Dangerous Freedom

Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels

Philip Page

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FOR MY FATHER

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ONE

The Puzzle of the One-and-the-Many

As Toni Morrison's fiction details the efforts of African Americans to find viable identities in a racialized society, it subtly probes what Ralph Ellison calls "the puzzle of the one-and-the-many" (*Shadow* 164–65). This is the idea that any entity is simultaneously unified yet divided, a whole yet an aggregation of parts. For example, the United States exists as a whole yet as regions, states, subgroups, and individuals; and, even though a discrete self is usually presumed, any individual exists in a multiplicity of roles, traits, and other factors. Similarly, a novel stands as a unified entity but simultaneously exists as a complex configuration of its constituent parts. Since no single English term adequately expresses this concept, I use "fusion and fragmentation," as well as comparable phrases like "plurality-in-unity," to indicate this simultaneous and overlapping unity and differentiation.[1]

This theme of fusion and fragmentation, which underlies my readings of Morrison's first six novels, provides insight into the novels' content, their form, and their contexts. In the novels' depictions of African-American identities, characters' psyches are revealed to be

whole yet divided, families oscillate between unity and separation, communities exist yet are always already fragmented, and blacks and whites are always at odds. Present and past and North and South are yoked in a plurality-in-unity, always separate but often bridged through memory and ancestry.

Correspondingly, the forms of the novels fret out the pattern, thereby richly doubling the content. Each novel employs mechanisms in the telling of the story that enact and enhance the novel's themes. The narration is frequently subdivided among multiple points of view so that each novel, while retaining its unity, also projects a collection of perspectives. Plots tend to be circular or spiral rather than linear, as meaning is accreted through repetition and layering and as multiple times are overlaid on each other. By requiring the reader to engage actively, the novels also create a plurality-in-unity between reader, text, characters, narrators, and author.

Although fusion and fragmentation are operative in many contexts that could be applied to Morrison's fiction, three contexts seem particularly germane: American culture, African-American culture, and deconstruction. In both American and African-American cultures, the interplay between a presumed or desired unity and the divided parts within such an entity has been self-conscious and determining. American culture has always been fraught with unresolved tensions between the two, and African-American culture, historically the most prominent subdivision within American culture, in turn illustrates the theme of plurality-in-unity, both in its relationships with the mainstream culture and in its own cultural forms and traditions. Deconstruction reconceptualizes the issue of fusion and fragmentation, for example by calling into question the unitary existence of any entity, by unraveling the presupposed relationships between binary oppositions, and by privileging multiplicity and process over any form of essentialism. These three perspectives provide multiple and overlapping contexts for my readings of Morrison's novels, as all three develop complex dynamics of multiplicity and unity, fragmentation and fusion.

Although every culture, nation, or society can be described in terms both of its wholeness and its internal variations, the United States is particularly characterized by diversity. It embodies the coexistence of

multiplicity and unity: *e pluribus unum*. This propensity is evident in such institutional structures as the constitutional balance of powers, bicameral legislatures, and the continual tensions between states' and federal rights. Since its inception American culture has been engaged with divisions and the difficulties of reconciling those divisions. Lawrence Levine claims that "American culture, from the very outset, was a divided one" (*Highbrow* 9), and Robert Spiller concurs that "mobility and diversity are and always have been the controlling factors in forming the American cultural identity" (5). American history can be seen as the alternation between periods of relative unity and relative plurality (Fisher, "Introduction" xii–xiii) or as a shift from a more holistic culture to a more heterogeneous one (Levine, *Highbrow* 171; Varenne 5). Henry Louis Gates, Jr., attests that "ours is a late-twentieth century world profoundly fissured by nationality, ethnicity, race, class, and gender" (*Loose* xv).

Commentators have provided many terms for this paradoxical trait, for example "*concordia discors*" (Grossman 184; Bercovitch, *Rites* 29), "classic polarities" (Bellah et al. 150), and "ambiguous 'double-consciousness' " (Marx, "Pastoralism" 56). Albert Murray defines America as "patently and irrevocably composite," as "incontestably mulatto" (22). For Ralph Ellison America is "a nation of ethical schizophrenics" (*Shadow* 99), and the American individual is in a state of "psychic uncertainty" (*Going* 20). In *The Rites of Assent*, Sacvan Bercovitch contributes a string of such terms for America: it is "infinitely processual" (14), characterized by "dissensus" (22) and "heterogeneity and pluralism" (372), and can be described as "a continual oscillation between harmony-in-diversity and diversity-in-harmony" and by "the continual flow of the one into the many and the many into the one" (373).

Michael Kammen exhaustively delineates this phenomenon, which he calls "biformity" (89). Tracing the idea to the divisions in seventeenth-century England that the first settlers brought with them, Kammen delineates the manifestations throughout American culture of this pattern of "paradoxical coupling of opposites" (89) or "strange sorts of hybrids" (90). For example, American culture, symbolized by the contrasting icons of Uncle Sam and the Statue of Liberty (108), is marked by conservatism but liberalism (92), by

individualism but conformity (108), by pragmatism but idealism (116), by isolation but sociability (179). Similarly, as Eric Sundquist contends, American literature is dominated by plurality-in-unity, encompassing multiplicity and tolerating dissonance, but not necessarily splintering. He formulates the "paradox that 'American' literature is both a single tradition of many parts *and* a series of winding, sometimes parallel traditions that have perforce been built in good part from this inherent conflict" (18).

Such theories of the plurality-in-unity of American culture parallel postmodern theories, which have reshaped traditional perceptions about nearly everything. They have accomplished this reshaping, in part, by calling into question the unity and coherence of all totalizing concepts and presupposed universals. Postmodern formulations of culture, race, gender, or the self, for example, insist on the complex and ever-shifting multiplicity of such concepts. Each concept still exists, but it is unraveled—deconstructed—to reveal its inner contradictions, variability, and indecipherability.[2]

Similarly, postmodern perceptions of the relationships between traditional entities shift from clearly defined (and inevitably hierarchical) bipolar oppositions to more complex fluctuations involving nonunitary entities and the undefinable but crucial differences and similarities between them. Not rejecting the original terms or replacing the traditionally favored one with the unprivileged one, the new perspective seeks a more complex perception of their interrelation. As Barbara Johnson writes: "Instead of a simple 'either/or' structure, deconstruction attempts to elaborate a discourse that says *neither* 'either/or,' *nor* 'both/and' nor even 'neither/nor,' while at the same time not totally abandoning these logics either" (12). That is, one keeps the dichotomy but one blurs the distinction between opposing terms, in recognition of the reality that neither term is self-sufficient, original, privileged or, by itself, knowable. One does not insist on either unity or separation, on fusion or fragmentation, but one maintains all possible relationships in a continuing flux, and one welcomes the open-ended, shifting, and opaque relationships among entities and constituent parts.

Crucial to this formulation is Jacques Derrida's concept of the *différance*, that is, the difference between opposing terms as well as the

temporal deferral from one term to the other. By insisting on the space and time between supposedly opposed terms, deconstruction de-emphasizes the original entities with their illusory identities and their unavoidable hierarchy and replaces them with the unresolvable relationships within the structure, which is no longer simply binary. The focus becomes the complex gradations within the opposition, the influences each term has on the other, the similarities between them, and the delicate balance between fusion and fragmentation.

This perspective also accounts for what Fredric Jameson calls "the dialectical reversal" (309). Based on Hegel's recognition that slavery enfeebles the master as well as the slave, many postmodern writers have addressed the reciprocality of influence within so-called binary systems. If any entity x gains hegemony over y, then x is at least partially defined by the distinction, that is to say by y. By becoming the image of what x is not and cannot afford to be, y reminds x of x's identity. In other words, x defines itself in terms of y; in a sense, x becomes y.

Not only does postmodern thinking about American culture reflect fusion and fragmentation, but so do contemporary ideas about texts. Following earlier work in linguistics, M. M. Bakhtin and Roland Barthes altered prevailing notions about written discourse. For Bakhtin, every text is characterized by "heteroglossia": "a set of conditions—social, historical, meteorological, physiological—that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions" (428). Every text is thus processual and dialogic: "Everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole—there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others" (426). A text is the result of competing influences, some centripetal, tending toward unity, and some centrifugal, tending toward heterogeneity. Novels especially are comprised of many voices or styles, the languages not only of the various characters or narrators, but the echoes of other styles that creep into every author's language: "dialogization . . . is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel" (263). Like Bakhtin, Barthes sees the text as plural, "a galaxy" (*S/Z* 5), a "cacography" (9), with no beginning or end. The traditional concept of the "work"—a finished, authored

product—becomes a "text," a process of ongoing interpretation, in which the reader, inseparable from the text, is as integral as the author ("From Work" 74–79). The text is "fugued," composed of uncountable bits and pieces, forever separate but comprising one text, in which "sequences move in counterpoint" (*Image* 103).

Just as language as a whole and any given text are hybrids consisting of a never-ending multiplicity of parts ambiguously joined in a unity-of-sorts, contemporary ideas about the self are couched in similar terms. A review of contemporary psychoanalytical theories is beyond the scope of this study, but two prevailing ideas are especially relevant. First, most theories imply that the self is formed through separation. This implies that the self is always already linked to other entities (such as language) in complex relationships. Jacques Lacan asserts the connection between language and the self: when the self enters into language, division develops between the speaking "I" and the "I" that the speaker's language represents. Second, most theories deny the traditional idea of a unified self or a fixed identity. Derrida argues that the traditional concept of the unitary self is contradictory and illusory, that no one possesses his or her life, and that every life is always at least double, deriving from the father and the mother. Like the postmodern sense of a text, the sense of self is a complex locus of forces, always in process of becoming, inevitably divided yet somehow an entity.

For the study of the self in literature, Thomas Docherty theorizes that postmodern fiction substitutes much more fluid subjectivities for the fixed notions of character and reader that prevailed in realist fiction. The "rigid logical unity" of the realist's character becomes the "plurality" of the postmodernist's characterization (265): "the conceptual notion of Character is replaced in post-Modern fiction by the process of Characterization, the continual re-creation or re-position of character as a 'becoming' rather than as an 'essence' (268). Fixed unities are unraveled into fluid collocations of fragments, a process that releases the reader as well as the characters: "through the process of de-centering the consciousness of the speaking characters, and the subsequent impersonal form of narration, the reader can be given the subjective authority of a first-person I or we" (109).

Feminist theory has focused particular attention on questions of

identity, especially since for women the traditional binary opposition of man/woman has carried the stigma of inferiority. In the patriarchal system, as Simone de Beauvoir writes, "He is the Subject, she is the Other" (xvi). For Beauvoir and many other women, "she" has a reciprocal claim but suffers the conflict between her human aspirations to be a subject/self and her social status as an object/other. This produces an "odd feeling" (297) of being both self and other, both inside and outside the system. Virginia Woolf describes such a feeling: "Again if one is a woman one is often surprised by a sudden splitting off of consciousness, say in walking down Whitehall, when from being the natural inheritor of that civilisation, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical" (97).

One response to this sense of doubleness is to embrace it, to assert the values of doubled consciousness and insider/outsider status. By so doing, one accepts oneself as a dynamic interplay of forces, whose blurred boundaries become potential strengths rather than absolute liabilities. Luce Irigaray argues that duality is essential for women, that women constitute a "disruptive excess" ("Power" 6) that includes the reversal of anything posited. Woman is "everywhere elsewhere," always displaced, and plural ("Volume" 53). Similarly, Rachel DuPlessis celebrates the "both/and vision" of the female aesthetic as opposed to the traditional Western male's either/or dichotomizing vision (276). For her, everything in women's experience leads to doubleness—doubled consciousness, doubled understandings (278), and a "double dance" in and out of culture and society (284). Women gain not an exclusionary wholeness (279) but the holistic sense of life, becoming "(ambiguously) nonhegemonic" (284).

If women's consciousnesses tend to be split, a remarkably similar phenomenon is attributed to African Americans.[3] Beauvoir notes the "deep similarities between the situation of women and that of the Negro" (xxiii), in particular the equal but different status of women and the separate but equal status of African Americans, and DuPlessis writes that "négritude has analogues with women's aesthetic practices" (285). The language of splitting and doubleness in feminist rhetoric recalls W. E. B. Du Bois's famous formulation: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by

the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (5). Many African Americans have expressed similar feelings. For example, Ralph Ellison describes the Negro as "that sensitively focused process of opposites" (*Shadow* 26), who is forced to become a "negative sign" (48) in the black/white dichotomy.[4]

For both marginalized groups, relegation to otherness leads to an awareness of doubled consciousness, in both cases the sense of plurality-within-unity is thereby heightened, and in both cases the perspective shifts toward the postmodern. Just as many women extol the positive effects of their doubleness, so do African Americans. Du Bois, in the midst of decrying the ill effects of racism in America, nevertheless claims that the Negro is "gifted with second-sight in this American world" (5) and that being forced to the other side of the veil is "a peculiar sensation," one that creates a new sensibility. Demonstrating his both/and vision, Ellison concurs that the Negro's position in America has caused untold disruption *and* has forced him to come to grips with life and self (*Shadow* 112), giving him a "special perspective" (131). Being a Negro "imposes the uneasy burden *and* occasional joy of a complex double vision, a fluid, ambivalent response to men and events which represents, at its finest, a profoundly civilized adjustment to the cost of being human in this modern world" (131–32, emphasis added). According to Houston Baker, Jr., double-consciousness led to forms of discourse such as the blues, whose "matrix avoids simple dualities" and which is built upon "a fluid and multivalent network" (*Blues* 9). African Americans, denied the ordinary sense of self, learned to privilege the unseen and the intangibly personal in complex forms and levels of discourse, a process illuminated by Derrida's privileging of absence as the means by which a system of signs conveys meaning (Baker, *Workings* 39–42, 55–56).[5]

For African Americans, the shift to a doubled perspective can be traced to traditional West African cultures.[6] West African culture contrasted pervasively with Euro-American culture, and those contrasts, along with the slaves' subjugated status, forced African Americans into doubleness—African by tradition but American by necessity. One

principal dimension of contrast was the shift from the traditional African sense of harmonious unity to the Euro-American focus on competitive differentiation. Adebayo Adesanya finds in African thinking "a coherence or compatibility among all disciplines" (qtd. in Jahn 96) and claims that the disciplines "all find themselves logically concatenated in a system so tight that to subtract one item from the whole is to paralyse the structure of the whole" (97). In the African world view, there are no clear demarcations between life and death (Asante 99; Barthold 11; Jahn 107), sacred and secular (Smitherman 93), or spiritual and material (Smitherman 75). Instead, the focus is on the reconciliation of oppositions in which the cosmos, as well as every community, is a "balanced force field" (Smitherman 108) and in which harmonies, coherence, compatibility, and equilibrium are the highest goals (Asante 65). The individual is not in competition with other individuals or with the larger community, as in the Euro-American mode, but instead attempts to achieve selfhood in balance with others. Society is a microcosm of universal order, and harmony in each depends on individuals accepting their places and respecting the places of others (Roberts 76). As Asante puts it, "One becomes human only in the midst of others" (185).

Another contrast between African and Euro-American views involves conceptions of time. For Africans time is cyclic and synchronous, as opposed to the linear, diachronic Euro-American sense of time (Asante 18; Barthold 6; Smitherman 75). In African thinking, past, present, and future are composite, and the individual lives "in time" rather than worrying about being "on time" (Smitherman 75). In this conception, as in the conception of harmony, the African view privileges fusion, whereas the Euro-American view tolerates and even values fragmentation.

A third element of contrast is the African emphasis on the spoken word versus the Euro-American privileging of the written word. In the African world view, the spoken word, *nommo*, represents the life-force, "a unity of spiritual-physical fluidity, giving life to everything, penetrating everything, causing everything" (Jahn 124). According to Roberts, "Africans viewed the spoken word as the embodiment of an individual's life-force in that it represented not only the means by which human beings communicated with each other but also the

means by which they interacted with all other forces" (77). Through "the magic power of the word" (Jahn 121; Smitherman 121), human beings give life to otherwise dead objects and materials. Even human babies are mere things until they are named (Asante 73; Jahn 125). Because of the power of *nommo*, any recounting, whether of experienced event, vision, or prophecy, causes what is told to be true.

Instead of assimilating African Americans, as it did virtually every other minority, white American culture used this most prominent subgroup to help define itself. James Baldwin maintains that "at the root of the American Negro problem is the necessity of the American white man to find a way of living with the Negro in order to be able to live with himself" (*Notes* 172). Ellison agrees that mainstream American culture has used the Negro to resolve its dilemmas (*Shadow* 28), and he claims that the otherness of blacks provided European immigrants with the reassurance that, in contrast to the excluded other, they truly were Americans (*Going* 111).[7] In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison extends such ideas to her concept of "an American Africanism" (38), an image of the unimaginable other that white Americans created as a way of defining themselves: "the process of organizing American coherence through a distancing Africanism became the operative mode of a new cultural hegemony" (8).

Consequently, of the innumerable rifts in American culture, the black/white racial schism was and still is the most fundamental. During slavery, American culture developed racial barriers into an almost unbridgeable gap. According to Kammen, slavery has always constituted "an underlying moral and social contradiction" (189) and, in idealistic America, that contradiction led to the concept of the black slave as "a model of what white Americans must never become" (191). For Ellison, race "made for a split in America's moral identity that would infuse all of its acts and institutions with a quality of hypocrisy" (*Going* 333) and "became a major cause, form, and symbol of the American hierarchical psychosis" (336). Stating that even today "slavery . . . is the overarching American issue" (11), Sundquist contends that American culture is inherently multicultural and biracial, built upon "the complex dialectic between 'white' and 'black' cultures" (2).[8]

Not only is African-American culture split off from but still part

of the dominant American culture, it is itself a pluralistic entity. By definition, African-American culture is a combination of African and Euro-American elements. Levine examines how the African world view interacted with and was transformed by Euro-American views (*Black* 5). The resulting African-American culture is a "syncretic blend of the old and the new, of the African and the Euro-American" (135) and the result of "a dual process of creation and re-creation, of looking both without and within the black community for the means of sustenance and identity and survival" (189).

African-American culture, simultaneously part of and separate from white American culture, developed a variety of expressive forms, for example Black English, the oral tradition, and musical forms such as spirituals, the blues, and jazz. One oral trope that is particularly noticeable in Morrison's fiction is call and response, in which statements by the individual and the group alternate.[9] Besides ritualizing the individual/group interrelationship, call and response embodies fusion and fragmentation. Since the complete utterance requires the completion of both constituent parts, it is a dialectic form featuring the dynamic oppositions of its parts within the context of the whole (Byerman 3). For Craig Werner, call and response is not a form of synthesis but a kind of inclusive analysis that allows for multiple voices and perspectives (*Playing* xviii). Similarly, Roger Abrahams sees call and response as an indicator of the simultaneous independence and interdependence of African-American culture. The form affirms through the enactment of opposites as it combines innovation and tradition, invention and initiation (83). Call and response thus replaces single-voiced, authoritative monologue with multi-stranded, collective voices that merge the individual and the community in mutual harmony.

African-American musical forms, in particular the blues and jazz, also illustrate the pattern of fusion and fragmentation. The traditional alternation between soloist and ensemble in the blues and jazz is a version of call and response in which the ensemble's instruments replace the community's collective voice (Jahn 221). Furthermore, Jahn's point that the blues singer typically expresses the community's experience (223) and Levine's similar point that blues songs are expressions of individual emotion but are designed to be communal

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(*Black* 235) suggest that the blues singer is a witness/testifier for the community. According to Levine, "black music was a participant activity" (*Black* 232), not only for those who responded to the leader of a field holler or who sang in response to the lead singer but for those who purchased the records, suggested new singers to the record companies, and followed closely the careers of the star performers (217–39). In African-American culture, music has provided one prominent avenue for the mutual fulfillment of both individual and community, thereby exemplifying the African concept of individual/community harmony: "Jazz is an art of the individual, celebrating originality and imagination, and simultaneously a group art, an art of the collective consciousness" (Nisenson 22).

It is a commonplace that African-American music combines African and European elements.[10] According to Levine, the blues "represented a major degree of acculturation to the individualized ethos of the larger society" (*Black* 221). Jazz has been described as a product of African-European cultural dialogue (Hartman 149) and as the embodiment of the melting pot's ideal synthesis of Africa and Europe (Nisenson 269). Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka) develops the general pattern by which African-American music expresses Negro culture's "adaptation," "fashion[ing] something out of [mainstream] culture for himself" (79), and creating "a brilliant amalgam of diverse influences" (80).[11]

Besides serving as exemplars of the blending of African and European cultures, the blues and jazz themselves are characterized by the seemingly endless mergers and splintering of styles, forms, and groups. African-American musical history reveals the mingling of folk and professional elements, of secular and sacred styles, of the blues and jazz, and of the constant formation and re-formation of performing and recording groups. This fluidity in the history of African-American music reflects the music itself, for example in Ellison's descriptions of jazz as "a texture of fragments, repetitive, nervous, not fully formed" (*Shadow* 202) and as a vernacular flux, "a dynamic *process* in which the most refined styles from the past are continually merged with the play-it-by-eye-and-by-ear improvisations which we invent in our efforts to control our environment and entertain ourselves" (*Going* 139). For Ellison, a jazz group is both a unified whole

and isolated individuals who work "in a spirit of antagonistic cooperation" (*Going* 129).

Characterized by these elements of fusion, fluidity, antiphony, and polyphony, African-American music has served a dual function as both a unifying factor within the subculture and as a vehicle and a symbol of the separateness of that subculture from the dominant culture. James Cone states both that "black music is unity music" (5) and that "it affirms the political 'otherness' of black people" (6). This double function of music has its roots in the common double meanings carried by African-American folk songs to deceive whites.[12] By reminding African Americans of their African heritage and at the same time reflecting the adaptation of traditional African forms into new American genres, the blues and jazz symbolize the doubleness of African-American experience and the ironies associated with that doubleness. As Leroi Jones argues, the emerging black middle class in the 1930s and 1940s often attempted to purge itself of anything reminiscent of Africa or slavery, but African-American music inherently remembers those pasts and the ambiguity of African Americans' "self-division, self-hatred, stoicism, and finally quixotic optimism" (136). African American music is both "a music of alienation" (Nisenson 78) and a music of "assimilation" (Murray 60). Like Black English, African-American music is a metaphor for and an instance of the "combination of acculturation and cultural exclusivity" (Levine, *Black* 154). For Ellison, jazz and the blues represent African-American experience—particularly its ambiguity (*Shadow* 246) and the necessity of losing one's identity in order to find it (*Shadow* 234).

One of the most prominent features of the blues and jazz is their improvisational nature. Classically, they have no fixed forms, no written standardized versions. They are "experimentation" (Murray 53), "a radical art form, always in creative ferment" (Nisenson 247), erupting in "playful festival[s] of meaning," "nonlinear, freely associative, nonsequential meditation" (Baker, *Blues* 5). As Ingrid Monson maintains, jazz is thus representative of elements of the African-American experience and is quintessentially postmodern. Both jazz and postmodernism are heterogeneous, doubled, and dialogic, working within yet subverting mainstream culture. Both constitute "two separate worlds clearly demarcated yet inextricably entwined" (286),

and both comment on mainstream culture through irony and parody (285–92).

Just as jazz and the blues are open-ended forms, constantly under revision, always in question, denying fixity, so the historical places and roles of African Americans have been necessarily fluid. African-American music is always shifting, always seeking the next variation, just as the African diaspora, the slave trade, the resale of slaves within the United States, the longed-for and sometimes achieved escape to the North, the myth of the return to Africa, and the northern migrations have kept African Americans literally on the move and metaphorically unfixed within the larger culture.

The improvisational nature of the blues and jazz and their role as epitomes of the paradoxical interrelationships between African-American culture and mainstream culture also associate these forms with deconstruction. For Baker, the blues singer is the *x* of the railroad crossing, implying "the multidirectionality of the juncture" (*Blues* 7), ceaseless flux and mobility, the necessity of polyvalent interpretations, the avoidance of "simple dualities" (9), and instead the sign of "a fluid and multivalent network." For Hartman, the jazz soloist puzzles over and re-interprets the prior musical "text," "recontextualizing" it "to expose its allegiances and assumptions" (63), a procedure analogous to a deconstructive reading of a written text. Like deconstruction, African-American musical forms challenge traditional notions of transcendent universals and bipolar oppositions. As Werner writes, "the jazz impulse (grounded in blues and gospel) engages basic (post)modernist concerns including the difficulty of defining, or even experiencing, the self; the fragmentation of public discourse; and the problematic meaning of tradition" (*Playing* xvii). Alan Nadel, stressing "the deconstructive energies of African-American art and culture," insists that the "strategies" employed by African-American music share "with deconstruction the constant undermining and reconfiguring of the audience-text-performer relationship, so as to reveal the instability of the assumptions that give each of those positions its positionality, its center" (qtd. in Werner, *Playing* xix). Just as Derrida insists on the play between and within oppositions, Albert Murray writes that playing the blues is also "*playing with* the blues" (58). Like deconstruction's shift of perspective from the oppositions between paired entities to the complex relationships within them and their pairing, Murray finds that the blues performer "turns disjunctions into continuities" (59).[13]

The blues and jazz thus provide a metaphor for my contention that a similar current runs through American culture, African-American culture, and deconstruction. All are engaged with the dynamics of bifurcation and interplay, differentiation and assimilation, fragmentation and fusion. American culture is a "delicately poised unity of divergencies"; women in this patriarchy must dance the "double dance" of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion; African-American culture, an adaptive hybrid of African and Euro-American influences, floats among the polarities of assimilation and separatism; "the dialogic nature of jazz places it at the American center" (Hartman 149); and through African-American music "the two separate worlds [of black and white America] [are] clearly demarcated yet inextricably entwined" (Monson 288).[14]

Recent theories of African-American literature, particularly black feminist theories, provide another background for the interweavings of fusion and fragmentation in Morrison's fiction. As they reinforce the connection between African-American experience, women's experience, and deconstruction, these theories call attention to four crucial issues in contemporary African-American fiction, all of which are relevant to Morrison's novels: the quest for place, the recovery of the past, the problem of identity, and experimentation with narrative form.

Since the diaspora, African Americans have been on the move, seeking a place within the American geographic and cultural space. In Morrison's novels, characters' journeys from South to North or vice versa are laden with such overtones. Houston Baker declares that slaves' first place was a hole, a coffin, a place of death and rebirth, on the slave-trading ships: "Place as an Afro-American portion of the world begins in a European displacement of bodies for commercial purposes" (*Workings* 108). As opposed to the seemingly limitless spatial potential of America for whites, blacks were consigned to holes, then to rural cabins, and later to urban kitchenettes, not truly their own places because such places were imposed upon them. This historic condition outside mainstream American culture forced African

Americans to deconstruct, defamiliarize, and signify within the master discourse ("There" 136–41).

Melvin Dixon and Charles Scruggs extrapolate on this theme of place in African-American fiction. For Dixon, the geographical dislocations of history led to African-American writers' emphasis on issues of shelter, home, and identity and on images of journeys, conquered spaces, and imagined havens (*Ride* 2). Forced into these alternate spaces, marked by dislocation and fragmentation, characters, narrators, and readers become performers who gain some measure of control over themselves and their environments (5–6). Scruggs's apocalyptic theory posits the dialectic in African-American literature between dystopia and utopia, between the city as ash heap and the city as the Beloved Community, civilization, and home (*Sweet* 2–7). African-American writers' portrayal of their struggle within this dialectic figures the quest to find a secure place in American culture (220–23).

The search for place is inseparable from the theme of lost history (Scruggs, *Sweet* 207). As African Americans were denied place, so their African history was denied and their slave past was repudiated. Bonnie Barthold warns of the resulting danger of "temporal dispossession" (17) for African Americans caught in the chaos of time with no meaningful past or future. In a "no man's land" (42), black characters attempting to flee this chaos are led to temporal duality, a split between their inner vision and the world around them (75). Consequently, contemporary African-American fiction often incorporates the forms and values of the past into modern settings (Cooke 208). Unlike white characters who typically want to escape time, black characters seek redemption in the return to community and the ensuing resolution of their inner/outer fragmentation (Barthold 77–80). This yoking of past and present is often accomplished through memory, which "juxtaposes past and present and, to varying degrees, fuses the past of personal experience with the past of a cultural heritage, underscoring the necessity of accepting, rather than attempting to escape, the past" (89).

Black feminist theorists have articulated this need for reintegration of the past as a form of reestablishing community. Historically, black women have constituted the *other* other, the doubly marginalized, op-

pressed by both racial and gender prejudice. According to black feminist theorists, neither the black (male) drive for civil rights and racial equality nor the (white) feminist drive for gender equality adequately listened to black women. Michele Wallace contends that during the battle to ratify the Fourteenth Amendment black women relinquished their hopes for equality in order not to jeopardize the vote for black males (*Black* 152), and she attests to increasing distrust and hatred between black men and black women since the 1930s (13). In the civil rights and black arts movements of the 1960s, black women were again silent, deferring to the male-led drive for equality and assuming that once racial equality was won they would be granted sexual equality (14–29). Excluded from the civil rights movement, African-American women were also ignored by the white-dominated women's liberation movement. According to bell hooks, this movement diverted attention from black male sexism (*Ain't* 87) and was designed to insure white women's superior position over black men (127).

Other contemporary black feminists express the sense of isolation (M. Washington, "Introduction" xxxii), invisibility (B. Smith 168), being misunderstood (McDowell, "New" 187), and being victimized by damaging stereotypes (hooks, *Ain't* 84–85; Wallace, *Black* 152). By stressing such concerns, black feminist theorists keep attention focused on the complexities in the relations among blacks and whites and men and women, and therefore on the related questions of plurality and unity in American culture.

In particular, black feminist theorists urge consideration of the special perspectives of black women. For example, Patricia Hill Collins cites the corrective insights that an inherently postmodern black feminist perspective provides as it insists on "the interdependence of thought and action": "This dimension of a Black women's standpoint rejects either/or dichotomous thinking that claims that *either* thought *or* concrete action is desirable and that merging the two limits the efficacy of both. Such approaches generate deep divisions among theorists and activists which are more often fabricated than real. Instead, by espousing a both/and orientation that views thought and action as part of the same process, possibilities for new relationships between thought and action emerge" (28–29).

With regard to literature, black feminist theorists also articulate the theme of pluralism-within-unity. Echoing Du Bois's term, Mary Helen Washington sees a thematic parallel between literature by African Americans and by women: "The theme of double-consciousness is found in most literature by Blacks, and the theme of the divided self, woman split in two (which is closely akin to double-consciousness) is found in literature by women, white and Black" ("Teaching" 208–9). Likewise, Hazel Carby outlines the similarities between black feminist criticism and the white feminist movement (16), and Valerie Smith extends the parallels among feminist, African-American male, and black feminist literary theories, all of which attempt to locate and/or reinterpret the writings of members of their groups ("Black").

Furthermore, black feminist theorists claim that black women writers have a different orientation toward their predecessors than is generally acknowledged for other groups. For Washington, because of the African-American oral tradition and the associated strength of mother/daughter bonds, black women writers escape the dread of the patriarchal authority of previous writers ("I Sign" 160). Missy Dehn Kubitschek concurs that black women's fiction features the positive results of the matrilineal lineage for the individual and her community and that coming to terms with African-American history is necessary for black women. Michael Awkward differentiates black women's fiction as a quest for "comm(unity)" that features "self-division," "textual sharing," "double-voiced narration," and "Afro-American female protagonists' efforts to end debilitating psychological disjunction (or double-consciousness) and isolation from the larger black community" (*Inspiriting* 14).

The implicit connection between such theories and deconstruction becomes explicit in the formulations of Mae Henderson and Valerie Smith. For Henderson the "deconstructive function of black women's writing" is "to interpret or interpenetrate the signifying structures of the dominant and subdominant discourse in order to formulate a critique and, ultimately, a transformation of the hegemonic white and male symbolic order" (135). Black women writers "remain on the borders of discourse, speaking from the vantage point of the insider/outsider" and thereby able "to see the other, but also to see what the other cannot see" (137). Before developing her ideas about black feminist theory, Smith analyzes the overlapping among deconstruction, male African-American literature, and Anglo-American feminist theory, arguing that the latter two have been drawn to deconstruction because, like them, it is a destabilizing, oppositional discourse ("Black" 40). Smith warns, however, that deconstruction, which questions the validity of selfhood and which typically takes an ahistorical stance, may undermine the efforts of black males and black and white women to situate their places in American culture: both feminists and African Americans "may betray the origins of their respective modes of inquiry when they seek to employ the discourse of contemporary theory" (43). For Smith the antidote to this danger is the perspectives of black feminists, who can insure that the oppositional discourses remain radical and not tamely institutionalized.

One way for fiction writers to embody the fusion of past and present is through intertextuality. Awkward's thesis is that contemporary black women's fiction is based on the positive, "inspiriting influences" among black women's texts, as opposed to the male competition between texts and writers. The lineage—in Awkward's case, from Zora Neale Hurston to Morrison to Gloria Naylor to Alice Walker—involves complex interrelationships, not simple oppositions, among texts, identities, narrative strategies, and communities (*Inspiriting* 13–14).

Intertextuality as a form of integrating the past is also central to the theories of African-American literature formulated by Robert Stepto and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. For Stepto, "the primary pregeneric myth for Afro-Americans is the quest for freedom and literacy" (*From* ix), which is revealed by the "contrapuntal and dialectical aspects of the relationship" between slave narratives and twentieth-century African-American fiction (xi). His idea of the "immersion narrative" (x), one of his types of slave narratives, relates the hero's absorption of and reabsorption into his or her past. For Gates, *Signifyin(g)* not only refers to the oral art form of indirection and to the propensity for African-American writers to rework their predecessors' texts, but also implies a redoubling of ordinary signification. African-American discourse, the discourse of the excluded other in American culture, signifies within its own traditions and simultaneously, because of its

excluded position, comments upon, or shadows, mainstream discourse: "The relationship that black 'Signification' bears to the English 'signification' is, paradoxically, a relation of difference inscribed within a relation of identity" (*Signifying* 45).

Given that space and time in African-American experience have been so problematic and that individual and collective identities have been overriding concerns for all Americans, it is not surprising that "Negro Americans are in desperate search for identity" (Ellison, *Shadow* 297). Baldwin contends that African Americans are unique in American culture because their traditional past was so categorically taken away (*Notes* 169), that consequently African Americans have no acceptable self-image (*Nobody* 80), and that their identity has been achieved only by estrangement from the past (*Notes* 174). The sense of self and of one's role in the larger culture has been caught in the crossfire between such culturally constructed oppositions as exclusion/inclusion, freedom/slavery, and tolerance/prejudice, as well as between the contradictions of white attitudes. Bernard Bell suggests that, instead of the emphasis on the search for innocence in white American fiction, African-American novelists have had to grapple with the central theme of the black/white Manichean drama and the corresponding double consciousness (341). African Americans, forced into a plural identity, have documented in literature their quest to discover that identity and to realize its potential. Since African Americans "were compelled to verify a self's being-in-the-world" (Baker, "There" 136), they often chose such literary forms as autobiography, slave narrative, and essay that lent themselves to exploration of one's personal spirituality.

Typically for African Americans, identity is not only plural but it is never fixed, always in process (Byerman 5). It is necessarily formed in reaction to the controlling mainstream culture, so that there is never any sure reality, only a variation on it (Byerman 5), with the result that one often feels that one "does not exist in the real world at all" (Ellison, *Shadow* 304). One's identity is always a variation, a mask, with the constant danger that the mask will slip or, worse, that the disguise will become reality and any real identity will be lost (Barthold 45).

Perhaps because identity has been an often neglected and even

more perplexing issue for black women than for black men, commentators on black women's literature have dwelt on it. One perspective, discussed above, is the promise for identity formation provided by black women's matrilineal heritage. Another theme is the necessity for black women to take control of their own agenda. For Barbara Christian, this means the need "to define and express [their] totality rather than being defined by others" (*Black Feminist* 159), to define the cultural context as African-American, to analyze the interacting forces of racism and sexism, to question traditional definitions of womanhood, and to insist "not only on the centrality of black women to Afro-American history, but also on their pivotal significance to present-day social [and] political developments in America" (180). Also building on the fusion of racial and gender conflicts in black women's fiction, Elliott Butler-Evans sees the fictional texts of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker as "site[s] of dissonance, ruptures, and . . . a kind of narrative violence" (3). The resulting response is "an attempted reconciliation of a fragmented self and a synthesis of racial and gender politics" (4).

With the shift in focus of African-American fiction from the protest politics of the 1960s to more introspective portrayals of personal and community life (Bell 342), the form of the fiction has become more significant and more flexible.[15] In contemporary African-American fiction, traditional conventions are loosened, pushed in the directions of multiplicity, nonlinearity, open-endedness, and orality.

In many contemporary African-American novels, multiple perspectives are necessary to convey the intricacies of characters' responses.[16] As Barthold writes, "point of view in black fiction, with few exceptions, is multiple, at least dual" (79). She sees it specifically as an alternation between characters' inner perspectives and a third-person, outer perspective, an alternation that inscribes the ironic discrepancy between individual and world and that ultimately brings the character, as well as the reader, to a clearer understanding (82–83). Kubitschek connects the multiple perspectives with the "multitextured reality" (6) of African-American experience, particularly the necessity of bringing past female experience to bear on the present (21–22).

Partly as a result of such multiple perspectives, the plots of African-

American novels typically do not unfold in a conventionally linear fashion. Instead, differing renditions of the same events overlap like a circle or spiral, a temporal structure reminiscent of West African ideas about time. For example, the events in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* take place in less than an hour, while Minnie Ransom tries to heal Velma Henry, but that time period is multiply expanded as the impressions and memories of numerous characters are narrated. The forward momentum of the narration is based more on repetition (Byerman 7) than on the linear addition of "new" events or time. In explaining his concept of "the *Timed Book*" (*Workings* 200–203), Baker argues that contemporary black women's fictions are structured on a moment of crisis and then a reworking of that moment to create a newer and healthier time: "[The protagonists'] solutions and sojourns carry them from a static instant of crisis to a new *now*" (201).

As multiple perspectives and nonlinearity suggest, contemporary African-American novels tend also to de-emphasize conventional closure. The immediate crisis is perhaps averted or even transcended, but endings usually leave the characters with their lives still in process, still to be endured. Jacqueline De Weever sees this tendency as a result of the mixtures of cultures and myths affecting contemporary black women's fiction and the corresponding psychological and cultural crosscurrents that control the characters (16). For Kubitschek the openness is a consequence of the novelists' insistence on the continuous process of reabsorbing their cultural past (6), and Byerman associates the open-endedness with the folk sense of the necessity for endurance and improvement rather than for the sense of domination or conflict resolution (8–9).

Kubitschek and Byerman both link the novels' lack of conventional closure to call and response. In that form, there is no closure (Kubitschek 6), no resolution or progress, only return (Byerman 7). Like call and response, the novels are built on the open-ended interplay of multiple voices whose interactions are the point. Because of this dialogic play of characters' and narrators' voices, the texts become "speakerly." That is, they push written language in the direction of spoken language. This happens not only in dialogue but also in the characters' monologues and even in the typical informality of the third-person narrators. One result of this oral quality of the prose is

to diminish the distance between text and reader and thereby to invite the reader to participate. For example, when Morrison starts *The Bluest Eye* with "Quiet as it's kept" or *Jazz* with "Sth, I know that woman," the colloquial language suggests that the narrator is speaking directly to the reader and therefore that, as in a conversation, the reader is expected to respond.

The loosening of narrative conventions and forms in contemporary African-American fiction calls into question the traditional discourses of the novel. In Dixon's terms, it creates an alternate space in which not only characters but also authors and readers can perform: "protagonists are engaged in verbal performances *in* narratives that help authors produce performances *of* narratives" (*Ride* 6). For Butler-Evans the disruptive conflicts of race and gender force the texts themselves into fragmentation, into "a discursive formation marked by tensions and dissonance" (39). Byerman and Baker couch the tension in more political terms: for Byerman the African-American text creates an alternate discourse designed to counter the claims of the logocentric order (7); and for Baker African-American texts embody "the incendiary deconstruction, defamiliarization, and signifying within the master discourse" ("There" 141).

Toni Morrison's novels satisfy contemporary readers because they resonate with the disturbing themes of fusion and fragmentation in poststructuralist theories about American and African-American cultures. They satisfy in their rhetoric, especially in their reliance on multiple points of view, in their blurring of conventional distinctions between characters and narrators, and in their requirements for the reader's participation. And they satisfy in their unflinching examinations of both the difficulties and the possibilities of finding livable spaces, of coming to terms with the past, and therefore of achieving workable identities, especially for women, in African-American families and communities set within the racialized conditions of American society. Taking up the challenge posed by these complexities, Morrison's novels enter the interstices of the *différance*, not to resolve the unresolvable but to unravel some of the possibilities, to embrace, plumb, and cherish the rich responses to the collage of African-American experience.

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