey, she believes she has found acceptance and extends the women's false idolizing of this man.

In many ways, Junior is curiously naïve, though her brash words and actions belie her insecurities and help her to conceal her damaged past. She believes that Cosey is her protector, but her childish vision of love is offset by her experience in sex and violence. With Romen she encourages sexual violence and reveals her lack of self-esteem, fueling his desire for masculinity and power; Romen reflects that "She was like a gorgeous pet. Feed it or whip it—it lapped you anyway" (155). Junior initially remains trapped in this mode, but as she cares for Heed, she begins to feel "the kick of being, living, in a house, a real house, her first" (156). Unfortunately, she has no idea of how to hold on to this feeling in a healthy way, and she is unscrupulous in her selfish desires. Christine's suspicions that Heed is using Junior to displace her are fully justified. The final showdown occurs when Junior and Heed go to the hotel to find some old menus to forge a will in Heed's favor. Heed notes that the air "Smells like L" (175), and the presence of this other "disruptive" woman signals that change is about to occur. When Christine confronts them, Junior notes that Heed is about to fall, and she "does not watch or call out" (177), apparently allowing Heed to fall to her death. Junior's selfishness (a mode of self-defense based on her own experience of trauma) then leads to her abandonment of the two women, even as they are rediscovering their love for each other, signaling Junior's ironically

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<sup>9</sup>Robolin's focus is on South African writer Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* and Morrison's *Paradise*, but his point about the position of women in Morrison's writing and how they are connected to a perceived threat of "loose memory" is equally valid for *Love*.

positive presence as one which can disrupt unproductive cycles of traumatic memory.

Although Junior unintentionally brings about Heed and Christine's reconciliation, she herself remains alone in the end. Junior starts to change, but it is too late for her to maintain a relationship with Romen. Although she is the means by which he comes to self-realization, he does not stay with her. As already noted, she was initially unresponsive when he licked her injured foot (which represents the injuries of the past). This coldness, a remnant of her loveless childhood, begins to disappear after she abandons Heed and Christine at the hotel. Seeing Romen rush off to help them, she remembers how she had felt "A kind of inside slide" and a "jittery brightness that pleased and frightened her"—love. This feeling is "Brand-new, completely alien."<sup>10</sup> Her love is "why . . . she told him the truth" about leaving Christine and Heed behind, but the result is that he "ran. Away from her" (196). Though Junior attempts to begin a process of testimony by opening up to Romen and telling the truth, he does not prove to be a sympathetic listener or an "*addressable other*" (Felman and Laub 68). In the end, Junior is left locked in a room, and Christine and Heed (who continue to converse even after one of them dies) debate what to do with this young woman who "Ought to be" ashamed, but whom they can still see as a "little rudderless, homeless thing." They note that she could stay "under certain circumstances" since, although "She knows how to make trouble" (198), so too do they. In this way, as Mayberry notes, "Salvation becomes possible for Junior not through her glorified Good Man [Cosey] but by two old women's grace" (292). This moment emphasizes the power of women to heal women, and Junior's potential is explicitly linked to Heed and Christine, as well as to Celestial, so that she may have some hope for claiming her own power. It is these women to whom she may address her testimony in the future, drawing new strength. In the end, as Bouson remarks, Junior serves "as L's agent of healing" (370), and she may demonstrate how Morrison associates "the lawless female with the 'beloved' part of the self, finding in the risk-taking behavior of the outlaw woman the possibility of an

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<sup>10</sup>Schreiber notes that Junior's capacity to feel empathy and love is also awakened by her caretaking of Heed: "Human interaction via care-taking and physical contact protect against trauma, and Junior's bathing of Heed echoes how the bathing of Sethe by Baby Suggs and Paul D restores integrity to the body in pieces" (146). Of course, it is not until she realizes her new feelings for Romen that Junior becomes fully aware of the change in herself.

unbounded love" (372). Morrison herself notes that Junior is "a poor, rootless, free-floating young woman—a survivor, a manipulator, a hungry person—but she does create a space where people can come with their better selves" (Bouson 367). Junior's own future is left undecided, but she may have begun to confront the pain of the past, and through her relationships with Romen and the two women, she does make some progress in self-knowledge even as she brings forth self-realization in others.

**"Like stars free to make their own history": L's Power of Potentiality, Healing, and Changing the Future**

In contrast to these characters, all of whom are somewhat trapped by their haunting memories of the past, L acts *outside* of time and helps the other characters to learn about themselves. Most critics who engage with *Love* have focused on L as an embodiment of the novel's title, but they also view her as representing ancestral mothering or femininity, a Greek chorus, a figure of justice, a ghostly instrument of performativity whose actions are open to critique, an embodiment of female temporality, the Greek goddess Aphrodite, and the voice of Morrison herself. As narrator, character, ghost, and manipulator, L also stands for the kind of collective memory found in oral storytelling cultures. She "hums" at a low frequency, speaking to the reader from beyond the grave. K. Zauditu-Selassie explains the humming as "a language that informs and transcends words" (192). This hum has power "to calm and still the mind [and] connects L with other 'women who know things'" (191). Rebecca Hope Ferguson claims that L's name may be a pun on the French word "'elle' ('she') . . . , signifying female power" (248). L certainly judges and evaluates people around her, as when she relates that she turned her back on Cosey's women, judges May for separating the girls, wakes Heed up from a hysterical pregnancy, and eventually calls Cosey "*a good bad man, or a bad good man*" (200). Most notably, L is concerned with the telling of women's stories—her favorite thing is "*a story that shows how brazen women can take a good man down*" (10). This frank admission of a vested interest in the story, and of her admiration for strong women, signals to readers that they are meant to evaluate L's version of events *as a story*, told from a certain perspective—that of a brazen woman.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>In this sense, the narrator is overtly linked to the anonymous narrator of *Jazz*, which, as Wardi notes, Morrison considered to be her only other "perfect" novel (207).

From this outsider's perspective, unconstrained by normal conceptions of time and space, L preserves collective memories and pronounces judgment on the present, trying to change the future. For example, speaking about what happened in the decades after Cosey's resort went downhill, she states that May and Christine reconciled because Heed, with her inappropriate youth, potential promiscuity, and lower-class roots, represented a perceived danger to the family and to the black community. L's evaluative perspective here shows how she tends to re-frame her sense of the past to serve her present purposes, and her narration allows the reader to question the past from several perspectives, creating what Wen-ching Ho calls "a distinctively Morrisonian metanarrative" (669) as she serves the "dual role of spectator and moralist" (666). This metanarrative implicates the reader in the actions observed from L's perspective, including that of murder, and as Yoo argues, the reader is performatively engaged in Morrison's "haunting" narrative, and so is given the responsibilities of "witness, accomplice, and victim all at the same time" (154). Witnessing and engagement are founded on the recurring emphasis of traumatic memory in the story, and Morrison fosters this sense of responsibility because she believes that re-witnessing the past through an implicated perspective (which might include a reader's engagement with the text) promotes change. L, who speaks as a female ancestor (providing a counternarrative to official history and serving as a figure of communal testimony), states that progress often occurs through negative experiences that strengthen "*whoever survives; helps them know the difference between a strong mind and a healthy one; between the righteous and the right—which is, after all, progress*" (139). Thus, L serves as a voice of memory and a reminder of the function of storytelling as a kind of witnessing or testimony.

And yet, as Yoo also notes, to be drawn into the past in this manner is also to be invited to judge, and the reader is placed in a position where he or she must "decide what to do with the dismal injustice the ghost novel has presented" (166). Many readers are tempted to blame L for her interference with the will and her poisoning of Bill Cosey.<sup>12</sup> Not only

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<sup>12</sup>While some critics praise her act as merciful (see Feng and Mellard), others question "whether justice can be elastic without mechanisms of forgery and murder" (Sweeney 462). Ferguson remarks that the only way in which the women in *Love* gain any power is through "L's illegal (and murderous) acts of subterfuge" (272). Mellard goes so far as to claim that L's act of murder is "also perhaps the most primal founding gesture in *Love*

does she manipulate the reader by withholding information regarding her actions and about Christine and Heed's primal scenes, she manipulates Christine and Heed with her creation of an ambiguous will, later fostering their reconciliation. Within the story itself, Christine reflects that L is to blame for allowing Cosey to marry Heed: "she was the only peacemaker around . . . but she would take no one's side" (133). But L is also an employee who is at Cosey's mercy, and she does try to protect Heed. L's residual guilt may explain why she acts from behind the scenes later, altering the will and murdering Cosey. These details encourage readers to view L's actions critically, including the ways in which she narrates the story as a whole.

As narrator, L represents communal memory and manipulates the reader's impression of the past. Particularly in the final scenes of the book, she acts as an agent of change, prompting a productive and healing re-witnessing of the past and a movement beyond recurring cycles of trauma. When Junior allows Heed to fall through the floor, normal time is suspended, as signaled by L's unseen presence: Heed notes that the air "Smells like L" (175) when they arrive, and after Heed's fall, Junior says, "The aroma of baking bread was too intense. Cinnamon-flavored" (177). In these scenes, Junior enacts L's desire for change and the uncovering of true memory. Christine and Heed's friendship can be resuscitated only by uncovering the repressed truth about the past, as represented by the "obstinate skeleton [that] stirs, clacks, refreshes itself" (177).<sup>13</sup> As we have seen, the primal memories emerge to be faced and re-witnessed, allowing for redemption. Christine and Heed begin speaking *to* one another rather than *at* one another (so true testimony occurs), and they become part of what L calls "An unborn world where sound, any sound—the scratch of a claw, the flap of webbed feet—is a gift. Where a human voice is the only miracle and the only necessity" (184).<sup>14</sup>

and, indeed, in all Morrison's fiction" ("Unimaginable" 264).

<sup>13</sup>Mellard identifies the skeleton as love itself in "Families," but given what is happening in the novel at this moment, I remain convinced that repressed memory is represented by the skeleton, with its associations of the hidden "skeleton in the closet" and the emergence of new realizations for both women, which will then be followed by renewed love.

<sup>14</sup>Although Schreiber claims that "the shame each has internalized from Cosey's inappropriate touching and arousal" is left "unexpressed" (154), moments like these emphasize that they have taken a crucial first step in communication and testimony, and it is one that will continue now that they have the "gift" of their friendship to depend

Existing fully in the present, the gift they are now able to give one another is that of listening to the truth and providing forgiveness. Blame is finally laid on Cosey, but not exclusively, for they realize that “We could have been living our lives hand in hand instead of looking for Big Daddy everywhere” (189). This realization is what creates a new vision of possibility for the future—the unborn world where they can be together. They are like “stars free to make their own history and not care about another one; or like diamonds unburdened, released into handsome rock” (194). The re-witnessing of the past is transformative—it alters the characters’ and the readers’ understanding of the past, the present, and the future.

Thus, with the character of L, Morrison writes against a monolithic view of history, truth, and memory, showing how stories demand participation, including that of the reader, in evaluating the past. The constantly shifting perspectives in *Love* force the reader to debate what actually happened and whose perspective is in fact reliable. Unlike Ho, who sees L as representing the voice of the “implied author” (665) and functioning “like the chorus in a Greek tragedy” (661), I would argue that it is important to distance this figure from Morrison herself. L is a character whom the reader is meant to evaluate and not take as an absolute authority, despite her wisdom. At the end of the novel, Celestial, L, and (presumably) Heed exist outside of human time and memory (all three are dead), but they have some relationship to both, and their observations provoke the reader to re-evaluate the events described in the novel. Many situations remain open-ended: Heed and Christine may or may not show mercy to Junior. Romen develops a stronger sense of self and reframes his memory of the gang rape so that it does not threaten his identity, but his relationship with Junior appears to be over. Finally, L’s voice reaches out to the reader, inviting reconsideration of her story. After all, she provides only one perspective, and when she observes Celestial’s ghost sitting on Cosey’s tombstone, the reader is prompted to consider what Celestial’s story might have been if she had told it herself.

Thus, L’s version of events, though more inclusive than that of most of the other characters, is only a placeholder or marker, one story that must be added to, a fact that is signaled by her joining in Celestial’s song. L’s identification of Celestial’s song as “*a sound I wanted to answer*”

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on, even after one of them dies.

(106) shows the need for a recognition of women's voices and communication between generations, for arguably, L's "answer" to Celestial is the novel itself. The novel's sections, which include the titles of "Friend," "Stranger," "Guardian," "Father," and "Phantom," signal the roles that Bill Cosey played during his life, but these titles can also be read as attempts at memorialization and definition that fail within each chapter, leading the reader to consider how they might apply to other characters as well.<sup>15</sup> In this way, Morrison creates a space for alternative histories to be created and other memories to be included. In this novel, neither personal nor collective memory is entirely sufficient to understand love in all its valences. Morrison stated that she wanted to show how these characters dealt with "particular kinds of oppression" and "what was successful in their response and what was not successful" ("Interview" 102). In the end, through a process of witnessing and testimony, the primary relationship, that of Christine and Heed, is healed. No longer will their lives revolve around Cosey, and so their act of re-witnessing the past, facilitated by L in a moment that crosses the line between life and death, the temporal and the timeless, finally allows for healing. *Love* shows the dangers in considering only the past and present, and highlights a need for an "outside" perspective, connected to the timeless and the unknown future. Becoming hospitable to change is a sign of strength here, and this transition in the characters is echoed by the readers' encounter with new information about the characters' pasts; we are invited to re-read earlier moments and to question how re-witnessing the earlier scenes changes the implications of the novel. Readers can, as the final line of the novel indicates, "*join in. And hum*" (202). Morrison's *Love* thus enacts what she has stated in her non-fiction and interviews were her primary concerns: a fuller understanding of the past through the re-witnessing and reintegration of personal and collective memory, the importance of finding an "addressable other" to

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<sup>15</sup>Indeed, according to Wyatt, Morrison also creates this ethical effect of making "the reader aware of the extent of her own mental and emotional subjection to patriarchal systems of meaning and value" by "presenting two distinct narrative frames of signification": a "seemingly objective heterodiegetic narrator" and L, who "becomes the voice of truth and authority in the novel's concluding pages" (200). The chapter titles would be part of the so-called objective framing whose patriarchal values are called into question, for Morrison provides signifiers that invite "the reader to invest in one set of meanings only to overthrow the whole implied signifying chain and show the reader that the word meant something else entirely" (210).

witness past trauma, and an opening to the possibilities of the future by creating a stronger, more aware version of the self.

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