

Segundo Congreso Internacional de Ciencias Humanas "Actualidad de lo clásico y saberes en disputa de cara a la sociedad digital". Escuela de Humanidades, Universidad Nacional de San Martín, San Martín, 2022.

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Cita:

Silvestrin, Sabrina (2022). *The Search for the Female True-Self in the Trauma Narrative of Morrison's Jazz*. Segundo Congreso Internacional de Ciencias Humanas "Actualidad de lo clásico y saberes en disputa de cara a la sociedad digital". Escuela de Humanidades, Universidad Nacional de San Martín, San Martín.

Dirección estable: <https://www.aacademica.org/2.congreso.internacional.de.ciencias.humanas/275>

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# The Search for the Female True-Self in the Trauma Narrative of Morrison's *Jazz*

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## Abstract

The present academic analysis will delve into the subject of trauma and female identity as seen in the main female character of Toni Morrison's historical fiction novel *Jazz* while narrowing its scope to the topic of understanding the fragmented personality, the lack of self-love in order to become obsessed with others and the search for the lost female true self -as a sense of personal female agency. This so-called trauma narrative is set in the harrowing loss of contact of the character with her African-descent ancestry, linked to the traumatic experience of having lost her mother at a very early age and deepened by a context that also intersects brutal racism and gender violence. The present study will be underpinned by research done on the subject of trauma and its narratives by Laurie Vickroy and Cathy Caruth and on Identity and the Self by D.H. Winnicott, and Toni Morrison herself.

## Keywords

Fragmented personality; trauma narratives; true self; female self; violence; racism; intersectionality.

## **Introduction and thesis statement**

*Jazz*<sup>1</sup> is a historical fiction novel by the celebrated Nobel Prize Award winner Toni Morrison set in Harlem in 1926. A stream of connections and digressive details present the struggle of a romance framed in a violent and brutal love triangle between Violet and Joe Trace, and Dorcas. The middle-aged character of Violet Trace longs for her lost female self in her ancestry which she seems to be lacking. This absent self is manifest in her duplicity of being, her erratic and unreliable behaviour, and her silence. This analysis narrows its scope to the theme of the loss of the female True Self -female agency- based on the harrowing experiences of the concomitant childhood trauma in a socio-historical context which intersects racism.

## **Methodology**

A descriptive analysis.

## **Theoretical background**

The present study will be underpinned by research done on the subject of trauma and its narratives by Laurie Vickroy and Cathy Caruth, and on Identity and the Self by D.H. Winnicott, and Toni Morrison herself.

## **Historical Context and Racism as part of Trauma**

Morrison's *Jazz* is set in a racist society which seems to make it practically impossible for its members to establish new connections while attempting to acknowledge or, at least recall, their own ancestry and roots, since this single fact could trigger a diverse array of outrageous and extreme white violence, thus hindering the possibility for the racialised communities to find their own cultural identity. This attempt for black Americans to find or keep their identity has been seen by white supremacists as a tacit permission or validation for the violence exerted on black communities. As Vickroy stresses, for racialized people to find their own cultural identity is not only to "mak[e] terrifying, alien experiences more understandable and accessible but also to provide a means of witnessing or testifying for the history and experience of historically marginalized people." (Vickroy, 2002, p.221) i.e. African American people are not spectators of history but victims of ancient marginalization and hostile racism. This can be illustrated in several instances in *Jazz* in certain instances of racial segregation under the Jim Crow Law<sup>2</sup> as when Violet and Joe are travelling and we can read "there would be no green-as-poison curtain separating the color people from the rest of the diners" (Morrison, 1992, p.31), i.e. under the aforementioned law, black Americans were banned from sharing common spaces with white people and even faced incarceration for defying it.

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<sup>1</sup> Morrison, T. *Jazz*. Penguin, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> In 1893 (...) the Supreme Court reversed the Civil Rights Act of 1875. With this decision, Jim Crow and lynch law—a new mode of racist enslavement—received judicial sanction. Indeed, three years later the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision announced the "separate but equal" doctrine, which consolidated the South's new system of racial segregation. (Davis, A. *Women, Race and Gender*. First Vintage Books, 1983. p70.)

In anonymity, the narrator of *Jazz* portrays how identities are sexualized and racialized as being part of an urban community where there is a superimposition of the supremacist world of white people over the world of the racialised American people. Moreover, racism can be evidenced in the voice of the narrator when they state that both the poor black and the wealthy white “are pleased with the spectacle of the other” (Morrison, 1992, p.8). That is, there is no reconciliation between the different ethnic groups that cohabit in a city where it becomes challenging for the members of the black community to find their true identity and settle down since the trauma produced by racism generates a severe fragmentation of their identity. In other words, racism itself has left several traumatic effects in those racialized communities, where kinship established among their members is dominated by both the white supremacists and the male gender, thus generating a displacement of what is referred to as the Self. In such context, it seems inconceivable to trace back African-American origins so as to find some genealogical roots in order to establish a sort of cultural identity in that life-threatening and extremely racist setting.

### **Early Trauma and the Search for the True Self**

As regards the displacement of the self in this novel, in an interview with Gloria Naylor in 1985<sup>3</sup>, Toni Morrison herself explained that she wondered “what compels a good woman to displace the self, her self” and she answered her own question by stating that romantic love could be the source of the displacement of the female self. That is, being the displacement of the female self when loving someone more than herself in the search for identity, *Jazz* is framed in an extramarital love affair which turns out to be violent and which problematizes the aforementioned displacement through romantic love in a social system where there is marked violent domination by the white race and by the male-dominating world, and where female desire is either entirely obliterated. This emphasizes how the grounds and foundations of adult love lie in childhood. In other words, neither is adult sexual love defined nor outlined in the relationships or events that are forged during a mature age, yet they originate in infancy, thus opening the opportunity to revisit the conflicts that emerged at that early time in order to redeem them. This can also be seen under the lens of Cathy Caruth when she defines trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.” (Caruth, 2012, p.11). It is through the process of reliving a specific triggering event once again that the person reopens the wound of trauma, thus reinforcing the unpredictability of the responses of the trauma survivor in the way they express those traumatic experiences and the reactions they might have.

Identity in ancestry is not the same as the True self in the female sense, since the latter is related to the female agency, which women need to exercise in order to free themselves from

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<sup>3</sup> Micucci, D. (1994). An inspired life: Toni Morrison writes and a generation listens. In D. Taylor-Guthrie (Ed.), *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (pp. 275-279). Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi

the manacles of a patriarchal society which has been restraining them for centuries. Additionally, if women do not find their female True Self they can certainly fall prey to the violence and subjugation that the patriarchal system exercises on them since they might develop another type of self which is not in accordance with their own truth and their own desires. According to Winnicott,

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. (D.W. Winnicott, 1965, 148)

In *Jazz* this can be exemplified in Violet's double personality: she sees herself performing actions as an outsider, so readers are presented with a picture of *this* Violet (her True Self) and *that* Violet (the False one). The False Self seen in Violet is portrayed by the narrator as follows: "...*that* Violet slammed past a white woman into the seat of a trolley four minutes late. And (...) *that* Violet heard the clack of the plate glass (...); *that* Violet not only knew the knife was in the parrot's cage and not in the kitchen drawer." (Morrison, 1992, p.90). And it is *that* False Violet who approaches Dorcas' coffin and slashes the deceased's earlobe, thus showing a clear fragmentation of Violet's personality: one side is in the search of becoming aware of her True Self and real feelings, and the other, behind whom she hides and lacks personal female agency, even though performs actions she seems to be unable to account for. Moreover, by hiding her True Self she becomes ostracized and almost voiceless, as when she is described by Joe when he expresses his feelings regarding Violet's silences: "Violet takes better care of the parrot than she does me (...) But the quiet. I can't take the quiet. She don't talk anymore." (Morrison, 1992, p.49) Violet is silent and secluded in herself her psychic structure is diluted because she is no longer the subject of the desire of her husband. This idea can be emphasized by Vickroy when she explains how "[i]n a traumatic context, (...) there can be (...) a sign of being caught in stasis, of not being able to move on and resolve the initial trauma" (Vickroy, 2002, p.90) That is, the aforementioned immobility can be reflected in the fact that Violet shuns herself and does not even talk to her husband, but only communicates with a bird which seems to be the only one who can express her "I love you" (Morrison, 1992, p.3) but out of conditioned repetition. All in all, Violet, an allusive of "violent", seems unable to love herself enough due to her childhood trauma, which has caused the fragmentation of her own self.

## Result

On balance, Morrison's *Jazz* problematizes and foregrounds a character that possesses a fragmented self, which is an inevitable result of childhood trauma, while she is part of a convoluted socio-historical context of racism that seems to deepen the convolution of her identity and makes it almost insurmountable to find her True Female Self.

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