

Re-Membering the Song of My Self— African-American Self-Formation in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*

Wei-ching Lai

Department of Children English Education
National Taipei University of Education
E-mail: wclai@tea.ntue.edu.tw

Abstract

This essay aims to analyze how an African-American self is constructed in Morrison's *Jazz*, with a contextual argument to suggest that Morrison successfully foregrounds Africanist personas in the realm of American literature. The essay proper is divided into three sections: first, the construction of identities in the postmodern era; second, popular music and cultural identity; third, jazz structure and self formation in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*. In the first section, I discuss how critics in the postmodern era deal with the issues of identities, and I appropriate Stuart Hall's theories of identity to analyze Violet's and Joe's self-formation. In the second section, I argue that popular music can be viewed as a platform for the listeners and the performers to construct cultural identity, and I suggest that Violet's assimilation into the urban black community be correlated with her adaptation to the jazz music. In the third section, I discuss how the main characters in *Jazz*, through their improvisatory riffs, re-member their past experiences and

thereby establish a “unified” sense of self, and I also suggest that the defiant spirit of jazz is shown in the character of the ambiguous, self-deconstructing narrator.

Key Words: identities, self-formation, jazz

In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison (1992b) investigated and challenged what she called “American Africanism.” She explored how an Africanist “presence or persona” was constructed in supposedly white-dominated American literature. The silenced Africanist presence, as Morrison points out, manifests itself “in the rhetoric of dread and desire,” serving to define the white self. Published in the same year as her sixth novel *Jazz* (1992a), *Playing in the Dark* was no less than a manifesto of her writing politics. All her novels might be viewed as attempts to construct a counter-discourse to American Africanism. Like the writers of the Black Aesthetic Movement in the mid 1960s, she strove to undermine the stereotypes of blacks that continued to be reproduced and circulated in American society, and more importantly, she endeavored to represent black “realities.”¹ Also, like her predecessors, she launched a campaign against white, racist society in the field of representation.

In an interview with Dana Micucci, Morrison referred to a recurring theme in her works: “The search for love and identity runs through most everything I write” (1994: 278). This statement holds true for *Jazz*, a novel dealing with “couple-love—the reconfiguration of the ‘self’ in such relationships; the negotiation between individuality and commitment to another” (Morrison, 1992a: xviii). However, how could Morrison construct an African-American self through couple-love if the Africanist persona had long been “bracketed” or distorted in the realm of American literature? What strategies could she adopt to foreground the black “realities” on the barren stage of American imagination?

¹ According to Elliott Butler-Evans, there are three objectives of the Black Aesthetic Movement: first, “to produce a counterdiscourse . . . to displace the dominant Western mode of representing Black ‘reality;’ (1989: 20)” second, “to construct narratives of a mythical Black nation;” third, to support cultural forms more related to orality (e.g. poetry and one-act plays).

I. The Construction of Identities in the Postmodern Era

In the era of “identity crisis,” as Kobena Mercer forcefully argues, identity as a fixed, coherent, and stable entity is challenged by “the experience of doubt and uncertainty” (1990: 43). As an essentialist concept of identity no longer rings true in the modern theoretical field, how can post-colonialist, feminist, or leftist critics continue to deal with issues of identity and identification which are no less than the *raison d'être* of their theoretical discourses? An “anti-anti-essentialist” concept of identity, as Paul Gilroy suggests, opens up a theoretical third-space, an interstitial, in-between space. Identity can be viewed as “a changing rather than an unchanging same” (Gilroy, 1993: 101). Many post-colonialist critics, like Gilroy, neither endorse the notion of “an unchanging same” nor advocate the idea of “incommensurate local differences” proposed by the post-modernist critic François Lyotard. They strive to negotiate between an essentialist concept of identity and postmodernist/poststructuralist language games. In practice, they appropriate poststructuralist theories to modify an essentialist concept of identity. This leads to an “anti-anti-essentialist” concept of identity—identity becomes an amorphous entity with diverse, heterogeneous, hybrid, and probably contradictory components; and identity is regarded as “a ‘production,’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside of, representation” (Hall, 1990: 222).

Stuart Hall’s theorization of identity belongs to the anti-anti-essentialist or revised poststructuralist model. In “Introduction: Who Needs Identity?” Hall gives a definition of identity by appropriating the Althusserian notion of “interpellation” and the Foucauldian notion of “discursive practices,” while insisting on the autonomy of the individual. He defines identity as

the meeting point, the point of *suture*, between on the one

hand the discourses and practices which attempt to “interpellate,” speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be “spoken.” Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us. (1996: 5-6)

For “an effective suturing” to occur, the individual should not only be interpellated but also “invest in the position” (Hall, 1996: 6). In other words, while the individual is “hailed” by the discourses, “the psychic mechanism or interior processes” of the individual, to borrow Hall’s words, is working simultaneously. Hall’s argument opens up the possibility of resistance: the individual might resist the interpellation of certain discourses no matter how irresistible these discourses seem to be. Moreover, since Hall no longer believes that there are any intrinsic elements of identity, such as a common origin or a common structure of experience, and that the construction of identities is not “the so-called return to roots but a coming-to-terms-with our ‘routes’” (Hall, 1996: 4).² Identities “arise from the narrativization of the self” (Hall, 1996: 4).

Stuart Hall’s theory of identities could help to explain the formation of the African-American self in Morrison’s *Jazz*, a novel with an ambiguous narrator, traumatized characters, and a fragmented storyline. Violet and Joe Traces, the two main characters in this novel, exemplified the difficult process of self-formation in a white, racist society. Violet’s construction of her self depended on her ability to resist the dominant discourses of

² Lawrence Grossberg refers to two models of identity. “The first model assumes that there is some intrinsic and essential content to any identity which is defined by either a common origin or a common structure of experience or both”; the second model suggests that “[i]dentities are always relational and incomplete, in process. Any identity depends upon its difference from, its negation of, some other term” (1996: 89). Stuart Hall’s notion of identity, according to Grossberg, belongs to the second model.

beauty and felicity, which had been planted in her psyche since her girlhood. Joe gained his self identity by re-membering his fragmentary past experiences and finally coming to terms with the “routes” he had taken in his life.

The late middle-aged heroine Violet was confused by her dual self—she was split into a crazy “Violent” and a sane but weary “Violet.” With her mouth agape, *this* Violet watched *that* Violet steal a baby, sit down in the middle of the street, and attempt to slash a dead girl’s face at a funeral. The splitting of the self resulted from Violet’s internalization of her grandmother’s stories of Golden Grey, which reproduced the dominant discourses about skin color and the standard of beauty. Near the end of the story, Violet told Felice (a teen-aged girl who was Dorcas’ best friend) how detrimental her internalization of the perfect image of Golden Grey was to her:

My grandmother fed me stories about a little blond child. He was a boy, but I thought of him as a girl sometimes, as a brother, sometimes as a boyfriend. He lived inside my mind. Quiet as a mole. But I didn’t know it till I got here. The two of us. Had to get rid of it. (Morrison, 1992a: 208)

Violet’s late epiphany triggered off an effort to exorcize her false self. In Felice’s retrospection of her conversation with Violet, Violet resorted to bloody imagery to describe the recovery of her self, a self she favored and felt comfortable with:

“How did you get rid of her?”
 “Killed her. Then I killed the me that killed her.”
 “Who’s left?”
 “Me.”
 “I didn’t say anything. I started thinking maybe the hairdresser was right again because of the way she looked when she said ‘me.’ Like it was the first she heard of the word. (Morrison, 1992a: 209)

Violet was not ruined by the dominant discourses of beauty and

felicity, as the vulnerable social pariah Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*; instead, she was able to shake off the white racist discourses in whose subject position she once so whole-heartedly invested. Only when she metaphorically killed the “lady” (the “somebody else” she had pretended to be—white, light, and young) was she able to build up her authentic, black self.

While “Violet’s splintered subjectivity is experienced synchronically,” “Joe’s shifting selfhood is experienced in a diachronic mode” (O’Reilly, 1996: 375).³ Joe believed himself “changed into new seven times” before he met his eighteen-year-old lover, Dorcas (Morrison, 1992a: 123). The seven new starts referred to Joe’s giving himself a surname the first day he went to school, his being picked out and trained by Hunter’s Hunter, his being forced to leave his hometown, Vienna, which was “burned to the ground,” his moving north with his wife, his moving uptown in the City, his narrow escape in the riot of 1917, and his joining the black demonstration in 1919. The seven “rebirths,” embodied in Joe’s understatement “changed into new seven times,” consisted of positive experiences like Hunter’s Hunter’s mentoring, but most of them were negative experiences of denial, rejection and displacement. Joe failed to coordinate his discrete personas, and his first experience of negation—his parents “disappeared without a trace”—was especially traumatic. When he met the girl with “hoof marks” on her cheekbone, he told her things he hadn’t told himself. (And later the unspeakable thing turned out to be his obsession with his wild, crazy mother, his futile attempts to track down her, and her refusal to give him a sign.) The narrativization of his fragmented experiences rehabilitated his self. He could then obtain a “unified” sense of self, no matter how temporary it was, by narrating, re-membering, and making sense of his fragmented past experiences.⁴

³ O’Reilly (1996) attributes Violet’s and Joe’s splintered selves to their loss of mothers.

⁴ “Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a

II. Popular Music and Cultural Identity

Music, as Simon Frith suggests, “seems to be a key to identity because it offers, so intensely, a sense of both self and others, of the subjective in the collective” (1996: 110). Ralph Ellison explicates the complicated relationship between self and others in his famous observation about jazz:

true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment (as distinct from the uninspired commercial performance) springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. (1972: 234)

The “true jazz moment,” as Ellison calls it, enables an individual player to define himself against and through the ensemble. The construction of the self through a group is clearly manifested in James Baldwin’s much-anthologized short story “Sonny’s Blues.” In “Sonny’s Blues,” the band leader, Creole, directed Sonny to “speak” for himself, and finally Sonny, formerly a drug addict and lost soul, established his self identity with the help of other musicians. “Then they all gathered around Sonny and Sonny played. Every now and again one of them seemed to say, amen. Sonny’s fingers filled the air with life, his life” (Baldwin, 2005: 76). The relationship between a solo player and the other musicians in a musical performance can be metaphorically extended to the relationship between an individual and his community. Just as a player in an improvisation defines himself against and through his fellow musicians, so an individual can define himself against and

painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present” (Bhabha, 1994: 63).

through his community.⁵

Not merely a metaphor of identity, popular music is able to construct identity. According to Simon Frith, music “symbolizes *and* offers the immediate experience of collective identity” (1996: 121). In responding to music, an individual is drawn into an emotional affiliation with the performers and other audience members (Frith, 1996). Musical identity is not just imagery but “always also real, enacted in musical activities” (Frith, 1996: 121). Music making and music listening are “bodily matters”—musical pleasure is not derived from fantasy but is experienced materially (Frith, 1996). However, the “core” or “essence” of musical identity is not a fixed, intrinsic entity waiting for an individual to identify with it; it is a “changing same” which admits re-making and hybridity. As Keith Negus suggests,

Songs and musical styles do not simply “reflect,” “speak to” or “express” the lives of audience members or musicians. *A sense of identity is created out of and across the processes whereby people are connected together through and with music* (Emphasis mine). (1996: 133)

In other words, the lives of musicians and audiences are not an intrinsic element of music that manifests itself in the content or form of music; on the contrary, music offers a platform for the musicians and audiences to “articulate” with each other. And the interaction of musician and audience produces a collective or cultural identity.

In *Jazz*, Violet’s relationship with the urban black community was symbolized by her adaptation to the jazz music. In the beginning of the novel, the ill-accommodated Violet tried to win back her husband by imitating “the dance steps the dead girl used to do” (Morrison, 1992a: 5). But her imitation was awkward, disgusting, and ridiculous: “It was like watching an old street pigeon pecking the crust of a sardine sandwich the cats left behind” (Morrison, 1992a: 6). At

⁵ The jazz model may help to explain the relationship between the self and the community in Morrison’s novels, which are greatly influenced by the black music and black oral tradition.

that moment she was at odds with the urban black community—she was a social outcast who stumbled into “cracks” once in a while. Unable to invest in the musical discourse that interpellated her, she could not really integrate into the jazz milieu. However, after she had exonerated the racist discourses implicit in the stories of Golden Grey and vowed to be her own black self, she was able to integrate into the jazz milieu and thereby reconcile with her husband. Felice witnessed the scene:

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. Funny, like old people do, and I laughed for real. Not because of how funny they looked. Something in it made me feel I shouldn't be there. Shouldn't be looking at them doing that. (Morrison, 1992a: 214)

Through their bodily participation in music, Violet and Joe assimilated themselves into an urban black community, constructing their collective/cultural/black identity. As they interacted with the black community on the musical platform, they also communicated and reconciled with each other. And Felice felt their mutual involvement, which made her say she “shouldn't be there.” Unlike Dorcas who was an interferer, Felice was willing to be a faithful family friend. The former chaotic trio, Joe-Dorcas-Violet, was replaced by a beneficent trio, Joe-Violet-Felice.⁶

Joe and Violet's dance near the end of the novel echoed the “train dance” on their way to the City twenty years ago, which marked the “honeymoon stage” of migratory accommodation, to borrow Debora Barnes' term. Passing the excitement of moving to a

⁶ The biblical name of Dorcas means “gazelle,” which relates her to Joe's “deer-eyed” mother (Rodrigues, 1993: 740). The name Felice connotes felicity. That is why Joe said to Felice, “They named you right” (Morrison, 1992a: 215).

new place, this displaced and misplaced couple “become disoriented, their identities begin to erode, and they experience themselves as fragmented, foreign, without function” (Barnes, 2000: 290). After the phases of crisis and of recovery, they reestablished “community and with it a concomitant sense of identity (Barnes, 2000: 286). The dance near the end of the novel marked the “adjustment phase”—the fourth and last phase of migratory accommodation—in which Joe and Violet accommodated themselves to the urban black community.

III. Jazz Structure and Self-Formation in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*

Morrison’s *Jazz*, though set in the 1920s Harlem, does not deal with African-American intellectuals’ glamorous achievements during the Harlem Renaissance; the novel, instead, depicts the life of plain, ordinary people immersed in the urban jazz milieu of the 1920s. The protagonists of the book are an unlicensed, crazy hairdresser (Violet Trace) and a beauty product seller (Joe Trace). All of the conspicuous social events shown in the characters’ retrospection, such as the St. Louis race riot of 1917 and the resulting National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) demonstration in New York City, are pushed into the background of the novel (Matus, 1998). Nevertheless, jazz—the popular music permeating New York’s black community in the 1920s—is undoubtedly thrust into the limelight in the novel.⁷

⁷ Critics often refer to Morrison’s interviews to measure the importance of jazz in this novel. Linden Peach, for one, refers to Morrison’s 1992 interview with Bigsby: “Morrison admitted . . . that the title might not be right for the novel, believing jazz itself to be more in the background of the book as image and metaphor” (1995: 114). In spite of this interview, Peach argues that the influence of jazz is obvious in this book. However, Carolyn M. Jones refers to Morrison’s 1993 interview in *Paris Review*, in which Morrison said, “the jazz-like structure wasn’t a secondary thing for me—it was the *raison d’être* of the book” (1997: 492). No matter what Morrison said, the readers cannot

Jazz, an important form of black secular music, is controversial and much misunderstood. Many people believe that jazz arose from the brothels of Storyville in turn-of-the-century New Orleans and thereby conveyed an immoral overtone. Kalamu ya Salaam strives to rid it of its ill fame, contending that “[j]azz was born in the streets and parks of the New Orleans African American community” (1995: 368). But ya Salaam’s exoneration gesture fails to purge jazz of the lewd and lascivious insinuation felt by its listeners. With its immoral undertone in mind, Joel Augustus Rogers suggests that the impact of jazz depends on the stability of the listeners: “Jazz, it is needless to say, will remain a creation for the industrious and a dissipator of energy for the frivolous, a tonic for the strong and a poison for the weak” (cited from Ogren, 1989: 167).

Many historians agree that Harlem Renaissance intellectuals tended to hold biases against jazz, but some literary artists did find the new musical form provocative and stimulating (Ogren, 1989). Writers like Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Huston used jazz not only for setting and themes, “but as a language expressing their particular artistic vision and containing the potential for a more general Afro-American aesthetic” (Ogren, 1989: 162). These Harlem Renaissance writers, by incorporating “jazz language” into their works, anticipated a great number of African-American literary works that not only use jazz for image, subject, setting, and theme but also incorporate jazz rhythm, jazz pattern, and jazz “language.” Morrison’s stylistic approach in *Jazz* pertains to the tradition of “jazz literature.”⁸

In Morrison’s *Jazz*, jazz as a form of “black” music created an alluring, amorous atmosphere in the City. The music was nearly

deny that “jazz” is a crucial component in this novel.
⁸ Barbara Williams Lewis found the term “jazz literature” when she searched for her paper “The Function of Jazz in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*” (2000: 272). She believes that Morrison’s stylistic approach in *Jazz* is a very carefully structured technique, and she suggests that many of Morrison’s previous novels, especially *Beloved* and *Sula* are jazz novels.

equivalent to the City—both were enchanting yet “dangerous.” Jazz, as a form of music, also evoked diverse responses from different characters. For the sexually repressed Alice Manfred, jazz, a kind of lascivious music that “had dropped on down, down to places below the sash and the buckled belts,” compelled Lord-abiding listeners to shut the windows and “suffer the summer sweat” (Morrison, 1992a: 56). Dorcas, who “thought of that life-below-the-sash as all the life there was,” surrendered herself to the seductive music (Morrison, 1992a: 60). For the love forlorn Violet, jazz was a love potion by means of which she could win back her husband. The characters’ multiple responses to jazz, on the one hand, enabled jazz to act as a signifier with multiple significations, and on the other hand, conveyed the listeners’ personalities, desires, and interests. In other words, depicting the characters’ responses to jazz was a method of characterization.

However, the most important function of jazz in this novel, as many critics have indicated, is Morrison’s application of the jazz structure to the narrative. Henry Louis Gates, for instance, designates the importance of the jazz structure in Morrison’s novel: “while many black writers have used musicians and music as theme and metaphor for their writing, none have attempted to draw upon jazz as the structuring principle for an entire novel” (1993: 52). According to Barbara Williams Lewis (2000), Morrison’s jazz structure consists of a skimpy “core” and lengthy repetitions of the basic material. The “core” of the story manifests itself in the first paragraph of the novel:⁹

Sth, I know that woman. She used to live with a flock of birds on Lenox Avenue. Know her husband, too. He fell for an eighteen-year-old girl with one of those deepdown, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going. When the woman, her name is Violet, went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her

⁹ Barbara Williams Lewis (2000) suggests the opening paragraph tells the whole story.

dead face they threw her to the floor and out of the church. She ran, then, through all that snow, and when she got back to her apartment she took the birds from their cages and set them out the windows to freeze or fly, including the parrot that said, "I love you." (Morrison, 1992a: 3)

With Joe's murder of his young lover as the "core" of the story, the unnamed narrator and each of the main characters—Violet, Joe, Alice Manfred (Dorcas' aunt), Felice (Dorcas' best friend), and even Dorcas—take turns telling the event from his or her point of view (Lewis, 2000). The multiple, circular, yet somewhat repetitive narratives offer multiple perspectives to the same event and, more importantly, leads to those characters' narratives about themselves. In their personal narratives, they "jump backwards in time to fill in gaps and provide explanation. They remember the past through improvisatory riffs situated in the here and now" (Rice, 2000: 172). Only when they are able to "re-member" the formerly unassimilated fragments about their past can they establish a "unified" sense of self.

Like the two protagonists, Joe and Violet, Alice Manfred "tailored" a new self by coming to terms with her past experiences. In the chapter dealing with Alice's bereavement, fragments of memories frequently popped up and intervened the present: the 1917 race riot in which her sister and brother-in-law were brutally killed, her restrictive upbringing under the eyes of her conservative parents, the sexual suppression she imposed on her orphaned niece, Dorcas, and her repressed desire to seek revenge against the woman who had stolen her husband. After this respectable woman retrieved her forgotten or unassimilated memories through conversation with Violet, she had a better understanding of her self and thus alleviated her fear of sex as well as her fear of violence. With a better understanding of her self, Alice became courageous enough to move back to Springfield (a sorrowful place where her husband betrayed her), searching for "[t]he cheerful company maybe of someone who can provide the necessary things for the

night” (Morrison, 1992a: 222).

Almost all of the main characters’ improvisatory riffs brought about reminiscences of the unspeakable or perplexing things, but Dorcas’ solo is exceptional. Dorcas, a girl with “the inside nothing,” underwent traumatic experiences in her childhood—in the East St. Louis race riot, her father (a pool hall proprietor) was pulled off a streetcar and stomped to death, and her mother was subsequently burned to death in a fire (Morrison, 1992a). Her traumatic experiences, however, were represented second-hand in Alice’s and Joe’s recollections of her. Alice saw the hard part of Dorcas: “she must have seen the flames She never said. Never said anything about it” (Morrison, 1992a: 57); Joe tended to her soft part, watching her crying in his arms for the loss of her paper dolls and her Mama. Instead of re-membering the traumatic fragments of her past, Dorcas’ improvisatory monologue focused on the occurrences on the night of her death—her passionate love for her new boyfriend, Joe’s trailing of her, and what happened after she was shot. These details, though crucial for the development of the whole story, demonstrated her superficiality. As a person without self, Dorcas was merely a specter living in people’s memories.

As young and inexperienced as Dorcas, Felice described incidents that took place in the recent past in her improvisatory monologue, mainly her visits to the Traces. However, Violet’s meditation on “Me” inspired Felice to look for her real self. “A secret somebody you didn’t have to feel sorry for or have to fight for. Somebody who wouldn’t have to steal a ring to get back at whitepeople and then lie and say it was a present from them” (Morrison, 1992a: 210). Recognizing the importance of an authentic self, Felice started to reflect on her past experiences—her pretending to be somebody else when making up love scenes, and her mother’s stealing an opal ring to seek revenge against a white clerk in Tiffany’s who had slighted her. Deciding to cherish an authentic “Me,” Felice relinquished her search for the opal ring—another white myth—and promised, instead, to bring some

jazz records when she came to visit the Traces again. Felice's awakening brought her a brand-new, confident self.

The jazzifying structure of *Jazz* not only results in fragmentary, circular, and repetitive narration but also leads to an ambiguous and self-deconstructing narrator. The narrator is an "anonymous first-person omniscient narrator," to borrow Katherine J. Mayberry's term. Neither first-person limited nor third-person omniscient, the narrator is an in-between figure that deviates from the standard narrators in American literature. This narrator remains indeterminate: gender, age, and race are ambiguous.¹⁰ More controversially, this narrator deconstructs her (?) authoritative self by admitting her failure in depicting the characters ("It never occurred to me that they were thinking other thoughts, feeling other feelings, putting their lives together in ways I never dreamed of" [Morrison, 1992a: 211]), and by yielding her narration to other characters (for example, in Chapter Five, the first-person narrator's meditation on City life gives way to Joe Trace's monologue). The narrator even invites the readers to "make" the book, following the tradition of jazz music which demands the audience's participation. The last paragraph of the novel, conveying the narrator's strong desire for love, is no less than her gesture to invite the reader to join and culminate the book:

But I can't say that aloud; I can't tell anyone that I have been waiting for this all my life and that being chosen to wait is the reason I can. If I were able I'd say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now. (Morrison, 1992a: 229)

Jazz is a novel with no closure, always inviting the reader to make

¹⁰ Caroline Rody suggests that this narrator is "pointedly ungendered and unraced, an uncategorizable speaker" (2001: 635). And Henry Louis Gates suggests that the narrator is "neither male nor female; neither young nor old; neither rich nor poor. It is *both* and *neither*" (1993: 54).

and re-make it. Thus the anti-traditional narrator yields to the reader.

IV. A Coda—Jazz up and Foreground Africanist Personae

Jazz, with its antiphony, improvisation, non-closure, swing, and syncopate, defies the Western rules of musical composition. By adopting the musical form of African Americans and its radicalism, Morrison challenges American literature. The jazzifying structure, fragmentary and circular narrations, and an in-between narrator are all at odds with the tradition of American literature. Dirk Ludigkeit points out the defiant power of *Jazz*: “Morrison’s inherent affirmation of a specifically African-American cultural heritage, and the openness to diversity that it embraces, makes *Jazz* a powerful political statement” (2001: 169). His observation echoes Morrison’s declaration to be political:

If anything I do . . . isn’t about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams—which is to say, the work must be political. (1999: 202)

One way for Morrison to be political is to foreground the bracketed, silenced, and distorted Africanist personae. In *Jazz*, she deals with the black characters’ self-formation. Through the improvisatory riffs, these insignificant city residents take turns narrating an identical event—Joe’s murder of his young lover—from their own perspectives. By moving back and forth in time—sometimes reflecting on the current event and sometimes recollecting the past ones—they re-member the forgotten or unassimilated fragments in the past and gradually establish a “unified” sense of self. At the end of the novel, they are no longer trapped in their past nightmares, and a better understanding of

themselves enables them to confront their future, courageously and even cheerfully. Moreover, within the framework of jazz music, considering the complicated and intertwining relationship between the self and the group in the musical performance, the stories of one or two selves are closely related to an ensemble. The personal stories of Violet, Joe, Alice, Dorcas, and Felice could be inferred to the story of ordinary black folks who lived in the urban jazz milieu in the 1920s. The once silenced African Americans are foregrounded. Through *Jazz*.

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重新拼湊出自我之歌—— 試論《爵士樂》中非裔美國人的自我建構

賴維菁

摘 要

本論文主要探索摩里森如何應用爵士樂的敘事結構與爵士樂所蘊含的精神來處理書中人物的自我建構，並進而將本書視為摩里森藉由黑人音樂與文字的結合，作為在美國文學的範疇裡替黑人發聲的一種方式。本論文主要涵蓋三個區段：(一) 後現代時期的身分認同 (identities)——探討後現代時期的理論家如何詮釋身分認同的議題，並利用Stuart Hall的理論來詮釋《爵士樂》中兩位主角的自我追尋；(二) 流行音樂與文化屬性 (cultural identity)——探討流行音樂如何成為聽眾與演出者共同建構文化屬性的場域，並探討《爵士樂》主角紫羅蘭如何透過與爵士樂的融合而融入都會黑人社群；(三)《爵士樂》中的爵士結構與自我建構——主要討論摩里森如何運用爵士樂的敘事結構使每個主要角色得以在「即席獨奏」的部分重新反思自我的創傷經驗，進而建立全新的自我，並且探討爵士樂的反叛精神如何體現在書中最曖昧、模稜的角色——敘述者。

關鍵詞：身分認同、自我建構、爵士樂