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## “Blackness of Blackness,” or Jazz as a Dual Figure of (African American) Historicity

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### I.

In the 1980s, such critics as Houston A. Baker, Jr., James A. Snead, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. cast a new light on African American culture by connecting it to so-called poststructuralist theories, or what is more simply called “theory” in American critical circles. Though basically literary scholars, they invoked music as a prime example of their theories, and since then, African American music—especially jazz—has been critics’ favorite figure of the African American aesthetics. Their works have considerably promoted theoretical approaches to African American literature and music, and as a result, literary scholars “have produced the most influential theoretical writing to date on the music’s presence in African American culture” (Lock and Murray 3). It is also true that many have “pointed to the dangers inherent in such uses of music in relation to theories that are chiefly grounded in literary texts and the precepts of literary criticism” (4). Still, whether they may be received as a source of inspiration or put under reconsideration, those theoretical critical works have been a focal point of African American literary criticism as well as of arguments on the sociopolitical and cultural aspects of jazz.

But first of all, what is jazz? This is an ever elusive question. A famous anecdote reports Louis Armstrong’s answer to it: “if you gotta ask, you’ll never know.” As Scott DeVeaux explicates in his essay “Constructing the Jazz Tradition,” attempts to define jazz by musical qualities or techniques will always be frustrated since “exceptions will overwhelm the rule,” and accordingly people’s efforts tend to be directed to the construction of a historical narrative that complements the troublesome inventory of its musical traits and thus delimits the entity of what is called jazz (486). The same thing could be said, of course, about other musical genres. We know, both empirically and theoretically, that it is impossible to give a decisive definition to a musical genre (or for that matter, to any genre). Still, this knowledge

does not entirely invalidate the concept of genre—it still functions as a habitual point of reference with all sorts of connotations that is historically, but imperfectly, constructed.<sup>1</sup> Each genre has tentative boundaries comprised of formal, technical, vehicular, etc. characteristics, as well as posited origins and developmental histories, while they can never be fixated; thus a genre both does and does not exist.<sup>2</sup> As for jazz, as DeVaux argues, though there have been various narratives that try to organize the history of jazz, it is ethnicity that has provided “a center of gravity for the narrative of jazz” (486).

A common assumption has it that jazz is an African American music, even though no one would deny that it is made up of various musical influences and has been practiced by people of various ethnicities in various countries. The tendency to assert the African Americanness of jazz reaches its height in the 60s along with the Black Arts Movement. Especially important is LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka’s writing on jazz. Asserting that “[m]ost jazz critics have been white Americans, but most important jazz musicians have not been” (“Jazz and the White Critic” 137), Baraka regards jazz as well as the blues as “continuous parts of the historical and cultural biography of the Negro,” an expression of “the black psyche” (139). The authenticity of jazz is then measured according to the extent to which a performance captures that psyche. Baraka’s argument is valuable in that he decisively breaks with the “white” Euro-American standards for the excellence of art, but it can also lead to a dogmatic view that the authentic jazz is exclusively African American.<sup>3</sup>

Before Baraka, the blackness of jazz was mostly assessed in relation to whiteness, whether it was received positively or negatively. For example, Duke Ellington, in an article published in 1938, emphasizes the African origin of jazz, its primitiveness, emotionality and closeness to nature, while pointing out the affinity between jazz and classical music, and especially between his own music and “‘legitimate’ music” such as “Stravinsky, Debussy, Respighi, and Gershwin” (110).<sup>4</sup> Though his claim of the primitiveness and affinity to Western musical tradition of his music (then termed “jungle sound”) was obviously a commercial strategy, the view of jazz as primitive and the desire to match up with the “white” Euro-American art tradition were broadly shared. As Justine Tally points out, during the Harlem Renaissance, jazz was associated with primitiveness and lowliness even by African American writers and not regarded as a respectable art that enabled them to be on equal terms with the “mainstream” white arts (67).

The view of jazz as a primitive African American music persists until well after World War II. A typical example is found in Norman Mailer’s infamous essay, “The White Negro” (1957), in which he regards African American jazz musicians as primitive, childlike

barbarians who live “in the enormous present” (341). Whereas he follows, as those before him implicitly did, the Hegelian concept of the African culture characterized by immediacy—the Negro as the Natural Man without history—he gives the othered, marginalized black culture an affirmative value, converting it into revitalizing force for jaded white bohemians.

It was in the 1980s, after the decline of black nationalism, that people started emphasizing the universality of jazz rather than its blackness. Thus such jazz musicians as Billy Taylor and Wynton Marsalis embrace jazz as a serious art music that can be likened to European classical music. Taylor calls jazz “America’s classical music,” and claims that though jazz is of African American origin, “the music has transcended ethnic boundaries and reflects and defines the national character as well as the national culture” (330). Likewise, Marsalis, in an article titled “What Jazz Is—and Isn’t” (1988), argues that jazz has gained “such universal appeal and application to the expression of modern life” (334). Even as they defy Hegelian views that jazz is “a product of noble savages” or that “jazz history does not exist” (Marsalis 334-35), they also reject Baraka’s black nationalism by claiming that jazz is *the* American music, or even a universal music. Still, clearly they do not part with the African Americanness of jazz even though they do not overtly insist on its essential blackness. For example, Marsalis, looking back at the development of jazz, mentions many jazz musicians in the article, but every one of them is African American; his “neoclassicism” presumes an elitist, institutionalized history and tradition of jazz that is largely dominated by prestigious African American musicians. As the article’s title suggests, Marsalis advances the “purist ethic in jazz” (335), and African Americanness serves as a tacit standard for the definition of authentic jazz. In a sense, they accept the Hegelian value system and the progressive sense of objective, rational history, even though they include black culture in the mainstream rather than give it the othered status.<sup>5</sup>

The narratives of jazz made by Taylor and Marsalis as well as Ellington and Harlem Renaissance writers are all characterized by the irreconcilable duality—African Americanness and Americanness, or blackness and whiteness—that can take many forms but is always reminiscent of W. E. B. Du Bois’s “double consciousness”: “One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one body” (9). Even Baraka’s black nationalism, though it is a struggle to get out of the double consciousness, remains within the dualist racial schema, being in its worst case a mere inversion of the hierarchy somewhat similar to Mailer’s claim.<sup>6</sup> Now to return to the theoretical criticisms in the 80s, their poststructuralist approaches are understood to be engaged in the deconstruction of the Hegelian dualism concerning race and history, the double

consciousness produced by the racial schema of America, without falling into the essentialization of blackness. I would argue, however, that the theoretical critics still retain a slightly altered version of double consciousness.

Take, for instance, Snead's essay "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture," in which he revalorizes Hegel's definition of black culture in positive terms from the perspective of "a revised metaphysics of rupture and opening" that is ascribed to Nietzsche and Derrida (66). Snead accepts Hegel's idea that black culture is totally other to the modern European sense of progressive history, because of its "immediacy," or its peculiar sense of time that is cyclical and repetitive but full of "accidents and surprises" (qtd. in 65), of which Snead thinks jazz improvisation is a typical example. What distinguishes him from Mailer is that he further argues that elements of black culture are also "already there in latent form" in European culture (77). Blackness in this sense becomes a general principle of time and history that denies any stable linearity, objectivity, rationality, and identity—something comparable to, say, Derrida's *différance*. This will lead to a logical conclusion not only that there can never exist a coherent historical narrative of cultural practices including jazz, but also that, at least in terms of formal structure, the "peculiarity of black music" (which already blurs the distinction among musical genres) may actually not be peculiar but shared by other forms of cultural practices and other, supposedly nonblack cultures (72).

What saves Snead from being another advocate of the universal applicability of blackness (and in so doing complicates the matter) is, on the other hand, his stubbornly drawing on specific practices of black music, black church, and black literature in the U.S. in order to describe those disruptive elements, as if to assert that they are proper to and the property of the specific ethnic group (above all, Snead calls them "elements of black culture" even though they also exist in other cultures). In other words, when Snead says "black culture," it has two meanings: one is specific African-derived cultural practices, and the other the general principle of nonidentity separated from any specific, historically situated practices. The relationship of the two kinds of blackness remains unclear in Snead. Is the former a mere example of the latter, or something more than that?

Attacks against the theoretical approaches tend to be turned toward their inability to address specific experiences involved in African American cultural performances as a result of resorting to theories that speak of allegedly universal principles. However, the pioneering scholars such as Baker, Snead, and Gates actually seem to share an assumption that jazz is nothing but African American music even as they advocate the disruptive, nonidentitarian aesthetics of the music. The matter is, therefore, not that they are simply universalist

theoreticians, but that they are still trapped in the unreconciled duality, which now appears in the form of the particularity of ethnicity and the universality of theory. Is jazz a particular ethnic practice, or does its historicity (in the sense of situatedness in history as well as historical connotations derived from it) totally disappear in the course of formal abstraction into theory?

This essay aims to explore this duality, the two kinds of blackness in the discourse around jazz, with Ralph Ellison as another focal point. One of the most influential writers to form the cultural image of jazz, Ellison is placed in a peculiar position in the history of jazz narratives; he plays an important role in both of the two main currents in jazz discourse in the 80s—Marsalis's neoclassicism and theoretical criticisms—and as such, his writing also shows the duality. The reason why I think Ellison is worth being examined together with the theoretical critics is not simply that they share the same aporia. In his works, I would argue, there are moments when he is working on the mysteries of duality—both the classical double consciousness in the racial schema and the theoretical dilemma as to particularity and universality. For example, Snead mentions the “Blackness of Blackness” sermon in Ellison's *Invisible Man* as an example of the repetitive black cultural performance. Yet it seems to me that the repetition of “Blackness,” a word whose association with black nationalism Ellison frequently condemns in essays and interviews, directly addresses the two kinds of blackness which are intricately intermingled in Snead. Before examining Ellison, however, let us make it clear what is at stake in the theoretical critics' usage of jazz. As Snead's “cutting” demonstrates, musical figures derived from historically situated specific African American cultural practices designate an African American sense of temporality that reformulates the concepts of history, historiography, and historicity. What happens, then, to the historicity of jazz itself?

## II.

Serving as a point of departure in the social, political, cultural, and historical arguments on jazz after the 80s, Baker, Snead, and Gates have inspired later scholars and have invited critical reconsideration, especially with regard to their juxtaposition of music and theory. Those who criticize Baker, Snead, Gates, and later theoretical critics influenced by them often point out their misuse of musicological terms, and the impropriety of using music as a figure of literary/critical theory.

However, their attack is often based on the assumption that there are strict definitions of the terms and a coherent developmental history of jazz, and is accordingly incompatible with the theoretical premise of Baker, Snead, and Gates. Thus Alan Munton argues that Snead and Gates's understanding of such terms as "cut" and "riff" is imprecise, and their focus on those rhythmic aspects of the music is an undue attempt to "'Africanize' the music's origins" (236), or "search for authenticity or roots" (251) because, for example, "the riff is of African origin" (241). Both "cut" in Snead and "riff" in Gates, however, stand for rupture and transformation in repetition which undermines the modern Western view of history and the idea of authenticity established on origin. As a matter of course, Gates never claims the exclusively African origin of riffing, and on the contrary, he cites a definition of the term that associates it with "*ostinato* in classical European musical notation" (105). It is true that Snead and Gates expand the meaning of "cut" and "riff," but it is rather later critics who take over the earlier theoretical critics that are to blame for Africanizing and thereby authenticating jazz,<sup>7</sup> even though the latter do assume the African Americanness of the music as said above.

Still, Munton hits the nail on the head when he draws attention to the redundancy of the musical terms in the explication of literary or cultural performance when it "can be grasped in literary terms alone" (238). Gates reads jazz in works of African American writers such as Ellison and Ishmael Reed as a figure of what he calls "Signifyin(g)," the African American vernacular practice characterized by intertextuality and formal revision in repetitive utterance. If "all jazz is Signifyin(g)" as Munton says, however, "then the term becomes redundant" (248). Although Munton hence tries to distinguish jazz from Signifyin(g) by unjustifiably reducing the latter's scope to an innate and exclusively antagonistic linguistic practice against the dominant white discourse (249-50), what matters here is the redundancy that arises when two terms presumably designate the same thing. Indeed, why do we have to use such terms as jazz and riff to describe literary texts of African American writers if they can be replaced by a term more directly invested in linguistic performance, Signifyin(g)?

Juxtaposed with literary terms, jazz seems to lose its specificities as music, to the extent that it acquires universal applicability, and thus becomes devoid of their supposed historical connotations, ultimately becoming indistinguishable from theory itself. In fact, Gates says: "The riff is a central component of jazz improvisation and Signifyin(g) and serves as an especially appropriate synonym for troping and for revision" (105). As this passage suggests, Signifyin(g) itself, which is supposed to be an African American vernacular practice (but is comparable to Derrida's "différance" [46]), can be abstracted as generalized linguistic theory. Thus another troublesome moment is seen when he accounts for what he means by

“formal Signifyin(g),” referring to Ellison’s answer to Irving Howe’s criticism. Ellison says: “I agree with Howe that protest is an element of all art, though it does not necessarily take the form of speaking for a political or social program. It might appear in a novel as a *technical assault against the styles* which have gone before” (qtd. in Gates 107). Gates, concurring with Ellison, extends the import of Signifyin(g) so drastically as to encompass literary history as such: “This form of formal revision is what I am calling critical signification, or formal Signifyin(g), and is my metaphor for literary history” (107). If Signifyin(g) designates a structure that appears in more general workings of signification and literary history, is the former term not redundant? This is not a problem peculiar to Gates, but rather an inevitable problem that comes up whenever we think of formal aspects of a supposedly unique African American cultural practice, whether it is Signifyin(g), jazz, or the blues, because they do have a semblance to (often European) linguistic, literary, or cultural theories.<sup>8</sup>

Craig Hansen Werner argues, however, that theoretical discourse actually exists and is engaged in “institutional contexts,” as, for example, Derrida’s deconstruction does—according to Jonathan Culler, deconstruction is “the twin principles of the contextual determination of meaning and the infinite extendability of context” (qtd. in Werner 9). In the “Afterword” of *Limited Inc* Derrida addresses the problem of historicity of interpretation and meaning. Here, he admits that there are moments of relative stability that enable us to share a partial consensus on interpretation and meaning, and that relative stability is the very source and target of deconstruction. Thus he says: “the norms of minimal intelligibility are not absolute and ahistorical. . . . They depend upon socio-institutional conditions, hence upon nonnatural relations of power that by essence are mobile and founded upon complex conventional structures that in principle may be analyzed, deconstructed, and transformed; and in fact, these structures are in the process of transforming themselves profoundly and, above all, rapidly” (147). Derrida is aware that every language, interpretation, meaning, and therefore his own argument, too, is dependent on contingent and historically specific social norms.

If every theoretical argument is historically situated, there is no theory but is itself interventional practice; and it is interventional practice in the process of theorization, rather than conclusive theory. Take Derrida’s *différance*. Whereas the relative stability of meaning and context is “the momentary result of a whole history of relations of force” (145), history and relations of force themselves are made possible by *différance*, the principle of “nonidentity with oneself” (149), since there is no history without nonidentity, instability, or the possibility of change. *Différance* is therefore also the principle of history, historiography,

and historicity, and it lets us radically rethink those concepts. Yet, as Gates says, *différance* is itself a revision of “Saussure’s notion of language as a relation of differences,” and as such becomes an example of the process at work through the intervention in the institutionalized concept of difference (46). *Différance* is then not an ahistorical, universal principle but something both inside and outside of history; the principle of nonidentity is obliquely found out through each particular deconstructive practice, only after the fact, as what enables history and its vicissitude: “In order for [the] history to *have taken place* . . . [*d*]ifférance must have been able to affect reference” (Derrida, *Limited Inc* 145, my emphasis).

Gates’s comparison of Signifyin(g) with *différance* is, then, actually very apt. As he explains, Signification is a revision of and intervention in the conventional understanding of the concept of signification,<sup>9</sup> and while disrupting specific contexts behind the conventions, it both revises the concept and signals toward the structural principle which enables that change. Signifyin(g) suggests that the nonidentitarian aesthetics of African American culture is not an applied version of an a priori universal principle that is out there to be made use of, but is something only retrospectively discovered through actual interventions in historical contexts as what enables those very interventions, and therefore always inseparable from particular practices, though calling Signifyin(g) a “metaphor” of history remains to be problematic. For all occasional inconsistencies in the critics’ writings about this point, the theoretical understanding of the formal structure and contextual interventions thus require each other. The duality of particular and universal does not imply the deficiency of theory; on the contrary, it is its prerequisite.

To use such terms as jazz, “cutting,” “riffing,” or Signifyin(g) in criticism is, then, justifiable only insofar as it is not just a metaphorical substitution of abstract formal structure but itself an intervention in historical contexts that inescapably but not steadfastly surround them, especially the conventional Hegelian views on African American cultural practices in these instances. This interventional aspect is obscured when theory is fixed as “theory” in the academic discourse, to which critics’ somehow rash juxtaposition of cultural practices and poststructuralist theories have partially contributed. Nevertheless, works of such critics as Baker, Snead, and Gates do show the process in which, evoking institutional historical contexts as a point of departure, interventional practices start having broader implications that affect the concepts of context and history themselves. Blackness as well as jazz in their arguments at first seems to be attached to a presupposed context, a certain historical past of a certain ethnic group, but it eventually obtains the disruptive power that confounds the very presupposition without completely eviscerating it of its historicity or historical connotations



(after all, as Werner points out, “[r]ecognizing the contingency of race . . . by no means negates its reality and power” [223]). Accordingly, what is aimed at is neither the establishment of authentic history nor the entire abolition of historicity, but a more viable concept of time, history, historicity, genre, identity, ethnicity, etc. Even though they share a theoretical insight with poststructuralist thinkers, each of them is engaged in particular contexts to reach it, while allowing, at least logically, a possibility of another blackness, another jazz that is not exclusively African American—but probably no critics are as lucid about this point as Ellison.

### III.

Werner takes up the image of “masking jokers” who take over the minstrel tradition in Ellison as an instance of the deconstructive blackness in which the mirroring performance infinitely multiplies meanings and subverts the binary oppositions such as blackness and whiteness. However, Werner in his analyses of literary texts often betrays this insight. His stance becomes especially ambiguous in his reading of James Baldwin where he links blackness in “Sonny’s Blues” with what he calls “the gospel impulse,” and in turn it with “an entry into the fullness of life” (221). Werner then mentions Baldwin’s concept of love that “takes off the masks” and “force our brothers to see themselves as they are” (qtd. in Werner 239) in a way that elicits an interpretation that there is true reality beyond masks and that Baldwin’s love is an egalitarian call for regaining the fully realized subjectivity for all people. It comes as no surprise that Werner sees the salvation of “the voices of excluded ‘others’” as the ultimate merit of many writers in the 20th century including Ellison (62). It is true that “other voices” are of primary importance especially in *Invisible Man* (9), and yet we should take note of the fact that what *Invisible Man* hears in it is the “Blackness of Blackness” sermon, which suggests, first of all, that in the novel’s logic there are no other voices outside the repetitive, dualistic structure, whatever it may be. After all, *Invisible Man* states: “Now I know . . . that all life is divided and that only in division is there true health” (576). For Ellison, what matters is not so much the fullness of life as its fundamental division, and it is much more than an existentialist anxiety about alienation which Werner’s argument amounts to implying.

Certainly, the duality found in Ellison rather tends to be regarded as a naïve double consciousness, especially with regard to his reflections on jazz. While the convergence in jazz

of diverse styles allows him to contend that “[j]azz is Afro-American in origin, but it’s more American than some folks want to admit” (C 310), as a jazz critic, he is usually deemed as notoriously conservative. In fact, he consistently praises a few African American musicians such as Armstrong, Ellington, Jimmy Rushing and Charlie Christian and shows little appreciation of later musicians who contributed to the development of the postwar jazz including Miles Davis and John Coltrane.<sup>10</sup> This aspect of Ellison is often magnified by the conflation of his opinions with those of his associate Albert Murray,<sup>11</sup> or by biased receptions by such neoclassicist critics as Stanley Crouch. The image of Ellison as conservative is further enforced by association with Marsalis, who is much influenced by Murray, Crouch and Ellison, with *Jazz at Lincoln Center*, which was co-founded by Marsalis, Murray and Crouch,<sup>12</sup> and with Ken Burns’s documentary series *Jazz* (2000), in which not only do Marsalis, Murray, and Crouch appear as main commentators but also Ellison is amply quoted. The introductory part of *Jazz*, which begins with the opening statement of Marsalis, ends after Murray’s comment with a quotation from Ellison: “And yet, who knows very much of what jazz is really about? Or how should we ever know until we are willing to consider everything which it sweeps across our path?” This passage seems to be a justification by Ellison of the documentary’s project to recapitulate the history of jazz and thereby establish a fixed tradition. In fact, celebrating prebop musicians such as Armstrong and Ellington and depreciating postwar musicians, *Jazz* is close to Ellison’s viewpoint, at least on the surface.

The quotation in *Jazz* reproduced above is taken from Ellison’s essay “On Bird, Bird-Watching and Jazz,” in which he takes an ambivalent stance toward Charlie Parker, and vindicates Armstrong’s clownish performance from beboppers’ accusations. The quoted passage continues: “Consider that at least as early as T. S. Eliot’s creation of a new aesthetic for poetry through the artful juxtapositioning [sic] of earlier styles, Louis Armstrong, way down the river in New Orleans, was working out a similar technique for jazz” (CE 259). If read in the vein of *Jazz*, this could be construed as an expression of his double consciousness, of his desire similar to Marsalis’s elitism—a desire to place jazz in the Euro-American mainstream art tradition. In his article, Marsalis is asking for a truer vision of jazz or the “objective fact of the art” (336), a fact that jazz is not the music of noble savages but a sophisticated fine art with a well-established tradition, and that Armstrong was an accomplished virtuoso well-informed in musical knowledge despite the once prevalent view that his music was a kind of art brut. In a sense, his aim is to regain the “fullness of life” for jazz musicians beyond the racialist institution of America.

Though Ellison’s vindication of Armstrong’s artistic merit resembles this argument of

Marsalis's at first glance, what is at stake by invoking Eliot is precisely how one should grasp tradition, history, and time. For, the Eliotic view of tradition, as Snead suggests, contains the temporal perception of "black culture" (76), and in terms of historical sense, Ellison's vision of jazz is certainly "anti-Hegelian" (Yaffe 93). Ellison's description of jazz performance is obviously reminiscent of Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent":

[E]ach solo flight, or improvisation, represents . . . a definition of his identity as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. Thus, because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it. (*CE* 267)

Importantly, in Eliot, "the *whole* existing order" is, "if ever so slightly, altered" by individual performance; accordingly "the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past" (Eliot 5). In this viewpoint, tradition or the past is an inescapable condition but never fixed, and is exposed to incessant intervention from the present.

Ellison's stance is therefore resolutely anti-purist, and what troubles him concerning Parker and other beboppers is not so much the sound of their music as their refusal of the Armstrong-like entertainer's role by which "they demanded, in the name of their racial identity, a purity of status which by definition is impossible for the performing artist" (*CE* 259). Ellison challenges the assumption that jazz is a primitive African American music, and testifies for the greatness of certain musicians, but that is not for the purist ethic; on the contrary, it is to reveal the impurity of jazz, which allows for other possibilities of jazz not restricted to ethnic understanding.

This impurity of the performing artist brings us back to the theme of "masking jokers" in Ellison. Especially pertinent to my argument is the anecdote of laughing barrels in an essay titled "An Extravagance of Laughter," in which Ellison explores the mystery of the "blackness of Negro laughter." At first in the essay, blackness is grasped as "the dark consubstantial shadow which symbolizes all that its opponents reject in social change and democracy," that is, a kind of the abject (to use Julia Kristeva's term). As such, it implicitly critiques the white supremacist racial schema: "the blackness of *Afro-American* 'black humor'" of masking jokers "is not black; it is tragically human and finds its source and object in the notion of 'whiteness'" (*CE* 646). It therefore has nothing to do with the realization of the full subjectivity, but is inseparable from the racialist schema. Nevertheless, when the laughter becomes uncontrollable even to the laughing person in the laughing barrel, blackness goes

beyond the schema.

Laughing barrels were, according to Ellison, placed by white people in the public space in order for Negroes to thrust themselves into them upside down when they were attacked by a fit of laughter. Since white people could not see any rational cause of the Negro laughter, laughing barrels served as a device to banish irrationality from the civic space. However, the laughing Negro was “apt to double up with a second gale of laughter, triggered, apparently, by his own mental image of himself laughing at himself laughing upside down” (656), and in such moments the uproar of laughter became so raucous that it overflowed the laughing barrel, and the fit of laughter even caught whites nearby. Then, the vertiginous doubling accelerated because “the whites assumed that in some mysterious fashion”—which Ellison calls a form of “second sight,” another name Du Bois gives to double consciousness<sup>13</sup>—“the Negro involved was not only laughing at *himself* laughing, but was also laughing at *them* laughing at his laughing against their own most determined wills” (657). Through this “most vicious of vicious circles” of reciprocal mirroring, the Negro “turned the world upside down and inside out. In so doing, he *in-verted* (and thus *sub-verted*) and thus the preordained and cherished scheme of Southern racial relationships was blasted asunder” (657-58). The laughing Negro thus redirects the disruptive power of the object into the racialist system that produced it by taking advantage of the very device aimed at containing irrationality, and the blackness of Negro laughter becomes “outrageous absurdity” or irrationality itself (658).

As Robert G. O’Meally suggests, Armstrong’s masking smile for Ellison should be understood as this kind of infinite doubling of oneself and the other (282). Putting on a mask of stereotypical stage smile is in a sense an acquiescence to whites’ attempt to contain Negro laughter in expected, controllable situations, but in so doing he complicates the positions of the performer and the audience, making it no longer clear who is laughing at what or whom. Importantly, in *Invisible Man*, it is Armstrong’s music that enables Invisible Man to hear the unrecorded “other voices . . . speak” through the “unheard sounds,” in which it is announced through sermonic call and response that “*In the beginning . . . there was blackness*” (8-9). This sermon about “Blackness of Blackness” clearly states that blackness is nonidentity as such: black both “*is*” and “*ain’t*” (9), and black “*will make you*” and “*will un-make you*” (10). But it does not end up in mere embracement of blackness as nonidentity. The song Armstrong sings, “What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue,” also invokes a memory of slavery, and moreover “*ambivalence*” related to the memory (10), love and hate toward the master, or the paradoxical “*freedom*” in that loving (11). The grandfather’s will which Invisible Man is

obsessed with and involuntarily acts out throughout the novel is obviously a variation of this ambivalence that makes clear its subversive possibility to deconstruct inside/outside, in a way very similar to laughing barrels: “I want you to overcome ’em with yeses, undermine ’em with grins, agree ’em to death and destruction, let ’em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open” (16). As Ellison says in an interview, it is “to collaborate with [the society’s] destruction of its own values” (C 76). Through Armstrong’s song, African Americans are now reimagined as deconstructive masking jokers engaged in a subtle resistance to the whites’ dominance despite the prevalent image of the slaves as the oppressed without any agency, though it is far from autonomous freedom.

Blackness has its own connotations related to the past experience of a certain ethnic group within the racist society, but it becomes the principle of nonidentity by turning the master’s power against itself through the masking joker’s performance. Still, there will be the spectral residue of historical connotations attached to blackness in the wake of that becoming, as the source and target of intervention. We should note that blackness for Ellison is, just as *différance* is, both inside and outside of history: it bids defiance to the conventional understanding of past, memory, history, and life in general through the revision (rather than refusal) of a certain past, memory, history, and life. The memory of the abject blackness and the ambivalent love and hate toward the master’s power invoked by Armstrong’s song are thus not merely the salvation of excluded voices, but the means to overthrow the racial schema from within; it is the way to the nonidentitarian blackness. In the novel, jazz then serves as a figure at once of the African American historicity and of the revised concept of historicity in general.

In fact, the image of history in *Invisible Man* is densely packed with tropes of music and wordplays on them. When Invisible Man notices the existence of “men out of time” who “speak a jived-up transitional language full of country glamour, think transitional thoughts,” he thinks that his job is “to get them in, all of them” who are “out of the groove of history” (443). The “groove of history” is in this scene associated with a record of a “languid blues” which makes Invisible Man think “Was this all that would be recorded? Was this the only true history of the times . . . ?” (443). He dismisses the rigid form of the recorded blues, and this sends us back to the prologue, where he displaces the matter of recording to playing, and the groove of the record to the rhythm of music, through Armstrong’s performance that defies the institutional power of history and the record. Invisible Man even refuses to treat his recorded music as fixed, by imagining playing “five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing ‘What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue’—all at the same time” (8).

The song by Armstrong, the master player of the “invisible music” who has “made poetry out of being invisible” (8), has Invisible Man envision a way to manipulate blackness. Throughout the novel, Invisible Man encounters many characters that more or less embody the disruptive power of the abject blackness produced by the racist society. Furthermore, he discovers his own abject status after his ingenuous and vain efforts to conform to the society by submitting to its tactics of containment. His memoir (that is, *Invisible Man*) then brings the abject to light so as to play the “invisible music” in his own context, and thereby generates another history that includes them. But in order to do so, he needs another temporal perception which Armstrong’s music inspires. Significantly, the invisibility Armstrong and Invisible Man share does not make one entirely “out of time,” but “gives one a slightly different sense of time” (8). Invisible Man says that when you are invisible:

you’re never quite on the beat. Sometimes you’re ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you’re aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. That’s what you hear vaguely in Louis’ music. (8)

Armstrong’s play subverts the border of in time/out of time with his swinging rhythm and improvisation which involves repetition and difference, or Sneadian “cutting.”<sup>14</sup>

Invisibility thus becomes closely combined with the question of time and history in the novel. History is at first presented as that which is ruled by the dominant white discourse such as the seemingly philanthropic paternalism of the Brotherhood, a quasi-communist organization, and it produces the realm of blackness as the outside, the abject. So Invisible Man says: “Outside the Brotherhood we were outside history, but inside of it they didn’t see us” (499). Here is a subtle distinction between the outside and the invisible. Invisibility in this context is being inside history without holding controlling power, not the complete exteriority, which is in the novel embodied by B. P. Rinehart, a confidence man who, with his polymorphous identities, thrives outside the reach of the dominant cultural and political order. Ellison calls him in an interview “the personification of chaos,” a “figure in a country with no solid past or stable class lines” who “represents America and change” (CE 223). Thus embodying the principle of nonidentity in the realm of the abject blackness, he lets Invisible Man notice “infinite possibilities” alternative to the dominant racial schema (576). However, as an embodiment of chaos, Rinehart’s position involves a certain risk. For one thing, while his polymorphism is possible because of the mobility in the American society, Ellison warns

that that “high mobility” is liable to be taken advantage of for the “suppression of memory” (C 75). Indeed, without revealing any information about his individual background and even without so much as appearing in person in the novel, Rinehart seems to become the acontextual, ahistorical impersonal chaos itself. This seeming universality, however, prevents him from intervening in the practical condition of his performance, that is, his exclusion from history, and considerably limits his ability to undermine the dominant schema. Hence Invisible Man thinks that Rinehart is not enough, that “great possibilities” are “somewhere between Rinehart and invisibility” (IM 510-11), namely, between the outside and inside of history.

As he says in the epilogue, Invisible Man has to accept “the fact” that he is “an invisible man” awkwardly located in history (572), and this recognition of his unstable, unfixed status within history inaugurates the displacement of history through the abject blackness that is both inside and outside of it. That acceptance, moreover, places him “in the rear or in the avant-garde,” but it is undecidable which, and he says “*That*, perhaps, is a lesson for history” (572). This undecidable swinging rhythm is the rhythm of the invisible music he plays as a kind of masking joker from within history, remembering and retelling his and other people’s experiences differently, while trying “belatedly to study the lesson of [his] own life” (572), to realize that the nonidentitarian blackness must have been for another, viable history to exist. Invisible Man’s narrative remakes the concept of blackness, whiteness, invisibility, time, history, memory, identity, jazz, etc. not to discard them, but to revise historicity, specific historical connotations and assumptions attached to them and thereby let other voices infinitely reverberate through history. It is a different history with different temporality for sure, but still has historical specificity, which is precisely where other voices haunt. It is never sublimated into the single universal blackness nor restricted to salvaging excluded voices; there must always be the twofold blackness. Jazz for Ellison as well as for the theoretical critics, then, remains to be particular practices within specific contexts, even as it is at the same time exceeding them and thus signals for theorization of another historicity.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Derrida “The Law of Genre” 223-227 and Crimmins 50-51.

<sup>2</sup> As Laurent Dubreuil says concerning the Derridean deconstruction, “the absence of obvious and/or objective separations does not automatically imply that we should renounce using categories. Even if the line is blurred, the distinction can still be operative” (239). As it will gradually become clear, this ambiguity—the

nonidentity of category and its operativeness in spite (or, because) of it—is directly relevant to the questions of duality in which this essay is engaged.

<sup>3</sup> Baraka's ideological position keeps on drastically changing throughout his career, and it would be unfair to him to judge his thinking by works in a certain period. In this essay, however, I will focus on his works in the 60s since they are the most influential of his writings about music even today.

<sup>4</sup> In this article Ellington uses the term "swing," a common appellation for the genre at that time, instead of jazz. For the history of the word "jazz," see Merriam and Garner.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, when Marsalis says that "[j]azz musicians . . . are searching for the freedom of ascendance," he obviously presumes that they are African Americans, implicitly subscribing to the view that jazz is a part of African American social struggles (338).

<sup>6</sup> For instance, when Baraka in *Blues People* restricts such traits as flexibility, emotionality and freedom to African Americans—and especially when he mentions the "terrifying freedom" (227) of improvisation in free jazz, which for him allows jazz to recuperate the genuine black quality—he duplicates and perpetuates the "cultural associations" of the blues and jazz, or the "associative language of dread and love that accompanies blackness" (Morrison x, xii), which Toni Morrison shows are indispensable for the formation of the white subject. Unlike Morrison, who examines how the abject blackness is constructed and haunts and disrupts the white subject in *Playing in the Dark*, Baraka does not fully penetrate the historical and cultural constructedness of blackness/whiteness in his writings in the 60s.

<sup>7</sup> Kevin Gaines is an example of such critics. He aligns himself with Paul Gilroy and implicitly with Snead, imagining the symbolic coalition of black freedom struggles all over the world through "the sense of immediacy and immanence" in "the rhythmic component of black diaspora musics" (208). He thus evades the irreconcilability of particular and universal by limiting the latter to the expanse of black diaspora.

<sup>8</sup> In Baker, this becomes conspicuous when he explicates the figurative significance of the blues singer's performance. Tacitly appropriating terms of contemporary European philosophers, Baker ends up comparing the blues to "signification itself," leaving room for the blues to be interpreted as a mere example of the theory of signification in general, and thus obscures the particularity of what he calls the blues matrix, the blues text, or the blues performance (8).

<sup>9</sup> See Gates 45-47.

<sup>10</sup> For Ellison's remonstrance against Davis and Coltrane, see Murray and Callahan 193.

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, people often presuppose that Ellison and Murray's thoughts are one and the same. For example, Jerry Gafio Watts names the thought of Murray and Ellison the "blues ontology," mostly based on Murray's formulation, and blames their too optimistic view about African Americans and inability to engage in a "critique of Western cultural hegemony and the cultural objectification of nonwhite 'others'" (62). Watts claims that Ellison believes in the unlimited possibility of improvisatory freedom in the blues so much that his thought becomes "ahistorical and acontextual" (71), but this observation would be refuted by just a glimpse at a few pages of *Invisible Man*.

<sup>12</sup> Jazz at Lincoln Center was developed out of the concert series "Classical Jazz," which embodied Marsalis's ambition of canonization of certain jazz musicians. For the influential relationships among Ellison, Murray, Crouch, and Marsalis as well as their roles in founding Jazz at Lincoln Center, see Rampersad 550-51 and Yaffe 75-78.

<sup>13</sup> See Du Bois 9 and O'Meally 282.

<sup>14</sup> This theme of jazz and time recurs in Ellison's uncompleted second novel. Thus Rev. Hickman, a former jazz trombonist says about "our kind of time": "it's a discipline . . . through which we may see that which the others are too self-blinded to see. Time will come round when we'll have to be their eyes; time will swing and turn back around. I tell you, time shall swing and spiral back around" (*TDBS* 323, 324).



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## “Blackness of Blackness,” or Jazz as a Dual Figure of (African American) Historicity

桐山 大介

ジャズの歴史について語るとき、中心になってきたのは人種の問題であった。とくにジャズがアフリカンアメリカン音楽であるという想定は根強く、その前提とヘーゲル的な歴史観のもとで、1980年代までのジャズをめぐる言説は、デュ・ボイスの言う「二重意識」に特徴づけられてきた。80年代になると、ヘーゲル的な歴史観および二重意識を脱構築する批評家たちがあらわれたが、ジャズを含むアフリカンアメリカン文化とポスト構造主義理論を並置することで、彼らもまた一種の二重意識を持つことになる。本論文では、これら批評家たちにあらわれるジャズおよびその黒さをめぐる二重性——具体的な歴史のなかに位置づけられる文化実践としてのジャズと、特定の歴史的過去との結びつきを断つ非同一性の原理を示すものとしてのジャズ——が、欠点というよりは、むしろ理論上の必要として生じるものであることを論じる。この観点では、批評家たちによるジャズの使用は、特定の歴史的文脈から出発してその文脈自体を批判し、歴史的に構築される意味を（抹消するのではなく）他の可能性へと広げつつ、歴史性の概念そのものを問い直すような実践と捉えられる。本論文ではもうひとつの焦点として、同様の二重性を内包する作家、ラルフ・エリスンを取り上げる。エリスンは、ジャズ批評家としてはウinton・マルサリスらに影響を与えた保守的論客として知られるが、80年代以降の理論的批評においても重要な作家とみなされている。エリスンのエッセイと『見えない人間』の分析を通じて、エリスンがのちの批評家たちよりも明晰な理論的理解を有し、それを作品にあらわしていたことを明らかにする。