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**"Creating Something Else to Be":  
Negotiating African American Female  
Subjectivities in Toni Morrison's  
*Sula, Beloved, and Jazz***

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in English  
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## ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison's novels, *Sula*, *Beloved*, and *Jazz* delineate the struggles of African American women to attain subject positions in a society where blackness and femaleness mark them as 'others,' and where women are objectified in the male pursuit of subjectivity. Negotiation of a variety of psychoanalytic and feminist theories in reading these texts demonstrates the complexities of African American female subjectivities, and the difficulties of achieving representation of them within a patriarchal and racist order.

Morrison's themes and narrative techniques foreground the political implications of acts of reading, writing, and representation, and envisage female subjectivities which disrupt dominant narratives of identity, gender and race. These subjectivities cannot be wholly represented within the dominant order without appropriation, but can be glimpsed as mobile and multiple subjectivities which refuse the masculine economy's structures, and break open prevailing narratives to imagine a female subjective space beyond patriarchal culture, and to re-imagine African American female narratives of self.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.	ii
Acknowledgements.	iii
Preface.	1
Introduction. Theoretical Narratives: Feminist Rewritings of Subjectivity.	4
Chapter One. "Her Face is My Own": Mothers, Daughters, and Relational Subjectivities.	35
Chapter Two. "Black, Liquid Female": Otherness and Alterity as Sites for African American Female Subjectivities.	80
Chapter Three. Negotiating (With) the Text: Narrating Subjects and Subjective Narrating.	114
Conclusion.	142
Works Cited.	145
Works Consulted.	152

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## PREFACE

A few words seem necessary to provide a context for this thesis and its terms, particularly those of the title. The mention of "female subjectivities" signals this reading's employment of feminist theories in approaching Morrison's novels. I use "female" in full awareness of the debates that have ensued over the sex/gender and female/feminine divide, and do not intend to locate women's selfhood in biology, but to acknowledge the cultural, historical, and physical effects of being designated 'female' in a society that polices the male/female division with fervour. I choose the term "subjectivities" in an effort to conjure ideas of identity and selfhood which are not stable and singular, but, as the plural implies, multiple and many-faceted. "Subjectivities" also relates to the Lacanian theories I draw upon which consider the ways in which we are 'subject' to language, and, I will suggest, to narratives of subjectivity, rather than being masters of it/them.

The specification "African American" indicates both Morrison's and this thesis's focus upon black, predominantly African American women, and anticipates my use of black feminist theories in an effort to problematize issues of gender with those of colour, culture, history, and race - and issues of colour, culture, history, and race with those of gender. As a result, my theory often tends toward discussion of 'women' and/or 'African Americans' as a group; such generalizations seem necessary for theoretical purposes, even as my readings of Morrison's novels demonstrate the individuality of her female characters, and their refusal to be categorized within any amorphous entity.

Lastly, the expression "Negotiating African American Female Subjectivities" designates its initial word as verbal participle - "*the performance of* negotiating African American female subjectivities" *and* adjective - "African American female subjectivities who negotiate" - in order to convey this thesis's focus both upon the politics of black women's subjectivities, and upon Morrison's female characters as agents who strive to form and enact subjective positions within racist and sexist systems hostile to

conception of black women as subjects rather than objects. Further, the notion of "negotiation" portrays the act of gaining and sustaining subjectivity as one which requires constant give and take, and often partial or complete capitulation to the more powerful representatives of patriarchal and racist systems; "negotiation" simultaneously insists upon those who negotiate as agents, actively seeking self-determination. "Negotiation" also figures within this reading as a continual, eternally incomplete process, enacted and re-enacted in confronting and dealing with obstacles on the road to subjectivity; ultimately subjectivity is attained not at the end of that road, but in the process of travelling it, and alters constantly as one renegotiates one's subjective position.

The politics of "negotiation" also bear relevance to my theoretical position, which attempts to negotiate a variety of feminist and psychoanalytic theories in order to problematize, and to convey the complexity of, African American female subjectivities. The use of a variety of theories also indicates the impossibility of encompassing all pertinent concepts and philosophies, and undermines any conception of this reading - or any other - as authoritative. My Introduction refers to theoretical standpoints as narratives, and, as Chapter Three discusses, any narrative involves certain reductions and omissions which undermine any claim to mastery. For example, my use of Lacanian and French feminist theories often derives from others' readings of those theories - narratives of the narratives - simply because readings of complicated and frequently difficult writings of someone such as Lacan prove more accessible than the writings themselves. Of course, something is lost in this re-reading, and no summary of Lacan or any other theorist employed herein is offered as an adequate replacement for a reading of original works. Theoretical negotiation is, however, a process of re-narrating and interposing narratives, and remains valid and valuable if practised in full awareness of the implications of, in Gayatri Spivak's words, what is "left out" (18).

Finally, I offer my acknowledgement of my own position as a white, New Zealand feminist, in order to situate my thesis as itself a narrative which strives to negotiate several theoretical and literary discourses with no claim to authority; this I declare in response to bell hooks, who writes that the assumption

that women of color represent this group whose experiences and whose writing is so removed from that of white women that [white women] cannot address such work critically and analytically.... may very well enforce racism. It helps... take the burden of accountability away from white women and places it solely onto women of color. (1989 47)

For hooks, it is important for white women "to share their ideas about black women's writing...without assuming that their thoughts would be seen as 'definitive' or that they would be trying to be 'the authority'" (48). This thesis thus enacts, through the lenses of multiple theories and readings, a white woman's grappling with the complexities of African American women's subjectivities as depicted in three of Toni Morrison's novels, and the implications they possess for issues of race, gender, representation, and narrative. It is not intended as an authoritative and absolute portrayal of these issues; I do, however, stand by its 'conclusions' which work continually to indicate persistent difficulties in asserting any conclusion, even as they insist upon the need for action and struggle.

I focus upon *Sula*, *Beloved*, and *Jazz* because, of Morrison's six novels, they offer the greatest focus upon black women, they interact productively with one another, and their themes and characterizations most vividly engage my imagination. My readings of these novels, necessarily, gloss over and omit many aspects of the stories, and cannot do justice to Morrison's multi-layered texts; once more, however, this thesis strives to indicate those omissions wherever possible.

Ultimately, this thesis offers an understanding of the diverse and tangled interactions of narrative, fiction, and politics in allowing or denying space in which African American women may re-imagine themselves, reject the monolithic and limiting narratives of the past, and re-inscribe themselves as speaking subjects whose self-narratives disrupt those of the past, and endeavour to create new forms for the representation and agency of black women.

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