



1994

Self and Mutuality: Romantic Love, Desire, Race, and Gender in Toni Morrison's Jazz

Michelle C. Loris

Sacred Heart University, lorism@sacredheart.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/shureview>

Recommended Citation

Loris, Michelle C. (1994) "Self and Mutuality: Romantic Love, Desire, Race, and Gender in Toni Morrison's Jazz," *Sacred Heart University Review*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/shureview/vol14/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the SHU Press Publications at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sacred Heart University Review by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact ferribyp@sacredheart.edu.

MICHELLE C. LORIS

*Self and Mutuality:
Romantic Love, Desire, Race, and Gender
in Toni Morrison's Jazz*

Toni Morrison's novel *Jazz* wrestles with the problem of romantic love and desire. It defines that problem as a struggle for both self-identity and mutuality (mutual recognition). The longing and desire to be known completely as oneself by an other who shares this same feeling and intention, the novel declares, is the secret of love. The unnamed narrator of the story, in an impassioned conclusion, describes this condition of love as she looks upon Joe and Violet: "I envy them their public love. . . . I have longed, aw longed to show it, to be able to say out loud what they have no need to say at all: That I have loved only you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else. That I want you to love me back and show it to me."¹

The novel also shows, however, how love and mutual recognition cannot be achieved independently of one's internal self or one's social environment. The problem of love is a problem of the unconscious psychological self as well as the external social context. Given those imperatives, Morrison's work discloses that while both men and women, because of our human nature, have a similar motivation and potential to experience love, this capacity is complicated by a difference in gender, and this complication is further consolidated by culture and socialization. Thus, Morrison's novel demonstrates through her characters that for African-Americans living in a racist, post-slavery society which denies them their status as human subject, the bonds of love are often forged into the bondage of domination and displacement of the self.

Focusing on this issue of the displacement of the self in the novel, Morrison, in a recent interview, revealed the question that she had most specifically in mind as she wrote *Jazz* and that

Michelle C. Loris is Associate Professor of English at Sacred Heart University.

becomes the shaping motivation for this novel. She stated that she wondered "What is it that compels a good woman to displace the self, herself?" Romantic love, Morrison's novel suggests, may be the source of this displacement of the female self. As Felice explains, when she and Dorcas used to make up love scenes and describe them to each other: "It was fun and a little smutty. Something about it bothered me though. Not the loving stuff, but the picture I had of myself when I did it. Nothing like me" (pp. 208-09).

Using the framework of a violent, adulterous love affair, *Jazz* dramatizes this displacement of the female self in romantic love. Morrison's story shows that while romantic love is a desire for mutual recognition and must allow for sameness and difference to coexist simultaneously, in a social system where difference privileges domination by gender and race, female desire is displaced, even destroyed.

We know that the foundations of adult romantic love lie in infancy. Adult sexual love is not only shaped by events and relationships originating in the period of infancy and childhood, but also adult erotic life is an opportunity to reenact and rework conflicts that began there. We know too that the child's sense of self first develops with mother. Mother is the child's first object of attachment and first object of desire. But the child needs to see the mother as an independent subject, as a subject in her own right in order to develop this sense of self. The mother cannot give the child faith in itself to tackle the world if the mother cannot do it herself. The recognition of self that a child seeks is something the mother is able to give only by virtue of her own independent identity. It is in this early beginning that the child forms what D.W. Winnicott, the child psychoanalyst, called the True Self: an authentic self-identity and a sense of personal agency. The True Self is the opposite of a False Self: the compliant, acquiescent self which feels unreal, unauthentic, and experiences itself in a condition of deadness and despair, and under the control or direction of another. Lacking the necessary and good enough physical, social, emotional, or psychological space, this False Self never realizes the personal agency and desire that emerge from within.²

It is here, too, in childhood that the individual can learn and

develop what Jessica Benjamin in *The Bonds of Love*, explains is a capacity for an experience of mutual recognition.³ In such an experience, the power relationship between subject and object can be replaced by a relationship of mutuality between two sovereign selves who share an experience of empathy and attunement where the tension between the assertion of self and the recognition of a sovereign other is maintained. But, Benjamin explains, in our society where gender is privileged, the breakdown in the tension between the assertion of self and the recognition of other self is the point of entry for the beginning of domination. Domination is the result of refusing the condition of mutual recognition. In domination, one individual, the male, plays the role of subject, and the other individual, the female, serves as object. Romantic love illustrates this psychic structure, where the male is the subject who determines his desire, and where the female becomes the object of male desire. Benjamin explains further that this structure of domination can be traced from infancy to adult erotic love, from our earliest awareness of the difference between mother and father, to our larger cultural ideas of male and female.

Ethel Person, in her wonderful book *Dreams of Love and Fateful Encounters*, agrees that adult passionate love has its roots in the original mother-infant dyad and that the triangle of an adult affair between husband, wife, lover — regardless of class, race, religion — is a reworking of the original oedipal triangle in childhood.⁴ She also asserts that the difference in the social organization of our gender forms the basis for the difference in the romantic quest for the male and female.

Morrison's novel *Jazz* illustrates how romantic love, which is rooted in childhood, becomes a structure of domination and displacement of self and, more perniciously, how it can become a structure for destruction of the female self. For all three main characters, Joe, Violet, and Dorcas, the object of each person's desire is rooted in an unconscious yearning for and memory of their respective mothers. And in the case of all three characters, each mother, as a victim of both race and gender, lacks a subjective self-identity and personal agency which she in turn can foster in her child. The three mothers are women who, living in a racist and sexist post-slave society, not only stifle their own longings,

ambitions, and frustrations but more, each of these women is essentially damaged and destroyed by the racist culture.

As a fifty-year-old man telling his story to his seventeen year-old lover Dorcas, Joe confesses that, at age three, he learned from his foster parents that his biological parents had “disappeared without a trace” (p. 124) and it is then that he names himself Joe Trace. Later, at around age fourteen, Joe leaves his foster parents to be “trained to be a man and to live independent” (p. 125) by Hunter’s Hunter, a man who, Joe learns, had years earlier helped to rescue Joe’s mother, who had been raped, beaten, made pregnant, and left to die in a ditch. Hunter’s Hunter had named Joe’s mother Wild. She had not accepted her child Joe when he was born and, made crazed and wild by what had happened to her, she became untameable and lived wild and alone in a cave in the forest. At fourteen, Joe went in search of his mother, “wanting his mother to confirm him for once and for all — to say some kind of yes to him even if it was no — to confirm that she knew him — knew him to be the one son she had had fourteen years ago” (pp. 36-37). Of course, Joe could not get this acknowledgment of his self from Wild, now the beast-woman.

Violet, Joe’s fifty-year-old wife, trying to recover her self from her husband’s affair with the girl who was old enough to have been their child had they had children and whom he had murdered one night and whom Violet stabbed when the dead girl was in her coffin, recalls how racial hatred, violence, and poverty killed her mother, Rose Dear. When Violet was just about fourteen, Rose Dear, defeated and in despair, threw herself down a well and died. Violet recalls too that her “phantom father,” who was constantly away on “bold, fabulously dangerous and wonderful trips” (p. 100), arrived two weeks after the mother’s suicide, too late, his arms “laden with gifts, gold and stories of where he had been” (p. 100).

Dorcas, the “hard headed, alive and very bold” (56) seventeen-year-old who lived with her Aunt Alice, and who was Joe’s lover before he shot her, had, when she was ten years old, lost both her parents within five days of each other in the race riots in St. Louis in 1917. Her father “had been pulled off a streetcar and stomped to death” (p. 57) and her mother, who “had gone home to try and

forget the color of his entrails, burned crispy when her house was torched” (p. 57). Dorcas recalls that because they were black the fire engine did not come when called. Alice, Dorcas’ aunt, feared that the fire of desire had been ignited in her niece from the time the girl’s mother was burned in their house.

When love is thwarted in childhood, it becomes associated with unattainable yearning and self-abasement throughout life. Adult erotic relations are the crucible wherein we work through this early lack of love and where we work through the mother’s lack of personal agency and subjectivity which contributes to a loss of our own true self. For Violet, this is especially clear. Three weeks after her mother’s death she married Joe Trace, who had literally fallen out of a tree into her lap. With Joe, Violet decided that “never again would she wake struggling against the pull of the narrow well” (p. 104). But later, after the affair, the murder, and her own attempted desecration of the corpse, Violet reflects that “from the very beginning of their relationship, Joe had been a substitute and so had she” (p. 97). She had thought she had married Joe because she “didn’t want to be like her mother, never like that” (p. 97), but that for most of her marriage she lived “afraid to lose Joe” (p. 97), that she had “worked at anything to be with Joe” (p. 97). Fearing separation, abandonment, and her own true independence and aggression had led Violet in her marriage to a denial of mutual dependence, to a condition of extreme self-sufficiency where connection and mutuality are replaced by detachment and isolation.

This is Violet’s False Self: to be detached, self-absorbed. As Joe complains: “Violet takes better care of her parrot than she does me. . . . She don’t hardly talk and I ain’t allowed near her” (p. 49). But the novel tells us that Violet, the child of a suicide, was “hard to please and quick to believe no one loves her because she is not really here” (p. 4). Without a viable other — her mother or father in this case — to acknowledge and recognize her, Violet literally disappears within herself. Violet had recalled scenes of her life where “she does not see herself doing things — she sees them being done” (p. 22). Fearing that she had a “tongue yearning to be on its own . . . or an independent hand” Violet had become “still as well as silent” (p. 24). She had retreated and withdrawn and she spoke only to her Parrot, who cracked “I love you.”

Joe, too, comes to realize that he had married Violet “just because he could not see whether a wild woman had put out her hand or not” (p. 181) to claim him. Regarding his marriage to Violet, he concedes that he was “driven by loneliness from his wife’s side” (p. 12), but that “he had not actually chosen her, that she in fact had decided upon him and he had agreed” (p. 30). This compliant, passive False Self shows up, too, in the way that Joe is not like his other male friends as he relates to women. “Women teased him because they trusted him” (pp. 70-71). “He was a nice neighborly, and everybody knows him man — not dangerous like most men” (pp. 120-21). Joe’s defensive, adaptive False Self has staved off chaos by accepting another’s direction in order to maintain unconscious connection to his early love object, his mother, but in so doing, like Violet he had renounced true identity, connection, mutuality, and agency.

Dorcas learns about woman’s lost love and lost self in the many stories she hears from Neola. Dorcas’ “mother’s coffin makes her bold” (p. 58) but her desire for self recognition is undermined by her “love hunger” (p. 67). The desire to be known as one self is the secret of love, but in the oedipal-patriarchal context, the female desire for self is displaced, even destroyed as Dorcas’ situation illustrates.

Dorcas represents those women who submit to domination and lose their self not out of fear but out of a desire for recognition. First, Dorcas seeks recognition from Joe, the fantasized oedipal father replacement. In the oedipal structure the mother is displaced by the father, who represents freedom, excitement, autonomy, and agency as well as a denial of dependency. In this structure privilege and power go to the father. Desire, here, is linked to this striving for freedom and autonomy and is emblemized by the father-phallus. Dorcas, the young girl, seeks in the father figure, Joe, a desire for freedom, recognition, personal identity, and agency. In this way she tries to gain power and self through Joe, but this route leads to absence, emptiness, and exploitation for the female.

Dorcas leaves the exploitative situation that she is in with Joe only to follow another dead-end route to realize her desire for self recognition. Ethel Person explains that in the patriarchal oedipal structure, “for the female, the romantic quest leads to the female

being singled out among all other women by a male — the man's singling her out then becomes proof of her value."⁵ Person goes on to explain that in this oedipal structure the ultimate goal of the adult female is to surrender and lose herself in romantic union with the male.

With her new found love, Acton, who is "hawk eyed and a little cruel" (p. 188), Dorcas again, though seeking self-recognition, succumbs to domination. Dorcas liked "that other girls were jealous of her that Acton had singled her out over them. That she had won" (p. 216). She said to herself: "I won I won" (p. 216). But Acton behaves indifferent, aloof: "Sometimes he is where he says he'll be sometimes not" (p. 188). Dorcas, Morrison tells us, was one of "the girls with red lips and silk stockings" who "flash power" (p. 181), a "power they will exchange for the right to be overcome, penetrated. The men . . . will reach in, grab that power and keep it" (p. 182). In this male-dominated romantic structure, Dorcas represents how the female loses her self and is ultimately destroyed.

When Joe realizes that Dorcas has left him for another man, he hunts her down and shoots her dead. His hunt for Dorcas, however, is blurred in his mind by his earlier hunt for his mother: "I tracked my mother in Virginia and it led right to her and I tracked Dorcas from borough to borough" (p. 130). The text blends his hunt for both and as he shoots Dorcas he thinks of his mother.

Why the gentle, everyone-knows-him and every-woman-trusts-him Joe becomes a dangerous man and hunts Dorcas like prey and kills her is a difficult and complicated question in this novel. Alice, Dorcas' aunt says, "He killed her just because he could" (p. 73) and understands the murder in the context of all the brutalizing men who can kill unarmed black women — just because they can.

But in keeping with the more psychological perspective that this novel offers, Joe's actions require further analysis. Ethel Person explains that in the oedipal structure, the boy's realization that he cannot secure his mother's love is a blow to his narcissism and is linked to his subsequent domination of and aggression toward the female. The male's domination of the female is a way to compensate for his childhood fear of rejection or abandonment by the pre-oedipal mother.

Benjamin offers additional analysis to explain male domination. Her analysis provides further understanding for Joe's murder of Dorcas. Benjamin states that the tendency of erotic love to become erotic domination and destruction can be seen as a casualty of the characteristic male way of establishing separation and difference from the female during the oedipal stage of development. The need to sever identification with the pre-oedipal mother in order to be confirmed as a separate, male person prevents the boy from recognizing the subjectivity of the female mother. She is not seen as an independent person but as something other — an object. An objectifying attitude comes to replace the earlier interactions of infancy in which mutual recognition, dependency, and assertion could still coexist. Forming male identity in the oedipal structure emphasizes difference over sharing, domination over connection, self-sufficiency over mutual dependency.

Benjamin calls this process the male's false differentiation. More importantly, she explains that violation of the other is an elaboration of this one-sided or "False Differentiation." She states that the male's fantasy of maternal power underlies the violation; and in adult erotic domination, this male anxiety manifests itself in the need to violate, to be separate from, to have power over, to make as object, to denigrate the female other.

In this oedipal context of violation and violence where both male and female lose, how does one recover a True Self? Violet is the character who most successfully recovers and she recovers through her relationship with another woman, a mother figure. Violet makes friends with Alice, Dorcas' aunt. One day Violet arrives at Alice's door and says "I need a place just to sit down" (p. 80), and she knew Alice would let her. From this unlikely relationship between two women who have both been wronged by the men in their lives and who have been restricted by the racism in their society, Violet recovers a sense of true self-identity. Reflecting one day on her two selves, she recognizes that now "I want to be the woman my mother didn't stay around long enough to see. That one. The one she would have liked and the one I used to like" (p. 208). She also accepts important advice from Alice who tells her: "You want a real thing; I'll tell you a real one. You got anything left to you to love then do it" (p. 112). Violet does. She

loves Dorcas. And as she grows to love Dorcas, whose picture sits on her living room mantle, Violet experiences her own subjectivity and personal agency and she survives the act of her aggression and rage, which allows her the experience of empathy and attunement, first with Alice and then for her self and finally with Joe. For Violet had “decided to love — well find out about [Dorcas]. . . . She thought she could solve the mystery of love that way” (p. 5). She sees herself in Dorcas — “she too had once been a snappy determined girl like the dead girl” (p. 5). She also realizes that like Joe she is coming to love Dorcas. And in this experience of love, mirroring, and action, Violet learns “about having another you inside that isn’t anything like you” (p. 208). She learns, too, about having to kill that other “me” so that, as she tells Felice, when Felice asks who is left, Violet says “ME” (p. 209) — her True Self. With a solid sense of her true self, Violet has the capacity to experience both the tension and desire for mutual recognition in a full romantic love relationship.

Joe, too, has his reckoning. When Felice challenges him with the fact that he is the cause of Dorcas’ death, he relents: “I know. I know. . . . It was me. For the rest of my life it’ll be me” (p. 212). But the paradox he explains to Felice is that even though he shot Dorcas, he loved her. In fact, he confesses to Felice that until Dorcas, he “didn’t know how to love anybody” (p. 213).

Loving Dorcas has not actually taught Joe how to love, as he tells Felice, but it has opened in him a capacity for relationship. When Felice asks “what about Mrs. Trace,” Joe tells her “We working on it [their relationship]” (p. 212). And, in fact, Felice witnesses their new attempt at mutuality in relationship. She observes:

Somebody in the house across the alley put a record on and the music floated in to us through the open window. Mr. Trace moved his head to the rhythm and his wife snapped her fingers in time. She did a little step in front of him and he smiled. By and by they were dancing. (p. 214)

The nameless narrator of Morrison’s novel confirms Joe and

Violet's recovery of "old time love." She tells us that "They are inward toward the other, bound and joined . . ." (p. 228). Such love, she laments, is enviable.

Morrison's novel *Jazz* defines the problem of romantic love as a struggle for both self-identity and mutual recognition. The novel shows us that this problem of love and mutuality is a problem of the unconscious psychological self complicated by the social context of race and gender. Because of this complication, as the novel demonstrates, the bonds of love are often forged into the bondage of domination. Morrison's novel offers us a poignant understanding of the complexity of love in the image of Joe and Violet's "old time love" — purchased at the cost of Dorcas' life.

Notes

¹Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1992), p. 229. All further quotations from this book will be indicated by page numbers in the text of my essay.

²See D.W. Winnicott, "Ego Distortion in Terms of the True and False Self" in *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (New York: International Universities Press, 1965).

³Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

⁴Ethel Person, *Dreams of Love and Fateful Encounters* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988).

⁵Person. p. 270.