"Quarreling She-Crabs":
The Tide of Black Progress in Toni Morrison's Love

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1

Toni Morrison’s eighth novel Love (2003) tells the story of black economic and social advancement in the context of a south-Atlantic African-American beach resort hotel. The hotel and surrounding black community first prospers as the place to be for blacks in the days of segregation, and then unexpectedly fails after the Civil Rights Movement as this place to be becomes discarded and forgotten for the former whites only hotels and resorts that were once forbidden. The story centers on the charismatic charm of a black entrepreneur, Bill Cosey, who buys a whites only beach hotel during the Great Depression of the 1930s and quickly establishes the hotel as a trusted friend to the black community. At the same time, Cosey’s privileged 11-year-old granddaughter, Christine, establishes a trusted friendship with a girl, Heed, from the other side of the tracks from a neighboring beach community. However, while the hotel becomes “the best and best-known vacation spot for colored folk on the East Coast” by offering its guests a place of ease and luxury, the tide changes for the girls’ friendship when Heed becomes the child bride of Bill Cosey (6). Morrison weaves an intricate story that does not begin or unfold in chronological order but instead the novel opens in the 1990s long after the hotel has been shuttered. It is here that the two childhood best friends Christine and Heed find themselves living together in the Cosey homestead locked in mutual hatred as each one desperately tries to prove that she is Bill Cosey’s intended “sweet Cosey child” of Sooker Bay (79).

With the south-east coast serving as the novel’s natural background, Morrison explicitly and implicitly uses environmental symbolism to reveal a tidal duality in her story, and to help us gain insight into the human nature that underlies the actions of her characters. Our first glimpse into the power of Love’s natural world comes with the
description of imagined sea creatures that wander the shore punishing black people who enjoy swimming and finding love: "Police-heads—dirty things with big hats," as they are accompanied by "tall, raggedy clouds drifted across the moon," "shoot up out of the ocean to harm loose women and eat disobedient children" (106, 5). As Susan Neal Mayberry suggests, these threatening creatures mirror "the forms of white rules of patriarchy" (265), ever watchful lingering big thunderclouds that are constructed to reflect the geo-political weather of the time.

The following analysis will first show that in her chronicle of the economic and human ebb and flow of a black owned hotel business in the era of Civil Rights Movement, Morrison develops a notion of black progress in Bill Cosey's ability to revise his past, as revealed through the female characters' narrative reflections. Cosey's presence and legacy thus constructed and comparable to the Atlantic Ocean is so overwhelming that Christine and Heed are sundered by his tide, to the extent that they turn and fight each other in order to survive in its wake. Next, by considering Morrison's eco-feminist use of the local staple products, "she-crabs," as symbols, it will also be clear that Morrison is attempting to reshape the historically engendered south-east coast from being a fertile land expected to bear fruit into a place which questions the human world that employs the reproductive manner of nature. Finally, a discussion of Christine and Heed represented by Morrison as "quarreling she-crabs" with zoological implications will demonstrate that although once they were made powerless and scattered by the tide of Bill Cosey, they eventually are able to swim against it and create a tide of their own (201).

2

The opening scene of Love refers to the Spanish discovery of the American south-eastern coastal area and how this area came to be called Sooker Bay: "Our shore is like sugar, which is what the Spaniards thought of when they first saw it. Sucra, they called it, a name local whites tore up for all time into Sooker" (8). In the same vein as Annette Kolodny's The Lay of the Land (1975), which analyzes the engendered representations of America, Tessa Roynon argues that Morrison's Love explores the same traditional romantic notion of the "discovery" of America; in that the central plot of this novel, Cosey's marriage to the child bride Heed, "is clearly a parodic version of the configuration of America as the innocent virgin despoiled by the all-
conquering hero" (33).

It is this motif of “discovery” of America in Love that has intrigued most critics at the expense of the equally intriguing “discovery” of the tide of black economic progress through the portrayal of a black owned resort hotel. Yet undoubtedly, Morrison intends her novel to also provide a history of black owned hotels and resorts by comparing the rise and fall of the fictional Bill Cosey’s Hotel and Resort to that of actual black owned resort hotels of the time. According to Juliet E. K. Walker’s research, the black hotel industry prospered from the late 1940s up until the late 1950s. It was the requirement of separate public facilities for blacks that indirectly encouraged the construction of black hotels. By the early 1950s, not only black but also white entrepreneurs saw the profitability of the black consumer market and provided black people with “modest motel accommodations” (Walker 255). Such white investors were usually motivated by economic rather than the political goal of integration; for them running hotels for black travelers, especially building luxury ones, was “a new frontier” (qtd. in Walker 256).1 Ironically, with the rise of integrated accommodations, black owned hotels including Morrison’s Cosey’s Hotel and Resort faced financial difficulties and fell on hard times. Integration was “an excuse to pass up” black hotels (qtd. in Walker 258) and so black people enjoyed the right to stay at previously whites only hotels: “folks who bragged about Cosey vacations in the forties boasted in the sixties about Hyatts, Hiltons, cruises to the Bahamas and Ocho Rios” (8).

However, Marcus Franklin has pointed out that the historical and cultural background of Morrison’s Cosey’s Hotel and Resort reflects a famous black beach named American Beach on the southern end of Amelia Island just north of Jacksonville, Florida.2 American Beach, now conserved as a national historic site, was constructed by Abraham Lincoln Lewis’ Afro-American Life Insurance Company which purchased land on the island in the late 1930s.3 Morrison’s fictional and the

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1 Among the black owned hotels and resorts in the 1950s-1960s, Sally Walker’s Catskill Mountain resort and William H. Brown’s Hotel in Harlem were two of the more well known hotels at that time. For more details, see Walker 254-258.

2 For example, “Orlando [Magic],” the name of a professional basketball team, also suggests that the setting for this novel could be Florida (67).

3 Although critics have not mentioned it, no less important figure than A. L. Lewis is his great-granddaughter MaVyne Betsch, called “Beach Lady.” Born in 1935 in the privileged family, MaVyne’s carefree life style and commitment to the beach community until her death in 2005 overlaps especially with Christine’s life style. For more, see Phelts 131 and Rymer.
real resort hotels both prospered in the 1940s and 1950s, and both were victims of coastal hurricanes; with American Beach being destroyed by Hurricane Dora in 1964, and Morrison’s Up Beach, the area nearby Cosey’s hotel, by Hurricane “Agnes” (9). Interestingly, the coastal hurricane in Morrison’s novel can be a symbol to signify the socio-political change as the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement caused many black owned coastal resort hotels to shutter their businesses. While there might be other possible locations that served as the model for Morrison’s Sooker Bay and Cosey’s hotel, it is still worthwhile to put Morrison’s beach side by side with an actual historical account of a black owned beach resort because putting a real face on the imagined can help to understand Morrison’s interest in the re-discovery of the footsteps of black American entrepreneurs, and her view on the relationship between possession of land and unity of community.

3

The dream of possession and the nightmare of being possessed is a central issue that situates Love in the tradition of black American environmental thought. In her analysis of African American eco-critic writings from the eighteenth century to the early twentieth century, Kimberly Smith defines black environmental thought by making a contrast to the white narrative tradition of portraying American landscape as “pristine and innocent” (8). Smith argues that black writers consider American landscape as being “corrupted” and “in need of redemption” (8). She also states that black authors traditionally write about “how an oppressed, disenfranchised group comes into possession of the land” and claim that “owning land means more than acquiring wealth; it means civic membership, political autonomy and personality, and community integrity”(9). However, in this novel, Morrison creates an opposing duality in the traditional black environmentalist thought causing the reader to reconsider the notion of black advancement and progress in that as Bill Cosey comes to possess the formerly whites only hotel and land, the redemption and membership in the community that he creates can only be shared by those he deems acceptable.

4 It is assumed that Hurricane “Agnes” hit Up Beach in the early 1960s.
In fact, “none [of the local black people] was truly welcome at the hotel’s tables or on its dance floor” even though many of whom were his employees (41). Leaving the class stratification unsolved, Morrison’s characters do allow themselves to feel a sense of vicarious civic membership in Bill Cosey’s community: “it was enough to know Bill Cosey’s Hotel and Resort was there. … [A]ll felt a tick of entitlement, of longing turned to belonging in the vicinity of the fabulous, successful resort controlled by one of their own” (41-42).

At the same time that the locals are not allowed membership in Bill Cosey’s public (social) community, by delineating how the Cosey empire is constructed as well as what it constructs, Morrison reveals Bill Cosey’s inability to make the members of his own family feel like they are a part of his private (family) community. More specifically, despite the rising tide of Bill Cosey’s socio-economic success, there is no promise of peace in his personal life\(^6\); but instead, the way the Coseys came into their fortune in the first place and the way they have mythologized their fame only serve to destabilize his family’s relationships. For example, Cosey’s first wife Julia, whose “family were farmers always being done out of acres by white landowners and spiteful Negroes,” is shocked and “froze[n]” to discover that the “114,000 dollars” which Bill Cosey inherits from his father Daniel Robert Cosey is a “resentful” one (68). “Contrary to the tale he [Bill Cosey] put in the street,” the Cosey empire was established by betraying and victimizing racial loyalty; specifically Daniel Robert Cosey, “as a Courthouse informer” for white police, “kept his evil gray eye on everybody” to be “well paid, tipped off, and favored for fifty-five years” (67-68). That is why the local black people called Daniel Robert Cosey “Dark,” conveying the meaning of a racial betrayer (68). Even though Daniel Cosey was able to amass a sizeable fortune for the time, he did not use the money to provide a more luxurious or comfortable lifestyle for his family, as members of the black community guessed, to compensate for the guilt of his racial betrayal.

Therefore, it is with a different purpose in mind that in 1930 Bill Cosey uses his “resentful” inheritance to become more economically mobilized by taking advantage of “a broke-down ‘whites only’ club at Sooker Bay from a man honest enough to say that although he swore to God and his pappy he would never sell to niggers, he was happy as a clam to break his vow and take his family away from that bird-infested

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\(^6\) For more of Cosey’s fatherhood, see Gallego.
sidewalk for hurricanes” (102). All of this occurs in a time when “the whole country began to live on Relief the way Up Beach people [African Americans] did” (102), but Bill Cosey generously enjoys using his property to construct his “culture of hospitality” (Burr 169): “He wanted a playground for folk who felt the way he did, who studied ways to contradict history,” a “history” that makes “everybody” believe “it [poverty] was a virtue and a sure sign of honesty. Too much money had a whiff of evil and somebody else’s blood” (103). Even during the Depression, Bill Cosey believes that “where there was music there was money” and it is he who can pay black musicians sufficiently enough for their play (102); it is this belief that creates an atmosphere of a bygone Jazz Age at Cosey’s Hotel and Resort while at the same time he is aware of the racially charged atmosphere of the times. Therefore, though Cosey’s motto is “the best good time this side of the law” (33), his place is “more than a playground; it was a school and a haven where people debated death in the cities . . .” (35).

Regardless of the differences between father and son regarding the family fortune, their similar determination to be economically and then socially mobilized epitomizes Booker T. Washington’s politics of “up from slavery.” The heritage of Booker T. Washington influences not only Dark and Bill Cosey, but also the life of other Cosey members. For example, May, who has experience with “the live death of poverty,” is likely to consider her father-in-law as the primogeniture of black “independent contractors” (136). Based on her family background as a modest preacher’s daughter, May believes in the puritan work ethic that poverty “[is] a virtue and a sure sign of honesty” (103), “[giving] herself every opportunity to recount how Mr. Cosey came from a long line of quiet, prosperous slaves and thrifty freedmen” (136).

Yet as her obsessive “recounting” of Bill Cosey’s primogeniture suggests, the myth of Cosey empire is a made-up “street-sweet story” which “belonged to somebody else that she [May] and Mr. Cosey took for themselves” (136). Even her admiration for the lineage of success is manipulated by Cosey, who “knew better” than May the segregated society (136). His hate against the “history” that keeps black people down at the bottom of society makes him revise the history of his own kingdom, as it is often the case with heroic figures in their mythmaking process. Bill Cosey’s manipulative narrative also has an influence on May’s relationship with her daughter, especially after the death of her husband when May tries hard to maintain her daughter Christine’s right to inherit Bill Cosey’s estate. The mother-daughter relationship is further complicated and distorted by May’s obsession of keeping both
Cosey's hotel financially intact and her daughter's virginity intact because "her [May's] home was throbbing with girl flesh made sexy, an atmosphere that Christine might soak up faster than a fruitcake soaks up rum" (139). The situation becomes desperate for both May and Christine who, "spoiled silly by the wealth of an openhanded man," fight to prevent themselves from being deprived of their "home" when the changing tide brings a "girl" who comes from outside of the Cosey empire (78).

Bill Cosey's marriage to this "girl," named Heed, who is from an infamously immoral family living in a poor district near Sooker Bay, creates tension and fractures the female relationships. While people around Bill Cosey are upset or amazed by his marriage, it is the narrator-character L who speculates that even Cosey's marriage to Heed is intended as a revision to a part of the Cosey family narrative that occurred in his childhood. Bill Cosey often tells of a childhood experience that he thinks is supposed to show white racism, but it ends up revealing Bill Cosey's own cruelty and helplessness. One day a young Bill Cosey saw white people laughing at "some child who fell down in horse manure running after a posse" (139); but the listeners of this story, L and Sandler both of who used to work for Cosey's hotel, guess Bill Cosey indirectly gets involved in the white cruelty by making fun of the poor child himself. Bill Cosey repeats the story in order to erase his own cruelty which grows out of the discourse of "Dark," but in vain. Therefore, as L thinks, Bill Cosey needs a way to compensate for his own racial betrayal; in the end, he marries Heed for the sake to "educate to his taste" (110), while disregarding his own granddaughter Christine, who is left to inherit "his [Bill Cosey's] father's gray eyes" (139) and "honey" skin, the marks of "Dark" (34).

Based on Jacques Derrida's argument about the deconstructive nature of hospitality, Benjamin Burr claims that "hospitality appears in the novel as a readiness to welcome the other and a readiness not to be ready for the encounter" (169). "The culture of hospitality" can also be seen in the Christine-Heed friendship and the Heed-Cosey marriage. Christine and Heed first meet at the age of eleven, when Heed crosses the class-line invisibly drawn on the beach of Sooker Bay. Christine "who is the product

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7 "Indeed, on the one hand, hospitality must wait, extend itself toward the other, extend to the other the gifts, the site, the shelter . . . But, on the other hand, the opposite is nevertheless true, simultaneously and irrepressibly true: to be hospitable is to let oneself be overtaken, to be ready not to be ready . . ." (Derrida 361).
of a culture of hospitality” welcomes the unexpected visitor (Burr 169): “Once a little girl wandered too far . . . Ocean spray dampened the man’s undershirt she wore. There on a red blanket another little girl with white ribbons in her hair sat eating ice cream . . . ‘Hi, want some?’ asked the girl, holding out a spoon” (78). Despite their class differences, the absence of discrimination makes L describe their friendship as follows: “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” (199). Yet to employ Derrida’s conception of “hospitality,” as soon as Heed becomes Christine’s grandmother-in-law, she is now unexpectedly put in “the position of being the one who is overtaken by or not ready to receive the hospitality offered her” by Bill Cosey (Burr 169). In this way, Cosey’s marriage to Heed, while intended by him to dispel the mark of “Dark,” turns out to be viewed by Christine as a betrayal by both Heed and Cosey, which leads to the disintegration of their friendship. The narrator-character L shows her insight into Morrison’s use of “Dark,” a signifier of betrayal in disguise of love, saying that “I’ve come to believe every family has a Dark and needs one. All over the world, traitors help progress. It’s like being exposed to tuberculosis. After it fills the cemetery, it strengthens whoever survives . . . which is, after all, progress” (139). In this regard, betrayal works like a virus and those infected eventually acquire an immunity to this virus making the body of their family and community stronger. Thus, Morrison captures the black progress as destructive and reconstructive within itself.

4

Morrison’s use of the name “Sooker” Bay suggests the powerlessness of Christine and Heed; according to The New Oxford American Dictionary (2005 ed.), the term “sook” means “a female crab,” “coward,” and “a person lacking self-confidence.” After Cosey’s death in 1971, Heed struggles to run the business in her own way but her inability to navigate the changing socio-economic winds of the Civil Rights Movement leads to the fall of the Cosey empire. As a result, Sooker Bay in the 1990s is “a treasury of sea junk” (6-7) and what remains after “the withdrawal of that class of tourist [the black middle-class tourist]” is acknowledged as “shells and kelp script, scattered and unreadable” (39). Besides the unexpected influence of desegregation,
L considers another reason for the fall of Cosey’s Hotel and Resort, and then asserts that the hotel failed because Christine and Heed fought for the right to inherit his property: “they turned his home into a barrel of quarreling she-crabs” (201). It is this comparison of Christine and Heed as “quarreling she-crabs” that not only provides another example of the environmental symbolism used throughout the novel but also suggests some insight into Morrison’s feminist eco-critical attitude towards her characters.

The significance of Morrison’s characterization of the two women as “she-crabs” and her interest in reproductive discourse can be clarified by considering William W. Warner’s description of the mating rituals of the Atlantic Blue crabs in his Pulitzer Prize-winning Beautiful Swimmers (1976). Warner’s depiction of mating Atlantic Blue crabs, known as “beautiful swimmers” and common along the south-eastern coast, shows the benevolence of the male crab and the gracefulness of the female crab, which is comparable to affection between Cosey and his wives. After a courtship dance, “the male carries his chosen mate through the water, cradling her beneath him for a matter of days until she casts her shell” (Kopper 37).

This done, the male gently helps the female turn herself about . . . until she is on her back face-to-face beneath him. . . . When the female blue crab is ready, she opens her newly shaped abdomen to expose two genital pores. Into these the male inserts his pleopods or two small appendages underneath the tip of his elongated abdominal apron. When all is in place, the female so extends her abdomen that it folds around and over the male’s back, thus effectively preventing any risk of coitus interrupts. Truly, blue crabs are locked in love’s embrace. (Warner 115-116)

In Love, the ocean and the beach are Morrison’s chosen places for love and death as L, who calls the ocean “[her] man,” reflects on the tenderness and elegance which she saw in the way Bill Cosey and his first wife embrace each other (100):

It’s noteworthy, I suppose, that the first time I saw Mr. Cosey, he was standing in the sea, holding Julia, his wife, in his arms. . . . Her eyes were closed, head bobbing; her light blue swimming dress ballooned or flattened out depending on the waves and his strength. She lifted an arm, touched his shoulder. He turned
her to his chest and carried her ashore. (64; emphasis added)

Yet the love generated on Sooker Bay does not last so long. Julia, who is shocked and "frozen" to know the Darkness behind the Cosey family fortune, passes away when their son Billy Boy is young. Billy Boy, not long after he marries May, dies of "walking pneumonia"—"A cough or two and the lights go out" (43). However, when one ocean tide takes away Bill Cosey’s beloved, the following tide brings to his castle another to be loved, that is, Heed as a "she-crab." Thus the beach again presents the space for the first night of love, this time for the 11-year-old child bride Heed and the 52-year-old Cosey:

Of her wedding night, for instance, submerged in water in his arms. Creeping away from the uncomfortable reception, out the back door into the dark, rushing in tuxedo and way-too-big bridal gown across sea grass to powdery sand. Undressing. No penetration. No blood. No eeks of pain or discomfort. Just this man stroking, nursing, bathing her. She arched. He stood behind her, placed his hands behind her knees, and opened her legs to the surf. (77-78)

All through their marital life, Heed and Cosey’s lovemaking does not produce any offspring, although it is for this reason that Bill Cosey chooses Heed who is from Up Beach, “the most likely place for making babies and the least likely for a virgin” (104). So, ultimately, the beaches of Sooker Bay prove not to have the reproductive power necessary to provide Bill Cosey with a “sweet Cosey child.” It appears as though the beach as a signifier is left without its signified, that is, the place for reproduction.

Still with more insight to be gained from understanding the nature of "she-crabs" and to shed more light on Morrison’s use of the term in understanding the nature of her characters, a reference to Philip Kopper’s work is helpful. Kopper explains that mature or pregnant crabs are called “sook” because of their lack of quickness, and “virgin” or immature crabs, which often have “vigorous” temper, are called “she-crabs” (36). He further adds that the Atlantic Blue she-crabs are known to be “aggressive” and “sly” but “vulnerable” especially when they molt, or shed their skin as they mature and become ready for mating:

Before molting, the soon-to-be vulnerable crab hides in shallow bay waters among
eelgrass. When commercial crabbers catch a “peeler” with its characteristically pliable shell, they set it aside in a floating pen until it sheds. The pens must be checked frequently because crabs in captivity cannibalize each other, though there’s no evidence that this occurs in the wild. (Kopper 37)

Keeping this in mind it is easy to see that Morrison’s use of the term “she-crabs” is not a coincidence but is intended to signify the “aggressive” and “sly” yet “vulnerable” natural complexities that underlie Christine and Heed’s actions, particularly in regard to mutual self-destruction. As Kopper points out, the fact that only she-crabs in captivity resort to “cannibalism” provides an image that could be used to describe Christine and Heed’s co-dependent captivity in the house on Monarch Street as each one feeds emotionally and mentally on the other. For example, in exchange for paying the rent Christine cooks for Heed, but Heed, who has “never picked a crab” like the local people do because of the privileged marriage (71), “[doesn’t] eat shellfish” (28). Without the zoological knowledge about “she-crabs,” Heed’s rejection of “crustaceans” that Christine serves is read as hatred between them; but considering Kopper’s reference to “cannibalism,” it can mean that Heed identifies herself and Christine as “Crustacea” and unconsciously avoids destroying both herself and Christine—that is love in disguise of betrayal.

5

It is another blank signifier, a “sweet Coscy child,” that triggers the “quarreling” by the “she-crabs.” Because Bill Coscy does not leave anything but “doodles on a 1958 menu” saying that “the Monarch Street house and ‘whatever nickels are left’ to ‘my sweet Coscy child’” (88), Christine, who is his biological granddaughter, and Heed, who calls her husband “Papa” both aggressively and slyly look for any document or advantage that can be used to decide who inherits Coscy’s property. One day in the 1990s, each goes secretly to the old Coscy hotel left behind on Sooker Bay to find another menu or anything that proves who has the right to receive his property. Both now becoming more like “sooker crabs” with age, they manage to climb up to the dark attic, expecting that there might be something. Heed is accompanied by a teenage girl named Junior, who is supposedly hired to help the illiterate Heed to complete the history “of her family”; but the fact is, Heed hires Junior to make her
alter a document by imitating Cosey's handwriting (89). This final encounter of the three women is tense but does not last long because of Junior's betrayal. "Aggressive" and "sly" Junior emerges as the new "she-crab" by secretly making a will for her benefit not for Heed's, and by secretly pulling up the old carpet covering a hole on the attic floor in order to kill either Heed or Christine, or both. As a result, Heed is the one who falls through the floor and is seriously injured. When Junior runs out of the old Cosey hotel leaving the two elderly women behind, the tide changes for the final time as the long silence between Christine and Heed is broken.

As with the final scene of Morrison's Love, returning home has been a central motif of African American literature especially since the 1970s. According to Madhu Dubey, the increase in the use of the "black literary return" can be attributed to the fact that for the first time in the history of the South, the 1970s saw more black people literally coming back to the South than those departing. The cause of this population shift can be traced to an economic decline in the Northwest and the Midwest, and an industrial boom in the South as a result of the Civil Rights Movement (52). Dubey further adds that since the 1970s African American literature critics have acknowledged "the geographical opposition": while the urbanized North makes black people feel fractured and rootless, the rural South offers them a "redemptive" home, which accordingly is "feminized" (157). Morrison's Love employs this formula of "redemptive" home in the description of Christine's literal return home in 1975 from a peripatetic life that takes her from a prestigious high school to a whorehouse, and then to a prison. When she is betrayed by one of her lovers, Christine finds that she has no other place to go except back to her home, but at that point she is afraid it does not belong to her anymore but to Heed: "there was no place like and no place but home. Hers. To hang on to and keep an insane viper from evicting her" (167). Christine's longing for her home is also clearly demonstrated when she hisses to a female black lawyer that "if you don't know the difference between property and a home you need to be kicked in the face" (95).

Wrecks left behind in the old Cosey hotel, which Christine and Heed are now a part of, summon "the easy weather" of their childhood memories ("Foreword" xi). When Christine searches the rooms in the hotel for anything to ease the pain of a dying Heed, she finds "a pale yellow top," the top part of Christine's childhood bathing suit (185). As Christine "wipes perspiration from her face and neck with the fabric, then tosses it on the floor" (186), the tiny bathing suit unfolds the story of "the birth of sin" in their childhood, which has been kept in silence for nearly fifty
years (192). Here again, from the zoological perspective, the “pale yellow top” can be interpreted as a shell which “she-crabs” shed when they are matured and ready to molt. However, that Christine “tosses it on the floor” as if it were something filthy suggests, the “pale yellow top,” the shell, is being ripped off by Bill Cosey. The root of Christine’s disgust can be traced back to 1940, when Bill Cosey’s sexual titillation of an unaware Heed and his subsequent arousal accidentally witnessed by Christine in the yellow bathing suit has a lasting effect on both girls by putting an end to their intimate childhood friendship. After the incident happens, “they [Christine and Heed] don’t speak of the birth of sin” as “this particular shame . . . could not tolerate speech” (192), but makes Christine vomit, which does stay “on her [Christine’s] bathing suit that looks like puke” (191). Thus Morrison’s use of the zoological motif enables Christine and Heed’s final “quarreling” in the attic of the old Cosey hotel to represent the last chance for the two to turn and face the tide of their past. As the two women sit in “a little girl’s bedroom” in the old Cosey hotel (177), Heed in a hazy state and dying realizes what she has been looking for: “. . . the forget-me-nots roaming the wallpaper are more vivid in this deliberate dark than they ever were in daylight and she wonders what it was that made her want it so. Home, she thinks. When I stepped in the door, I thought I was home” (183). In this way, the “barrel of quarreling she-crabs” finally turns into “the easy weather” home of two childhood friends.

Works Cited


Synopsis of ‘Quarreling She-Crabs’: 
The Tide of Black Progress in Toni Morrison’s Love

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Toni Morrison’s Love (2003) tells the story of black economic and social advancement in the context of a south-Atlantic African-American beach resort hotel that prospers during the 1940s and 1950s by offering members of the black middle class a place of ease and luxury beyond the confines of the Jim Crow laws. With the south-east coast serving as the novel’s natural background, Morrison explicitly and implicitly uses environmental symbolism to reveal a tidal duality in her story, and to help us gain insight into the human nature that underlies the actions of her characters. This paper will first show that in her chronicle of the economic and human ebb and flow of a black owned hotel business in the era of Civil Rights Movement, Morrison develops a notion of black progress in Bill Cosey’s ability to revise his past, as revealed through the female characters’ narrative reflections. Cosey’s presence and legacy thus constructed and comparable to the Atlantic Ocean is so overwhelming that Christine and Heed are sundered by his tide, to the extent that they turn and fight each other in order to survive in its wake. Next, by considering Morrison’s eco-feminist use of the local staple products, “she-crabs,” as symbols, it will also be clear that Morrison is attempting to reshape the historically engendered south-east coast from being a fertile land expected to bear fruit into a place which questions the human world that employs the reproductive manner of nature. Finally, an analysis of Christine and Heed represented as “quarreling she-crabs,” with zoological implications will show that although once they were made powerless and scattered by the tide of Bill Cosey, they eventually are able to swim against it and create a tide of their own.