Cross-Cultural Visions in African American Modernism

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While haiku is a traditional Japanese poetic form, jazz has its origin in African American music. Despite technical differences in composition, haiku and jazz have been known for their powerful expressions of human sentiments by celebrated artists in both genres. *Jazz from the Haiku King* (1999) is the latest collection of James Emanuel’s work, in which a contemporary African American poet has presented a series of literary experiments he calls “jazz haiku.” Just as jazz has crossed cultural boundaries the world over in modern times, Emanuel’s intention is to translate the musical expressions of African American life, its pain and joy, into the 5–7–5 syllabic measures of haiku. In so doing, he has also attempted to expand the imagery of the traditional haiku beyond its single impression by including narrative and rhyme.

In Japanese culture, as pointed out earlier, haiku has served as an expression of the unity and harmony of all things, a sensibility that humanity and nature are one and inseparable. Haiku poets are attracted to such objects as flowers, trees, birds, sunsets, the moon, and genuine love. The seventeen-syllable verse form had been preserved by poets for nearly three centuries until the late seventeenth century. As mentioned earlier, by the time Basho in the late seventeenth century composed the first version of his celebrated poem on a frog jumping into the old pond, haiku had become a highly stylized expression of poetic vision.

Even on the surface jazz and haiku have much in common. As jazz performance thrives on an endless improvisation which the composer fashions from traditional materials, so does haiku composition thrive on an infinite improvisation upon beautiful objects in nature and humanity. Because of improvisation, the composer in both genres must efface his or her identity. In jazz, play changes on ideas as well as on sounds to create unexpected sensa-
tions. In haiku, the poet spares no pains to capture unexpected sensations. In both genres, the composer and the composed, subject and object, coalesce as the identity of the composer disappears in the wake of creation.

Jazz also shares many of the philosophical principles that underlie haiku. As noted in the introduction to this book, haiku since Basho has been traditionally associated with Zen philosophy. Zen teaches the follower to attain enlightenment, a new way of looking at humanity and nature. Just as Zen stresses self-reliance, not egotism, and nature, not materialism, so does jazz. Like haiku, jazz—characterized by innovation—seeks a new way of looking at ourselves and the world around us. Just as jazz challenges us to hear sounds and rhythms we have not heard before, so haiku challenges us to see images of humanity and nature we have not seen before. Jazz and haiku enable us to open our minds and imagine ways of reaching a higher ground in our present lives.

1.

Unlike those of haiku, the origin and development of jazz are well known by African American writers. Although jazz originated in the South from the blues and spirituals, it evolved into city music, flourishing with the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and with the Chicago Renaissance in the late 1930s and the early 1940s. As African Americans migrated to northern cities, they bore with them what Ralph Ellison called “the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near comic lyricism” (“Wright’s Blues” 202).

To Richard Wright, jazz or spirituals convey “bitter rebellion” that “simmers” behind them. When hearing such music, Wright stressed, one must not erase the fact that hatred was what constituted African American life, “the hatred of the disinherited from which no black man can isolate himself” (Conversations 108).

Not only did Wright and Ellison agree that African American music is a poignant expression of painful experience, but they also observed that it is a most effective means by which to battle racism. African American music, as a cultural critique, is to deconstruct the power of authority. Music decenters the outdated authority and creates in its place a new authority, what Alan Nadel calls “one composed of subversive strategies drawing from African-American traditions of ‘call & response,’ ‘signifyin’,’ and ‘loud talking’” (Werner, Playing xix).
As African music, the blues has served as an artistic, metaphoric ideal of freedom and individualism. Langston Hughes, a central figure of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, wrote a series of poems collected in *The Weary Blues* (1926). These poems celebrated African American experience and inspired African Americans to achieve individualism and self-reliance despite their adversity and loneliness. In “The Weary Blues” he provides a portrayal of a blues singer:

In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—
“Ain’t got nobody in all this world,
Ain’t got nobody but ma self.
I’s gwine to quit ma frownin’
And put ma troubles on the shelf.”

(Selected Poems 33)

To Hughes, the blues was a response to an unjust, unnatural racist system of power that had consistently degraded and denied African American experience.

Unlike Hughes, Wright believed that the blues represents a simplistic form of African American vernacular aesthetics. In his foreword to Paul Oliver's *Blues Fell This Morning*, Wright characterizes the blues as having “a vocabulary terser than Basic English, shorn of all hyperbole, purged of metaphysical implications, wedded to a frankly atheistic vision of life, and excluding almost all references to nature and her various moods” (viii; emphasis added). In *12 Million Black Voices* Wright describes the blues as a passive form of musical expression: “The ridiculousness and sublimity of love are captured in our blues, those sad-happy songs that laugh and weep all in one breath, those mockingly tender utterances of a folk imprisoned in steel and stone” (128).

At the opening scene in *Native Son*, Bigger’s mother sings:

*Life is like a mountain railroad*

*With an engineer that’s brave*

*We must make the run successful*

*From the cradle to the grave...*

(Native Son 14)

“The song,” Wright remarks, “irked him [Bigger] and he was glad when she stopped and came into the room with a pot of coffee and a plate of crinkled bacon” (14). Later in the story, Jan argues that a Communist revolution
needs African Americans, who have “spirit,” and says, “And their songs—the spirituals! Aren't they marvelous?” Bigger says that he can't sing, but Mary Dalton, closing her eyes, sings:

“Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming fer to carry me home. . . .”

Although Jan joins in, Bigger, Wright comments, “smiled derisively. Hell, that ain't the tune, he thought” (76–77).

As the migration from the South to Chicago and other Great Lakes cities continued in the early decades of the twentieth century, the sacred traditions of the southern black church developed into the gospel music of Clara Ward, Roberta Martin, and Mahalia Jackson. This gospel music “in turn contributed to the vocal styles fundamental to fifties rhythm and blues and sixties soul music” (Werner, Playing 244). Along with the musical developments, Wright organized a series of meetings for African American writers and artists, establishing the South Side Writers’ Group in 1936. In such meetings he submitted for discussions his essays and his drafts of “Down by the Riverside,” “Long Black Song,” and “Bright and Morning Star” (Fabre, Quest 128).

In contrast to the blues and the spirituals, jazz is well known for improvisation and syncopation. Individualism, which also distinguishes jazz, aside, another salient feature of jazz is the anonymity of jazz artists, as Ellison observes:

Some of the most brilliant of jazzmen made no records; their names appeared in print only in announcements of some local dance or remote “battles of music” against equally uncelebrated bands. Being devoted to an art which traditionally thrives on improvisation, these unrecorded artists very often have their most original ideas enter the public domain almost as rapidly as they are conceived to be quickly absorbed into the thought and technique of their fellows. Thus the riffs which swung the dancers and the band on some transcendent evening, and which inspired others to competitive flights of invention, become all too swiftly a part of the general style, leaving the originator as anonymous as the creators of the architecture called Gothic. (Shadow 234)

The anonymity of jazz musicians has an affinity with that of **noh** dramatists. W. B. Yeats, inspired by **noh** drama, wrote such plays as *At the Hawk’s Well*. In the performance of the play, he used masks to present anonymous, time-honored
expressions, just as the Roman theater used masks instead of makeup (Noguchi, *Spirit* 60). Yeats clearly implied in his letter to Yone Noguchi that contemporary arts in the West were infected with egotism while classical works of art in Japan were created as if anonymously (Noguchi, *Selected Writings* 2: 14).

What seemed to have inspired Yeats was the “simplicity” of the artists, an ancient form of beauty that transcended time, place, and personality. Irked by modern ingenuity and science, he was adamantly opposed to realism in art and literature. For him realism failed to uncover the deeply ingrained human spirit and character. He later discovered that noble spirits and profound emotions are expressed with simplicity in the *nōh* play. Noguchi observed: “It was the time when nobody asked who wrote them, if the plays themselves were worthy. What a difference from this day of advertisement and personal ambition! . . . I mean that they are not the creation of one time or one age; it is not far wrong to say that they wrote themselves, as if flowers or trees rising from the rich soil of tradition and Buddhistic faith” (*Spirit* 63). In its simplicity and appeal, jazz has much in common with *nōh* drama.

Unlike the blues, jazz is characterized by its flexibility and creativity. Just as the blues emphasizes individuality and personality, so does jazz emphasize anonymity and impersonality. While both individuality and communal affirmation are central to the blues, their relationship and their importance to jazz differ from those to the blues. “Seen in relation to the blues impulse,” Craig Werner observes, “the jazz impulse provides a way of exploring implications of realizing the relational possibilities of the (blues) self, and of expanding the consciousness of self and community through a process of continual improvisation” (*Playing* xxii). Involving both self-expression and community affirmation, jazz is a genre of ambivalence, of what Ellison calls “a cruel contradiction.” He remarks:

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

In light of the relation of self and community, jazz also bears a strong resemblance to *renga*, fifteenth-century Japanese linked verse, from which haiku evolved. *Renga*, which flourished in the beginnings as comic poetry was a continuous chain of fourteen (7–7) and seventeen (5–7–5) syllable verses, each independently composed, but connected as one poem, a communal composition.
In practice, however, jazz in the early 1950s emphasized individuality, in technical virtuosity and theoretical knowledge, rather than community and its involvement with jazz. “In response,” Werner notes, “jazz musicians such as Miles Davis, Ornett Coleman, and John Coltrane established the contours of the multifaceted ‘free jazz’ movement, which includes most AACM [the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians] work” (Playing 247). As Gayl Jones has also remarked, jazz—rendered through nonchronological syncopation and tempo—thrives on the essence of jazz, “the jam session,” that “emerges from an interplay of voices improvising on the basic themes or motifs of the text in keywords and phrases.” This interplay of self and other and self and community, what Jones calls “seemingly nonlogical and associational,” makes the jazz text more complex, flexible, and fluid than the blues text (Liberating 200). Jazz, as Louis Armstrong said, is a genre of music that should never be played in the same way as before.

While jazz has served African Americans as an artistic medium for conveying pain and suffering, it has also expressed natural human desire. Toni Morrison’s Jazz, as I have earlier argued, is intended not only as a battle against racism but more importantly as a blueprint for fulfillment of desire by African Americans. The novel demonstrates that only when “the village within” is established in the city will African Americans be able to fulfill their desire. Morrison’s attempt to equate desire with sexuality through jazz is corroborated by Wright’s view of jazz. As noted earlier, Wright was familiarly known as “Dick” in Harlem. He told Frank Tenot, an interviewer: “The black bourgeoisie don’t like either [gospel or jazz], because in their anxiety to imitate whites, they consider both to be ‘primitive’ art forms, incapable of expressing lofty, ‘civilized’ sentiments.” Wright believed that the African American bourgeoisie’s taste for music was corrupted by Hollywood music and American musicals, the type of music he called “[v]ery bad music.” In sum, he told Tenot: “Not to be a black bourgeois and to understand that the main gift that jazz has to offer the world today is an affirmation of desire” (Conversations 242–43).

Wright’s emphasis on jazz as an expression of desire notwithstanding, jazz has a strong affinity with haiku. Not only are jazz and haiku well-established art forms; they both stand in sharp antithesis to materialism and commercialism. There is little wonder, then, that Wright regarded Hollywood music and American musicals as vulgar representations of materialism and capitalism, to which he was averse all his life. The four thousand haiku he wrote in his final eighteen months, as discussed earlier, poignantly express his conviction that materialism and its corollary, greed, were the twin culprits of racial conflict.

Jazz has also been a catalyst for African Americans to attain their individual-
ism, but Ellison and Wright clearly differ in their views of how to achieve this individualism. Ellison defines jazz as a means of expressing individualism in relation to collectivity and tradition. Wright, on the other hand, defines writing as a means of expressing individuality independent of collectivity and tradition. In “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” as pointed out earlier, Wright envisions African American individualism as buttressed by the twin pillars of “perspective” and “intellectual space” which must not be influenced by any traditions or world movements. “At its best,” he stresses, “perspective is a pre-conscious assumption, something which a writer takes for granted, something which he wins through his living” (45–46). The reason for his defection from the Communist Party was that Communists deprived him of his individuality. In defining African American narrative of “ascent” and “immersion,” Robert Stepto shows that ascent narrative, diverting from familial or communal postures, develops into “a new posture in the least oppressive environment—at best one of solitude; at worst, one of alienation” (167).

In Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*, African American individualism finds expression and representation in the various events the author explores in the novel. At first she focuses on the courtship of Violet and Joe. For them, individualism does not simply mean freedom from racial oppression in American life; it is a sign of creation and progression, the twin actions which urban mood and urban music are urging upon them. Paradoxically, lack of space in the city creates more action and generates more desire: “Her hip bones rubbed his thigh as they stood in the aisle unable to stop smiling.” The rhythm of jazz represents an undulating movement that urges the listener into individuality rather than conformity. Just as Hollywood music and American musicals conform to materialistic and commercial impulses, African American jazz, in its freely improvised and syncopated sounds and rhythms, expresses subjective and individualistic sentiments. “However they came, when or why,” Morrison writes in *Jazz*, “the minute the leather of their soles hit the pavement—there was no turning around” (32). Likewise, the sound of drums has the effect of urging on a mature, middle-aged African American woman like Alice Manfred to seek liberty and happiness, but more importantly it inspires her with a sense of individuality and responsibility.

2.

Just as many modern African American writers have been inspired by jazz, so also has James Emanuel. His poetry, moreover, as the title of this book indicates, seeks a means of expression shared by jazz and haiku. Jazz and haiku
both convey spontaneously created expressions that are free from any economic, social, or political impulses. “Jazz,” he writes in his preface, “I knew—like the Caruso I heard on the same phonograph—had no boundaries; but its immense international magnetism seemed inadequately explored in poetry” (iv–v). In haiku, despite its brevity, he found much of the height and depth of vision that he did in jazz.

In the haiku entitled “Dizzy Gillespie (News of His Death),” placed in the middle of the collection, Emanuel hears Gillespie’s music reverberate in the sky and on earth:

Dizzy’s bellows pumps.
Jazz balloon inflates, floats high.
Earth listens, stands by. (44)

Traditionally haiku express and celebrate the unity of humanity and nature: the opening line of a haiku usually has a *kigo* (seasonal word). Even though Emanuel’s “Dizzy Gillespie” lacks a seasonal reference, it displays the nexus of humanity and nature: Gillespie and sky and earth. This haiku is an elegy for Gillespie, just as Whitman’s “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” is an elegy for Lincoln. In celebrating the lives of the great men, both poems express the immortality of their spirits. Just as Lincoln will return with lilacs in the spring and the North Star at night, Gillespie will be remembered for his jazz.

Emanuel’s haiku on Gillespie is also reminiscent of Zen philosophy, which emphasizes the fusion of humanity and nature. Zen teaches its followers to transcend the dualism of life and death. Zen master Dogen, mentioned earlier, observed that life and death are not separated as they seem and that there is no need to avoid death. Similarly, Emanuel and Whitman both sought a reconciliation of life and death. Whitman’s feat of turning the national bereavement into a celebration of death is well known, but less known is his idea of death given in “A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim.” To Whitman, the dead soldier in this poem appears no less divine than the savior Christ; they both represent the living godhead. In a similar vein, as Gillespie’s jazz balloon floats high in the sky and the earth stands by and listens, this jazz master is vividly alive.

Emanuel captures the affinity of jazz and haiku in many of the poems in the collection. The first chapter, “Page One,” features various types of jazz haiku with translations into other languages: “The Haiku King,” “Jazzanatomy,” “Jazzroads,” “Jazzactions,” “Bojangles and Jo.” The first of the four poems under the group title “Jazzanatomy” reads:
EVERYTHING is jazz:
  snails, jails, rails, tails, males, females,
  snow-white  cotton bales. (2)

To Emanuel, jazz represents all walks of life, human and nonhuman alike. Human life is represented by males and females, animal life by snails and tails, and inanimate life by “snow-white cotton bales” “My haiku,” Emanuel remarks in his preface, “added the toughness of poverty and racial injustice” (iv). The images of “jails” and “cotton bales,” signifying the unjustified imprisonment of African Americans and their immoral slave labor, represent the twin evils in American life: racism and poverty. “Song of Myself,” a narrative and autobiographical poem, also concerns all walks of American life. Focusing on human life, Whitman declares: “I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul,” and “I am the poet of the woman the same as the man.” About the problems of good and evil, he writes: “The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me” (39).

Emanuel’s view of humanity and nature is shared by his American predecessors, such as Whitman, Countee Cullen, and Wright. The opening pages of Wright’s *Black Power* have a passage addressed “To the Unknown African” and two quotations from Cullen and Whitman. “To the Unknown African” records an observation derived from Wright’s view that the African was victimized by slave trades because of the African’s primal outlook on human existence. The quotations from both Cullen and Whitman suggest that Africans, the inheritors and products of nature, have been exploited by a materialistic civilization. Before Europeans appeared with their machines, the continent had thrived on its pastoral idylls. Now it exists at the services of Western traders who exploit African products. Whitman’s line “Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you” expresses not merely his compassion for African Americans but strongly, as do Cullen’s lines, their natural and divine heritage.

Emanuel’s attempt to unify human and natural spirits can be seen in many of his jazz haiku. What underlies his experimentation is a Jeffersonian belief that those who live and work intimately with the earth deserve divine protection. In the haiku “Farmer,” Emanuel depicts the affinity of a farmer with jazz:

Good-grip Jazz, farmer:
  ploughed music like fields, worked late,
  kept all furrows    straight. (64)
Inspirational jazz is like a God-chosen farmer who cultivates the earth to attain the spirit of nature. The earth to Jefferson is “the focus in which he [God] keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth” (Jefferson 165). To Emanuel, jazz inspires genuine spirits just as the farmer keeps “all furrows straight.” The word *straight* has a moral implication if this haiku is mindful of Jefferson’s notes on farmers. “Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators,” Jefferson maintains, “is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example” (Jefferson 165). Unlike the traditional haiku with a single image or a juxtaposition of two separate images, Emanuel’s “Farmer” portrays a pair of related actions in farming. Not only does a good farmer, like a good jazz musician, work “late”; he also keeps “all furrows straight.”

The confluence of haiku and jazz in Emanuel’s poems is based on the expression of natural, spontaneous responses to human life. This sensibility is distinguished from that of negotiation and ambivalence characteristic of social and political discourse. The first group of poems, “Jazzanatomy,” presents—besides “EVERYTHING Is Jazz” discussed above—three other jazz haiku:

Knee-bone, thigh, hip-bone.
Jazz slips you percussion bone
classified “unknown.”

Sleek lizard rhythms,
cigar-smoke tunes, straight-gin sky
laced with double moons.

Second-chance rhythms,
don’t-give-up riffs: jazz gets HIGH
off can’ts, buts, and ifs. (2)

The first haiku features the explosive sound produced by a percussion instrument, while the last two focus on the uniqueness of jazz rhythms. The second one, “Sleek Lizard Rhythms,” characterizes the jazz rhythms not only as smooth like lizards but as capable of making thin tunes rise high as “straight-gin sky.” In the third haiku, “Second-Chance Rhythms,” Emanuel hears the rhythms getting “HIGH” by not giving up riffs. The height such rhythms attain enables the composer to rise above “can’ts, buts, and ifs.” “Second-Chance Rhythms” bears a resemblance to Basho’s “The Old Pond,” mentioned earlier. Emanuel describes the ways in which the sound of jazz, tran-
scending social and political interests and conflicts, enables him to attain peace of mind, just as Basho intimates the enlightenment he achieved by hearing the sound of the water bursting out of the tranquility of the world. “Second-Chance Rhythms” is also reminiscent of Emily Dickinson’s poem “The Soul Selects Her Own Society” in its rhythm:

The Soul selects her own Society—
Then—shuts the Door—
To her divine Majority—
Present no more—

Unmoved—she notes the Chariots—pausing—
At her low Gate—
Unmoved—an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat—

I’ve known her—from an ample nation—
Choose One—
Then—close the Valves of her attention—
Like Stone—

(Dickinson 1: 225)

Emanuel suggests the attitude of flexibility by describing jazz rhythms as having riffs, two or four or more refrains, in them. But he also stresses the decisiveness of jazz by capitalizing the word “HIGH.” In Dickinson’s poem, the flexibility in a woman’s character is described by longer lines with four beats, such as the opening line of each stanza: “The Soul selects her own Society,” “Unmoved—an Emperor be kneeling,” and “I’ve known her—from an ample nation—.” By contrast, the decisiveness in the woman’s character is expressed by shorter staccato lines with two beats, such as the concluding line of each stanza: “Present no more—,” “Upon her Mat—,” and “Like Stone—.”

Traditionally, haiku—seeking enlightenment on the spirit of nature—depicts the setting sun and the moon, mountains and seas, flowers and trees, but it does not concern human sexuality. Some contemporary haiku in America and Japan, however, are natural, spontaneous expressions of sexual desire, just as some forms of jazz are conducive to expressing sexuality. Rich Youmans, a contemporary American haiku poet, for example, includes such a haiku in his haibun (haiku essay) entitled “For My Wife on Our First Anniversary.” Youmans describes scenes of nature in early spring, when he wakes at dawn and gazes at his sleeping wife. Such a passage, with its
Christian allusions, makes this *haibun* an aubade, a kind of morning love lyric. What this haiku poet experiences is an epiphany from the spirit of nature, the essential meaning of his life, his wife being both eros and agape. Her waking voice is related to an allusion to the Resurrection dogwood petals which are described as “cruciform.” Youmans evokes the spirit of nature by the morning light transformed into prisms through the window glass, a figurative spiritualization of the physical world. The *haibun* ends with a haiku:

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prisms in
early light:
we make love
(Youmans 15)
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Just as Youmans seeks enlightenment on sexual love through a Christian revelation, so does Emanuel through jazz music. The first chapter, “Page One,” ends with four jazz haiku under the title “Bojangles and Jo”:

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Stairstep music: ups,
downs, Bill Robinson smiling,
jazzdancing the rounds.

She raised champagne lips,
danced inside banana hips.
All Paris wooed Jo.

Banana panties,
perfumed belt, JAZZ tattooing
lush ecstasies felt.

Josephine, royal,
jeweling her dance, flushing
the bosom of France. (8)
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The staiestep music with “ups” and “downs” induces Bill Robinson to smile and jazzdance “the rounds.” His smiling and jazzdancing, in turn, leads to Josephine’s raising “champagne lips” and dancing “inside banana hips”; “All Paris” woos her. “Banana panties,” “perfumed belt,” “JAZZ tattooing” each throw the listeners into “lush ecstasies.” All in all, this jazz music makes Josephine “royal”: she reigns as a goddess of love, “the bosom of France.” Not only does Emanuel cast “Bojangles and Jo” in a narrative style, but this group
of jazz haiku also bears some resemblance to renku, Japanese linked verse in the haiku manner.  
Emanuel's other unlinked, independently composed haiku are also jazz-like expressions of robust, natural human sexuality:

**Duke Ellington**

“*I love you madly,*”

Duke said. Beauty his mistress,  
*jazz hammock* their bed. (14)

**Fashion Show**

When you rock those hips  
and turn like that, JAZZ, baby!  
I know where it’s at. (32)

In “Duke Ellington,” their “*jazz hammock,*” endlessly rocking, inspires them with love. In “Fashion Show,” rocking “those hips” and turning “like that” instantly generate male desire.

Another group of haiku, entitled “*I’m a Jazz Singer,* She Replied,” consists of an introductory haiku followed by four haiku, each beginning with “*Jazz:*

He dug what she said:  
bright jellies, smooth marmalade  
spread on warm brown bread.

“*Jazz*” from drowsy lips  
orchids lift to honeybees  
floating on long sips.

“*Jazz*”: quick fingerpops  
pancake on a griddle-top  
of memories. Stop.

“*Jazz*”: mysterious  
as nutmeg, missing fingers,  
gold. Less serious.

“*Jazz*”: cool bannister.  
Don’t need no stair. Ways to climb  
when the sax is there. (83)
In contrast to the linked haiku in “Bojangles and Joe,” each of the haiku in “I’m a Jazz Singer, She Replied” is independently composed. Whereas those linked haiku capture the interactions between the jazz musicians in depicting the generation of sexual desire, each of these haiku about a certain female jazz singer features a specific image characteristic of the singer: “drowsy lips,” “long sips,” “quick fingerpops,” and “mysterious / . . . missing fingers.” Focusing on such sensuous images and actions, each of the haiku inspires the audience to generate desire and love.

3.

From a philosophical perspective, Emanuel’s jazz haiku has an affinity with the Zen concept of mu. A series of ten haiku in the chapter “Jazz Meets the Abstract (Engravings),” for example, describe various human actions in which Emanuel is in search of space, a Zen-like state of nothingness. This space is devoid of egotism and artificiality: it transcends human reasoning and personal vision. The first haiku follows:

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Space moves, contours grow
as wood, web, damp, dust. Points turn,
Corners follow. JAZZ! (87)
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In this haiku, jazz creates a space that moves as its contours “. . . grow / as wood, web, damp, dust,” their points “turn,” and their corners “follow.” Neither intellectuality nor emotion such as hatred or anger is able to occupy such a space.

Emanuel further shows in his haiku the state of nothingness which jazz is able to achieve:

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No meaning at birth:
just screams, squirms, frowns without sight,
fists clenched against light. (88)
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Abstract, I try you
(walk, sit, stretch). You say nothing.
Good fit; to wit: JAZZ. (90)
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No dust, rust, no guilt
in home JAZZ built; it cheers, STANDS,
charms guests from ALL lands. (93)
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Jazz is like a newborn child with its “fists clenched against light.” The child just “screams, squirms, frowns without sight”; all this has “No meaning at birth,” a state of nothingness. Emanuel tries jazz, as he does an infant: “(walk, sit, stretch).” Like the infant, jazz says “nothing,” mu, but is a good fit. Such a space has “No dust, rust,” and such a state of mind has “no guilt.” Whereas jazz was born and reared in America, it has attracted “guests from ALL lands.” To Emanuel, jazz and Zen, characteristic of their respective cultures, have a common, universal appeal.

In other jazz haiku, Emanuel also envisions a world in which the state of mu can be attained. In this haiku, for example, height and intensity define jazz:

Soars, leapfrogs, yells: JAZZ!
But don't expect no tantrums,
no crazyman spells. (6)

Jazz “Soars, leapfrogs, yells.” Emanuel cautions, however, that soaring sounds and “yells” do not signal “tantrums” and “crazyman spells.” The sound of jazz, like the sound of the water made by a leaping frog in Basho’s haiku, signifies enlightenment, the state of mu. Just as Basho is impressed with the depth and silence of the universe, so is Emanuel with the height and intensity of jazz. This state of consciousness jazz creates has the effect of cleansing the human mind of impurity. “Haiku on Louis Armstrong” captures Armstrong’s ability to create his utopia, a “wonderworld,” purified of social ills and racial conflicts:

Jazz-rainbow: skywash
his trumpet blew, cleansing air,
his wonderworld there. (56)

Armstrong’s utopia is, in turn, buttressed by individualism. The last four haiku under the title “Steppin’ Out on the Promise” in Chapter V, “Jazzmix,” impress on African Americans the imperative of individualism:

Step out, Brother. Blow.
Just pretend you plantin’ corn,
gold seeds from your horn.

Step out, Sister. Blow.
Must be Lord told you to play,
gifted you that way.
Step out, Daughter. Shine.
Make 'em switch their lights on, chile.
Make 'em jazzophile.

Step out, Sonny. Blow.
Tell 'em all they need to know.
Lay it on 'em. GO! (84)

Emanuel impels each of the African Americans, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, to be individualistic, self-reliant in their efforts to realize the Promised Land. He tells his brother to blow his horn and plant “gold seeds” from it; he tells his sister to blow her horn and play the way God told her. He urges his daughter to shine in her performance and make her audience “jazzophile,” and he tells his son to blow his horn and enlighten his audience with “all they need to know.” Emanuel's command “Step out,” which begins each of the jazz haiku, emphasizes the principles of subjectivity and individuality in jazz performance. Each of the jazz haiku above, unlike a classic haiku, is united in its rhythm and meaning by a rhyme between the last two lines: “corn” and “horn,” “play” and “way,” “chile” and “jazzophile,” “know “ and “GO!”

Adding rhyme to haiku, much like deleting seasonal reference, is an innovation Emanuel has made in his haiku. He has attempted to widen the sensory impact of haiku beyond the effect of the single impression given in a traditional haiku. Jazz is not only an expression of African American individualism; it also inspires African Americans into cooperation and dialogue. A series of haiku under the title “Jazz as Chopsticks” feature the unity and cooperation of two individuals:

If Twin's the arrow,
Chops plays bow. No JAZZ fallin'
if they both don't go.

Chops makes drum sounds SPIN.
Twin coaxes them, herds them in,
JAZZ their next of kin.

When stuck on his lick,
Chops runs the scale. Twin slides loose,
then harpoons the whale.

“Chops, whatcha doin’?”
“Waitin’ for Twin. It's my bass
his melody’s in.” (82)
The four haiku quoted above describe jazz performance in terms of a pair of chopsticks. In his notes Emanuel remarks: “Chops and Twin are names given to the chopsticks (Chops the slower, sturdier one, Twin the roaming, more imaginative one)” (82). The pair play the roles of bow and arrow: if they do not work together, they fall and fail to capture what they desire. The pair are in unison with the music, Chops making “drum sounds SPIN” and Twin coaxing them, herding them in. Jazz would not be inspirational if only one individual played the music: Chops’s role is as important as Twin’s. Jazz captures life as though the pair “harpoons the whale”: while “Chops runs the scale,” “Twin slides loose.” And jazz music intensifies with a coordination of bass and melody, a pair of chopsticks.

Emanuel’s admonition for African Americans to be individualistic in their lives is reminiscent of Zen doctrine. The concept of subjectivity in Zen, however, goes a step further, for it calls for a severe critique of self. The doctrine of satori calls for the follower to annihilate self to reach the higher state of mu so as to liberate self from the habitual way of life. In Zen, one must destroy not only self-centeredness and intellectualism but also God, Buddha, Christ, any prophet, or any idol because it is only the self, no one else, that can deliver the individual to the state of mu. Emanuel urges the liberation of self and the destruction of injustice in such jazz haiku as “Jackhammer,” “Ammunition,” and “Impressionist”:

**Jackhammer**

Jackhammer Jazz POUNDS—
just breathes—on your door. Message:
don’t lock it no more.

**Ammunition**

Weapons ready-y-y. JAZZ!
People fall, rise hypnotized,
maybe civilized.

**Impressionist**

Impressionist pipe
puffs JAZZ where pigments solo,
brightsoapbubbling air.
(70)

Each poem focuses on the sound of jazz that inspires the liberation of self from the ways one has been conditioned to lead. Jazz pounds away the door of racism. Jazz is an ammunition to destroy barbarism: people will “fall, rise
hyped, / maybe civilized.” Through its impressionist pipe, jazz creates “bright-soapbubbling air,” a colorful, exciting new world.

The liberation of self which jazz inspires is akin to the concept of liberation in Zen. Zen teaches its followers to liberate themselves from human laws, rules, and authorities. For jazz, as for Zen, liberation results from one’s desire to adhere to the law and spirit of nature. The haiku “The Rabbit Capers” resembles a senryū:

White Bugsy Rabbit
went scratch-scratch-scratch: jailed for theft
from The Old Jazz Patch. (78)

The jazz caper is portrayed as a work of art that is created for its own sake: the jazzrabbit, in another haiku, “aims his gun, shoots / . . . just for fun” (78). For Emanuel, jazz inspires one, as does Zen, with a new way of life: jazz and Zen admonish one to purge one’s mind and heart of any materialistic thoughts and feelings and appreciate the wonder of life here and now.

4.

In portraying the union of humanity and nature, the haiku poet must achieve its effect by expressing the feeling of unity and harmony. Based on Zen philosophy, such feelings are motivated by a desire to perceive the harmony of nature and human life, an intuition that nothing is alone, nothing is out of the ordinary. The famous haiku by Basho below expresses the unity and relatedness in human life:

Autumn is deepening:
What does the neighbor do
For a living?

While traveling, Basho rested in a lodge where he saw another traveler, a stranger, staying overnight. As he was reminded of an autumnal self, he was also concerned about the other person. Because he did not come from a well-to-do family, his life as an artist was that of a wandering bard who was enormously interested in the commonplace and in the common people.

Like this haiku, many of Emanuel’s haiku also express genuine feelings about his fellow human beings. Like Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” the dom-
inant voice recorded in Emanuel’s jazz haiku, “John Coltrane,” for example, is that of the common people:

“Love Supreme,” JA-A-Z train,
tops. Prompt lightning-express, but
made ALL local stops. (24)

The three jazz haiku under the title “The Middle Passage” depict the pain and suffering of fellow human beings as poignantly as does the prose of Toni Morrison’s Beloved and Charles Johnson’s The Middle Passage:

Tight-bellied ships, gorged
to the core, JAZZ claiming berths
where breath soured no more.

Chains, whips, ship-to-shore.
JAZZ don’t talk about these things
It can’t do without?

Chainmates, black, vomit
for breath, sang LIFE into JAZZ
while leaping to death. (74)

In emphasizing “the toughness of poverty and racial injustice” in African American life, Emanuel at times uses narrative style and rhyme. Not only do these haiku on the Middle Passage capture the epitome of racial injustice, but Emanuel is also able to intensify his vision in a painful narrative as he is not in a single haiku. All the same, his narrative haiku are endowed with natural, universal sentiments, as they are not motivated by social or political protests. The feelings expressed in Emanuel’s haiku transcend those of the individual or society; they are nature-centered sentiments, not even human-centered emotions. Limiting each of the haiku to a single impression, as he has attempted to do, he is able to avoid overly intellectualized or moralized reasoning.

One of the poetic sensibilities that characterize haiku is called wabi. Some poets are inspired by the sentiment that human beings desire beauty more than food, a sensibility animals do not possess. The expression of wabi in classic haiku is characterized by feelings of agedness, leanness, and coldness, as well as poverty. Richard Wright, too, as mentioned earlier, composed some of his haiku that reflect the sensibility of wabi:
Merciful autumn
Tones down the shabby curtains
Of my rented room. (Haiku 44)

Wright, while describing his poverty and isolation, intimates the transcendence of materialism and the creation of beauty. Wright captures the beauties of nature represented by various images, such as the setting sun in “That abandoned house, / With its yard of fallen leaves, / In the setting sun” (Haiku 10); one more winter in “In this rented room / One more winter stands outside / My dirty window pane” (Haiku 103); one buzzing fly in “This tenement room / In which I sweat this August / Has one buzzing fly” (Haiku 106); the moonlight in “I am paying rent / For the lice in my cold room / And the moonlight too” (Haiku 115); and the autumn sun in “My decrepit barn / Sags full of self-consciousness / In this autumn sun” (Haiku 174). Such beauties of nature compensate for the poet’s plight of existence and fulfill his goals as an artist.

As Emanuel’s haiku on the blues show, the sensibility of wabi also underlies his poetics:

I
Woman’s gone. BLUES knocks
my door, says “Hello, honey.
Who-o-o you waitin’ for?”

II
No use cryin’ ’bout
what she did after she found
where my heart was hid.

III
Been ridin’ the rails.
Butt’s dusty. When I last ate?
My mem’ry’s rusty. (98)

The images of a woman gone, a man crying, and a man riding on a freight train, all convey the sensibility of wabi, the feelings of loneliness, but the beauty of the blues compensates for such feelings. “Been ridin’ the rails,” as Emanuel writes in a footnote, refers to “riding freight trains, like a hobo, looking for work in distant towns” (98). He further depicts the toughness of poverty in a long narrative poem, “Sittin’—Log Blues.” Despite his unem-
ployment and homelessness, an African American man named Log raises his hopes with toughness and austerity: “I’m standin’ kinda crooked, Lord,” Log says, “but standin’ up is hard to beat” (103).

This perspective in viewing pain, poverty, and loneliness in light of their compensation creates paradox. Emily Dickinson’s view of failure is paradoxical, for she shows that success is best appreciated by failure:

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne’er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple Host
Who took the Flag to-day
Can tell the definition,
So clear of Victory

As he defeated—dying—
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear!

(Dickinson 1: 53)

Emanuel’s narrative poem “The Knockout Blues” also expresses paradox. An African American finds his poverty compensated for by the strength of his character in winning the battle of life: “Willin’ to work for a wage less than fair, / I couldn’t find nothin’ but a knockout stare” (104). Despite the racial prejudice rampant in American society, the hero of the poem is proud to say:

If my arms and legs is wobbly,
if my neck is leanin’ in,
I been fightin’ what I couldn’t see
in places wasn’t worth bein’ in. (105)

“The Downhill Blue” also resounds with paradox. The poet-narrator is least afraid of going downhill because “They say I’m tough with steerin’ wheels / and mighty sharp with brakes” (106). “But whatever’s below’s,” he observes, is too deep for a spineless man to fathom. Endowed with character and discipline that have guided his life, he is now prepared to meet the challenge. With a bit of humor, he imagines that as he digs deeper, he will end
up on the other side of the earth: “when I break through I’ll be a Chinese man. / If the earth be’s round the way they say, / when I come up it’ll be a
OPPOSITE day. / Downhill’s a long, long way to go, / but I can dig it if I
dig it slow. / I’ll turn up talkin’ in a Chinese way: / servin’ up the blues on a
thank-you tray” (107).¹¹ “The Downhill Blues” also suggests that Emanuel’s
poetic experiment is an attempt to gauge African American life from a non-
western, cross-cultural point of view.

Such ideas of compensation and paradox enable Emanuel to focus on the
creation of beauty in his jazz haiku. A haiku on Billie Holiday celebrates a
state of mind similar to wabi:

Hurt, always hurt. Wounds
bled, wounds, scarred stand-up power:
this worn, sad flower. (46)

Despite, and because of, the wounds, “this worn, sad flower” is strengthened
by its “stand-up power.” This haiku not only expresses a poetic enlighten-
ment but also delineates the beauty of a flower, a symbol of nature. The focus
in the rest of the haiku on Billie Holiday is on the beauty of nature:

Wrong arms to sleep on,
bruises to wear, long white gloves,
one rose in her hair.

Domino lovers,
Strange Fruit men, Ill-Wind hustlers,
then the frost set in. (46)

While such images as “one rose” and “the frost set in” brighten up the feel-
ings of pain and hardship, they also remain beautiful by themselves. In the
haiku “Sonny Rollins (Under the Williamsburg Bridge),” Emanuel depicts a
lone-wolf in flight as a thing of beauty:

Worldwaif: lone-wolf notes,
blown in pain with all his might,
heal themselves in flight. (54)

For an African American artist, not only does nature heal the artist’s wounds;
it also creates a powerful image of beauty.

Jazz, as Emanuel remarks in his preface, “has crossed oceans and conti-
nents to spread its gospel of survival through job and artistic imagination” (v). Throughout Jazz from the Haiku King he is intent upon composing haiku on the basis of its well-established philosophical and aesthetic principles. Philosophically, his finely wrought haiku enlighten the reader just as inspiring jazz does the listener. Aesthetically as well, Emanuel's haiku, sharing the devices of both haiku and jazz by which to seize the moments of revelation, express natural, spontaneous sentiments. His haiku, with sharp, compressed images, strongly reflect the syncopated sounds and rhythms of African American jazz.