

CONTEMPORARY VISIONS OF LOVE IN JACQUELINE WOODSON'S *RED AT THE BONE*

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Jacqueline Woodson's latest novel, *Red at the Bone*, unveils pressing issues concerning the contemporary African American experience. Through sixteen-year-old Melody's coming-of-age party, the author meditates on themes such as teenage pregnancy, sexuality, queerness, urban life, familial relations, class division, history, and education. Woodson's mastery in constructing the narrative situates the story at the border of prose and poetry; thus, the immediacy of the problems transgresses the limitation of genre. The current paper shall attempt to investigate the various manifestations of love that affect the characters' personal growth, their agency and motivations in the new century.

Key words: contemporary African American literature, coming of age, black sexuality, family relations, gender, race

Since its influential Renaissance in the 1970s, the black female literary tradition has continued to evolve. Writers uncompromisingly still thread unfamiliar grounds in their exploration of black subjectivity and being. Jacqueline Woodson, who only recently dove into the depths of adult fiction, has consistently published novels for younger readers since the 1990s. Her voice has become emblematic for many in the community due to its unapologetic explication of queerness¹ – especially during the coming-of-age period when the child can either be the one who experiences it or the one made aware of it – and diversity in terms of identity categories such as class, race, age, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. Even though she has tirelessly published well-crafted works, she still does not occupy a concrete place in the African American literary tradition

¹ See Kunze, Peter C., "Jacqueline Woodson and Queer Black Fiction for Young Adults." *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International State*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2015, pp. 72-89.

mostly due to the fact that she has predominantly focused her efforts on works for younger readers. Thus, the current paper is not only a specified examination of a given topic in her latest book, but also an attempt to expand the critical field surrounding her works and persona. *Red at the Bone* (2020), her latest novel, uses a coming-of-age party as a framing device to narrate the story of an (un)fortunate teenage pregnancy and the ripples it creates in time in the lives of all the characters. Woodson lends each chapter the voice of a different character – a method that allows her to combine a variety of problematic issues without them becoming overbearing and/or superficial in the span of about 200 pages. The current paper shall focus on the way the multifaceted array of romantic and familial relationships in Woodson's novel uncover love's potential as a powerful force that could lead to female agency, subjectivity and resistance or deter it. Love shall be the nucleus around which other aspects intersect.

Let us first look at the some of the important ties between a parent and a child. Melody, the young girl around whose birth the whole story revolves, has an interesting relationship with her parents, Iris and Aubrey. When she is quite young, Iris decides to pursue her education further and leaves Aubrey to care for Melody. Black fathers have generally attracted negative qualifications throughout history. In demographic studies, they have been described to a big extent as absent, economically unstable and incapable of fostering enduring relations. This widespread perception of them, which is mostly based on impersonal statistics, has eclipsed all other possible discourses. There has been a growing interest in the last 20 years to present a fuller and more nuanced understanding of father figures. Critics, primarily, have argued that the father is not only the biological procreator but also a male figure in the community that enacts such a role. Connor and White have appropriated the term *social fatherhood* to explain this phenomenon. They suggest: "as a more inclusive term, social fatherhood encompasses biological fathers, but also extends to men who are not biological fathers who provide a significant degree of nurturance, moral and ethical guidance, companionship, emotional support, and financial responsibility in the lives of children" (Connor and White 2006: 6). Social fatherhood then seems to be a male version of *othermothering*² – both are remnants of old African traditions, which elevate the importance of the community. The community as a whole is responsible for the growth and survival of the individual. In Melody's case, Po'Boy, her grandfather, is in the role of a social father.

² See James, Stanlie. "Mothering: A Possible Black Feminist Link to Social Transformations." *Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women*. Ed. St. James and A. Busia. London: Routledge, 1993. 44-54.

After his initial reluctance to accept that his daughter's life has been changed irrevocably, he becomes affectionate toward Melody and guides her on her path to maturity. He reminisces: "it wasn't about a growth spurt. That was you already inside her. Now look, you got your granddaddy crying again. Got this old man as misty-eyed as the day I first walked into that hospital room and saw your half-open eyes slide over to me" (Woodson 2020: 51). The immediate connection he feels toward the baby gives him strength to overcome the shame and failed ambitions he had for his daughter. Love then becomes a regenerative power for the family that helps them survive the breach of normalcy and rear a child fully equipped for the mature world. It is telling that the author chooses to unveil more details about the grandfather-granddaughter relationship than the one with the grandmother. As opposed to the ones expressed in some of the women's works from the previous generation, Woodson's world is not divided conceptually into villains and heroes according to gender.

A more conspicuous revision can be found in Aubrey's characterization. He leaves behind his individual desires to take care of Melody willfully and without regret. In the course of the years, they become really close and share interests and secrets. On the day of the party, while she looks around her room, she says:

My father and I went because Wu-Tang was opening. I was twelve then and the two of us yelled and rapped and cheered so hard, we both stayed home the next day drinking lemon-honey tea to nurse our sore throats. The poster was professionally framed—the red letters against a gray matte, the oversize black frame picking up the muted colors of the black-and-white photograph. Beside it, another poster. If someone said choose between your mom and dad, I wouldn't need to blink. Wouldn't stutter. I'd run like a little kid and jump into my daddy's arms.

(Woodson 2020: 5-6)

Music is the interest that appears to act as a connecting tissue between Melody and Aubrey. The way she explains, how they had uninhibited fun at the concert can even be said to sound closer to an adventure between best friends rather than a parent-child outing. It shows the depths of their bond which is not only biological but also supplanted with shared experience and interests. The great detail in which the framing of the poster is presented speaks of a cherished memory, which is immortalized on her wall for years to come. As a whole, this relationship has taken its time to evolve, which is not something that can be achieved through intermittent visits and meetings. She ends her ruminations by finally full-heartedly stating where her allegiances lie – in her "daddy's arms".

Aubrey shares a similar attachment to his daughter. When she is to descend the steps for her party, he thinks: “But what is the father of the child supposed to do with *his* hands? His big open hands. Where were they supposed to go when all they wanted was to reach out for this child, hug her, hide her from the world? [...] This child he made and raised and loved. God, how he loved every single cell dividing” (Woodson 2020: 22-23). The hands of the father are a prominent symbol for both of them. They signify the physical and emotional care he has provided her with over the years. His job required their constant use and physical strength. His love issues from these caring hands. Now he is no longer able to find their purpose when Melody does not need protection and upbringing; this exemplifies the loss of a connection between a symbol and its original meaning. As a conclusion of their overview of black fatherhood, Connor and White write that “data clearly suggest that African American men in fathering roles love, care for, and desire interaction with their children” (Connor and White 2006: 15). Through a fictional example, born out of her experience, Woodson proves the validity of such research and the fact that father love is essential in the upbringing of healthy individuals unafraid of the world and its discriminative practices.

Iris’s characterization as a mother figure and her relationship with her daughter might be considered quite controversial by many. Iris decides to leave off her early life behind and recreate herself as a young university student. She is unsure of the resonance of her action, “She had outgrown Brooklyn and Aubrey and even Melody. Was that cruel?” (Woodson 2020: 101). No one is qualified to answer her. As we would later see, this transformative process is not as successful as she would have wished. After initial longing and search for the never-present mother, Melody becomes somehow detached from her. She explains: “Me so in love with her that as a small child, I cried whenever my father put his arms around her. Said, *She’s mine*, and cried harder when they laughed” (Woodson 2020: 15-16). The child is hungry for the mother and what she can supply it with; it is a very egotistical and primal need. Melody’s hunger does not affect Iris physically but she is confronted by it and to an extent marked by it on a psychological level. It is at this point that she realizes the consequences of what has happened. When she gives birth and sees the baby, she thinks: “The baby’s eyes carried everything in them—they were almond shaped like her own, but for the few minutes they remained open, she could see that they were already a deep brown strangely flecked with green. The eyes were too beautiful. Too hungry” (Woodson 2020: 133). The eyes that open toward Iris are full of wonders and a completely new world. She is aware

of their beauty and need, which are aimed at her. Conflicting emotions swerve in her mind and heart and make her realize that the child is more than she expected. Sara Ruddick writes: “Maternal practices begin in love, a love which for most mothers is intense, confusing, ambivalent, and poignantly sweet as any they will experience” (Ruddick 1980: 344). For Ruddick maternity is obviously not a straightforward process; though, it is strongly bound to love, the feeling is sometimes incomprehensible and perplexing. From the given excerpt, it becomes clear that Iris is enticed by her child in whom she sees bits of herself, but she is further unprepared for what motherhood would require of her – part of her selfhood. There is no doubt that she loves her daughter, although it remains questionable whether she is prepared to surrender the whole of her identity to Melody. Self-love and love-for-the-other enter into a conflict.

In later years, Melody grows distant from Iris and considers their closeness a long-forgotten memory that lingers idly in the past. She says, “Maybe all over the world there were daughters who knew their mothers as young girls and old women, inside and out, deep. I wasn’t one of them. Even when I was a baby, my memory of her is being only halfway here” (Woodson 2020: 11). The past is also vague as an experience because Melody, to an extent, superimposes on it the years she has spent apart from her mother as proof that she was not really there from the beginning. Nonetheless, her words shows pain at the partial loss of her mother and a touch of longing for what *normal* children experience with a present mother figure. Most of all, Melody is looking for affection and support similar to the accumulation of moments spent together with Aubrey and impossible to replicate in a day or a year. Gillian Alban suggests that “the daughter’s journey from loving intimacy with her mother to maturity and independence may cause her to dislike her mother, even while the mother remains or retains a significant influence over her daughter into adult life” (Alban 2017: 116). During Melody’s coming of age, the initial close bond with Iris after the birth is followed by a dislike for the mother due to a certain lack – be it lack of time together, or of affection or of shared pain. We can agree with Alban that even though there might be dislike or resentment, the mother continues to influence the daughter’s life. Melody’s search for mother love that is fused with resentment has affected her self-expression and life decisions. When talking to Malcolm about possible relationships she is quite unsure whether there is something in store for her in the love department (Woodson 2020: 174). Simply said, the fact that her search for love has been constant since childhood makes her imagine her future relationships progressing in the same manner – she is unsure of her

worth and the fact that she might have been unwanted at birth plagues her. As the examination so far reveals, love between a parent and a child is never easy and has a great impact on the identity of both participants. What Woodson has achieved here is a subversion of the expectations for a doting mother and absent father.

The second essential aspect to the subjectivities of the characters is the existence of romantic love. Our focus in this examination shall be on the relationships Iris is involved in, as they appear to be the most pronounced and significant for the rest of the characters in the novel. Iris and Aubrey seem to be the core of the narrative. Even though, in many ways, Melody's coming-of-age party provides structure and the needed incentive for a retrospective, her parents' bond is actually the one that binds families, times and spaces. Iris is aware from the beginning that Aubrey is not somebody to whom she can completely surrender herself. In her own words: "She couldn't see a future with someone who only knew margarine. [...] She didn't love Aubrey enough to walk through the rest of her life with him. But she loved him enough to carry a part of him inside her, nourish it, love it, and see what it became" (Woodson 2020: 41-2). Margarine is symbolic of Aubrey's lower standing in the class system. Iris thinks that she is destined for greater things rather than an ordinary man with simple ambitions and relatively stable working-class future ahead of him. She further adds that she is prepared to allow him to possess a part of her self but never the full extent of it. Melody, then, is the only thing he can hope for out of this relationship. Early on in her mind's eye, she has silently decided to pursue her own goals. It is interesting, though, that she manages to assign a certain value to love, which begs the questions: What amount should love be to make a person stay? Later in the book, Iris recounts her affairs before Aubrey and shares that he was one of many that passed through her bed and life. "I learned quickly not to love them, to love the feeling of them inside me, the taste of their mouths, the way they held me. But nothing more" (Woodson 2020: 190). Her explanation suggests that men in her life transformed into an escape that supplied her with pleasure – they were never meant to attract a permanent status. How she views Aubrey, then, is not an isolated occasion. It is part of her identity and worldview. Bethea and Allen note that after surviving multiple oppressions African American "women are often reluctant to let men in fully"; their constant need to be strong and independent may make them also "reluctant to demonstrate vulnerability and reliance on a partner" (Bethea, Allen 2013: 30). Iris learns at an early age from the stories her mother tells her of her grandmother, who survived the events in Tulsa at

the beginning of the century, that survival is deeply rooted in individual strength. She even names Melody after her grandmother as a sign of tribute and re-memory. Thus, there may be some truth in the critical reasoning that attributes unwillingness to commit to a partner to the complicated history of black women. One way or another, Iris's love is not enough to sustain her newfound family and her flight for Oberlin might be the better choice if she was never going to be completely present anyway.

Aubrey, on the other hand, harbors more intense feelings for Iris. In his own words, "the thought of a world where he wasn't able to love her scared him" (Woodson 2020: 64). The world around him loses its contours if Iris is not there to paint its edges. He is willing to do the impossible to be with her, his first and only love as the book suggests. He does not have a comparable amount of sexual experience and the way he respects her is very much a consequence of his upbringing. His mother, CathyMarie, teaches him from an early age to stand his ground and be an honorable person. The close connection he shares with his mother reproduces itself in his romantic life. The lack of a father figure can also explain his need to love somebody and to give himself over completely to another person as he has searched from childhood for this imaginary recipient of affection – a journey that is accompanied by his growing uneasiness and resentment when the father figure proves impossible to find. After falling passionately in love with Iris, he finally reaches the conclusion that love and the search for it are intimately linked to pain. "*I love you*, he whispered into her ear as they lay side by side on her bed. *I love you so much, Iris*. Because maybe this was what love felt like—a constant ache, an endless need" (Woodson 2020: 65). Aubrey's desire is fueled by the pain he endures; pain, which is due to his ever-present need for somebody to return his feelings. Loving somebody, thus, becomes another aspect of his identity – first his mother, then Iris and finally Melody. Elaine Baruch in her extensive exploration of love in fiction throughout the centuries in agreement with Freud argues that "romantic love thrives on impediments, inhibitions of the sexual drive, longings—not necessarily sexual—that aren't satisfied" (Baruch 1991: 247). In other words, romantic love needs tribulations to exist and thrive. Aubrey's unrequited love does not lessen his needs but heightens them. His fixation on Iris may be said to be so intransigent not only because they have a child together but also because she remains the unattainable romantic ideal that is so close yet so far away at the same time. While Iris refuses to commit to a relationship, Aubrey is eager to be part of one.

In Oberlin, Iris experiences another type of longing and devotion. During a literature class, she grabs the attention of a spirited young woman

by the name of Jam. A discussion of Raymond Carver leads gradually to a secret intense relationship between the two women. Being with another woman is an unfamiliar territory for Iris; she is filled with conflicting emotions and an urges. “Iris leaned closer and inhaled her hair. The locks smelled like vinegar and heat. But there was lavender too. She pressed her nose into them, wondering if the smell of Jam’s hair would stay with her forever. Maybe this was love—wanting someone with all the senses” (Woodson 2020: 160). This time around, the other’s body is not only an object capable of providing sexual satisfaction, but also an entity invoking perceptual delight. Iris traces and retraces Jam’s hair and flesh in search of an answer to the question: Is that it? Is this what real love feels like? She comes to the conclusion that love is the desire to possess with all of one’s senses. Writing about queer desire in such detail is not a very common practice in African American literature mostly due to the history of harmful stereotypes about black female sexuality and the expectations of heteronormativity. According to Tapati Bharadwaj,

The usual scholarship on lesbianism tends to focus on the differences between black lesbian sexualities and white sexualities, without acknowledging that black lesbians share a history with other black women. Doing so defines black lesbians as outsiders within the black community, which is why many black women are wary of identifying themselves as homosexuals or writing about queer desires.

(Bharadwaj 2006: 785-6)

The number of black women writing about queer desire has not increased significantly nowadays. Woodson is one of the select few who openly introduce the experience in their works. What is striking about her writing on this topic is how overt her descriptions are. There are past examples of books by black women writers that touch on lesbianism but in most cases it takes place behind closed doors and the actual need for the other’s body is mostly spiritual in nature. The lack of awareness and acceptability of such relationships leads to the wariness that Bharadwaj suggest. Iris feels the same reluctance to carry out her relationship in public. “There was so much power in the not-telling, Iris thought. It terrified her that they’d be found out, that this feeling, this none-ending wanting, would be brought to an end by anyone” (Woodson 2020: 161). She is afraid that everything will be ruined if people found out because they would not be tolerant. To keep it hidden for her is to be powerful. This is her way of showing agency and taking control over her private life. Eventually, everything comes to an abrupt end when Jam finds out Iris has another secret family. Silence about

the past can only get Iris so far. As Regina Porter suggests, “The reality dawns on Iris that her two lives will never blend, and she goes on to pour herself into her education and career” (Porter 2020: n.p.). Past and present are unable to coexist together. Iris’s reinvention in college is ultimately unsuccessful because her past remains unresolved and ever-present. Social expectations and norms present during Iris’s upbringing impede her expression of love and fulfillment.

Jacqueline Woodson’s work *Red at the Bone* is an example of a contemporary novel that manages to honor the long-standing tradition it emerges from as well as to implement modern anxieties and troubles. All characters search for a sense of meaning and loving relationships. Melody’s memorable coming-of-age party inspires retrospection and reevaluation of a past marked by a life-altering teenage pregnancy. The predominant focus in this examination was on the aspects of parent-child and romantic relationships – their ability to sustain or cancel love as a force that defines a person’s identity. A child’s feelings for and dependence on a parent have an effect on their future choices and romantic ties. The inversion of the typical stereotypes concerning the black family reveals a new side of the identity of the parent. Love in romantic relationships, on the other hand, is subjected to a process of attributing quality and quantity. The depths Woodson plunges into in the span of 200 pages are profound; she manages to give a voice to a diverse cast of characters each with own desires and past traumas.

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