

(Re)voicing tradition: improvising aesthetics and identity on local jazz scenes

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Abstract

Historically, the field of ethnomusicology has tended to neglect the lives and work of individual musicians in favour of a view of music as culture, a disciplinary perspective that has assumed the homogeneity of the world's cultures. Contesting this erasure of the musical subject, biographical micro-histories situate the individual at the centre of music studies. Accordingly, the subject of this article is a self-identified 'local' jazz musician, whose narrative elucidates the exigencies of his musical and social life. One of the music's 'lesser lives', 'LC' is typical of those players who negotiate the contested terrain of jazz scenes peripheral to the jazz world's centre, New York City. The explication of his musical aesthetic and its influence upon his self-image as a jazz musician is directed toward a more representative view of jazz than that of institutionalised histories, which promulgate a 'Great Man' narrative. Incorporating contemporary discourse and critical race theories as alternatives to traditional modes of aesthetic inquiry, this study unpacks issues related to musical and social dialogism and signification, 'voice' and identity, and race and masculinity as a means of illuminating those criteria deemed crucial by a particular musician in his search for existential meaning and a jazz truth.

Musicians' narratives can elucidate the varied exigencies of their musical and social lives. Explication of the processes by which musicians negotiate their respective musical and social worlds requires an understanding of the aesthetic, ideological, representational, and adaptive strategies employed by them. Where a practising musician *is*, metaphorically speaking, is conditioned as much by past histories as present experience. Within local frames, individual aesthetic and stylistic choices reflect not only personal preferences but also those of identifiable – yet often fractious – jazz scenes,¹ collectively representing contemporary (re)figurations of past practices. Accordingly, aesthetics and style, identity and representation combine to evince a constructed socio-musical code both learned and lived, that is, a social signifying system as well as a complex of musical traits.

The subject of this article is a self-identified 'local' jazz musician whose acts of self-representation, aesthetic choices, and social strategies condition the ways in which he negotiates the vicissitudes of the jazz life as he experiences it. The biography of a work-a-day musician situated within one of a multitude of jazz scenes peripheral to the jazz mecca – New York City – can facilitate a fuller, more representative view of the jazz world than has traditionally been offered. Such a view is intended, as Ajay Heble (2000, p. 90) has written, 'to counter the misrepresentations fostered by institutionalized histories of the music', wherein *jazz* is normatively informed by a congeries of unexamined assumptions, impressionistic accounts, romance

paradigms, subjective processes of canon formation, and geographic chauvinism. Conventional jazz histories have tended toward a privileging of the lives and accomplishments of the music's 'great men'. Such grand narratives are flawed by their reductionism; they ignore – and therefore dismiss – the many musicians who labour in relative obscurity on jazz scenes worldwide and thus maintain the music's viability through a multidimensional act of commitment no less intense than that of those documented, 'real' jazz musicians of jazz historiography. Thus, a micro-history devoted to the aesthetic concerns of and the self-representational strategies employed by a local jazz musician can profitably aspire to achieve his 'rescue', in E.P. Thompson's formulation, 'from the condescension of posterity' (Thompson 1968, p. 12).

Guitarist LC² identifies himself musically as a practitioner of the jazz style commonly referred to as *bebop*, a term once regarded as meaningless and disparaging by the generation of young African-American modern jazz musicians of the 1940s, for whom, as trombonist George Lewis writes, 'sonic symbolism is often constructed with a view toward social instrumentality as well as form' (Lewis 1996, p. 94). Consequently, he situates himself within a matrix of issues attendant to the jazz life, a constellation of concerns regarding musical and social style, aesthetics and performativity, influence and originality, and masculinity and identity. Through varied acts of self-representation, he places himself not only within the framework of a particular musical idiom, but he also evinces an understanding of specific sonic and social requirements, as well as an empathy with the experience of historically removed musicians. To insist that LC is not a bebopper in the historical sense but, rather, is a musician who plays in that idiom is not to diminish his musical achievement or his sense of self. Rather, it is to locate him discursively within a stylistic web in which collectively sanctioned aesthetic and social imperatives are individually acknowledged and negotiated. Removed by time and social circumstance, LC recontextualises bebop temporally and ideationally within the frames of his experience and by doing so, sustains and invigorates it. His ultimate commitment to bop practice represents the culmination of numerous stylistic choices made over the course of many years of musical activity. Such personal preferences, however, do not indicate a simple, progressivist succession of musical idioms, each one displacing the one before, but rather they form a multi-layered complex of sonic possibilities and social identities that inflect his aesthetic values and musical self-image.

*Being a musician is all I know; it's who I am*³

LC is not unlike countless white, lower- and middle-class young Americans caught up in the rock music explosion of the 1960s. The possibility of ecstatic release promised by rock was seductive to a generation in search of a meaningful alternative to the conformist pressures and values of mainstream society. Music offered an outlet for self-expression as well as a means for identity formation to an emergent youth culture seeking a political and social voice. Proclaimed as oppositional, this 'counterculture' sought to form a social world in which a sense of alienation from mainstream values found expression in political activism, modes of private and public behaviour, and music, the latter allowing its users to create new subcultural forms of community in which to explore alternative ways of being (Pratt 1990, p. 32). For LC, the emancipatory experience he sought through rock music in the 1960s was a critical

component of a process of identity formation – ‘it’s who I am’ – crucial to his evolving self-conception as a jazz musician.

Clearly, popular music’s affective power was capable of creating and sustaining an alternative social reality for those who sought it. For LC, it provided entree into a world of possibility apart from that sanctioned by middle-class society. Playing the guitar in rock, soul and funk bands as a teenager provided him with an opportunity to forge an identity beyond such prosaic categories as ‘son’, ‘brother’, and ‘student’ without the coercive influence of parental and educational mediation. To be a musician meant to be aloof from the common concerns and ascribed identities of ordinary life; jobs were anathema, after-school activities ‘uncool’. But Pratt views the freedom from convention promised by musical performance as deceptive, ‘a limited or partial realm of freedom that might better be seen as a fantasy land, a make-believe sanctuary where the disappointments of the real world can be undone, reviewed, redefined, re-enacted, and overcome’ (Pratt 1990, p. 12). Like the bebop practice he eventually would embrace, rock music presented LC with both style and attitude options theretofore unavailable to him. The constructed ‘outsider’ status of rock and roll appealed to those who craved both social and musical outlets unavailable to them through established institutions, and for LC – an originary outsider by virtue of having been adopted at birth – such a status opened up a social and creative space, a ‘sanctuary’ in which he could negotiate and affirm an identity both new and self-determined, one pungent with possibility.

I was living the life, but I knew it couldn’t last; there had to be something more

LC played in a succession of rock, soul and funk bands during the late 1960s and early 1970s, working a club and hotel circuit encompassing the United States mid-Atlantic region as well as mid-western locales. The constant grind of club dates, one-nighters and road trips eventually would exact its toll. The monotony of playing the same music in the same fashion night-after-night in rowdy bars, compounded by the ennui of life on the road, only exacerbated the creeping realisation that it just might all lead to both a musical and financial impasse; it became, in LC’s succinct estimation, ‘a drag’. But the life could be exhilarating, the time spent away from school, parental constraint, and nine-to-five responsibility liberating. The expertise LC gained from the experience of constantly performing provided him with the necessary skills with which to negotiate both musical and social demands. The term *performance* in this instance is intended to encompass a wide variety of practices both within and without the parameters of actual music-making. The refinement of performance skills through constant practical application is, of course, predictable, but to *know* the music is as much a matter of living it as it is learning its technical and stylistic requirements. And for LC, access to that knowledge, to a way of being in the world, was possible only by tracing the music to its perceived source. Like many whites of his generation for which the complexities of cultural interaction remained largely unexamined in the desire to musick, he internalised essentialist assertions that attributed the potent power of both rock music and jazz to the ‘blackest’ of African American musics – the blues.

If there’s one thing I learned playing blues, it was how to cop a groove

Rooted deeply in African American culture, the blues is commonly troped as the touchstone of black musical expression and, according to James Cone, is

comprehensible only when viewed as a 'state of mind in relation to the Truth of the black experience' (Cone 1991, p. 102).⁴ As one response to the oppressive conditions African Americans historically have endured, the blues metaphorically embodied the spirit of hope and freedom, transformation and affirmation. As a form of expressive behaviour embedded firmly within a marginalised 'culture of resistance' (Pratt 1990, p. 87), the blues evinced an oppositional stance that subverted white cultural norms and expectations, an orientation that would resonate strongly within the white youth culture of the 1960s. For LC, the wrong-way assimilation implied in his adoption of a blues aesthetic was a form of *refusal*, one abetted by internalised notions of black 'authenticity'. In his view, 'the blues is the real deal; your shit doesn't stink without it'.

If, as Charles Keil (1985, p. 120) has suggested, the blues was 'a white idea about blacks', one that reiterated 'the all-too-familiar maxims of cultural geneticism, which designate music and cultural expression along absolute racial lines' (Ware and Back 2002, p. 10), it was one embedded in a romantic idealisation of black folk culture. As a potent expression of that culture, the blues was reified by folklorists, scholars, and a music industry intent on creating a distinct discursive category according to which the blues could be conveniently labelled as one thing – 'folk' music.⁵ The complexity of both the social conditions and processes of musical syncretism that produced the blues had to be ignored in order to construct an authentic folk expression amenable to the interests, ideologies and motives of mediating formations, one subsequent development of which was the blues revival of the 1960s, the formative period of LC's musical apprenticeship.

As the musical and social needs of both blacks and whites changed, the audience for the blues increasingly consisted of whites, a paradoxical development that resulted in a re-definition of the blues – the ways in which the blues mean – and a concomitant decline in its appeal among African Americans. 'You couldn't play blues at the black dances', LC remembers, 'because they thought it was some old, tired shit. But we loved it; it opened me up'. It is reasonable to assume that 'if there was a significant message to the blues, black audiences already knew it; whites [such as LC] were just beginning to hear it' (Pratt 1990, p. 83).

I'm no 'wigger', but maybe I'm black by affiliation

Catalysed by both the social and musical upheavals of the 1960s, young white musical aspirants such as LC began to investigate – to enter into a black musical circle, to paraphrase Houston A. Baker, Jr (1984, p. 84) – black urban blues and jazz as modes of personal expression that could serve their musical, social and psychological needs. Essentialist notions that place these musics beyond the reach of whites not only fail to acknowledge the multiple ways in which they potentially can mean but also that the constructedness of race precludes consideration of the idea that whiteness is inextricably linked to blackness (Ware 2002, p. 149).

While recognising that whites may evince 'otherness' and racism simultaneously and without contradiction (Back 2002A, p. 109), consideration should be given to the possibility that 'whiteness' can be shed in a subversive act of race treason, one that requires, according to Ware, 'disobeying the rules of whiteness . . . and identifying with those who are not allowed to belong' (Ware 2002, p. 161). LC's sustained participation in musics essentially marked as 'black' – blues, soul, funk, jazz – and his traitorous 'affiliation' with otherness not only contradict a fixed and sedimented whiteness but, by doing so, challenge a facile 'black through white

syndrome' (Back 2002B, p. 231) in which white involvement with musics so designated is reduced to a simple condition of love and theft.⁶ By ignoring the complexity of transcultural interaction, the black inspiration–white appropriation model perpetuates the view that black and white people each are defined by a singular culture, effectively effacing in the process the hybrid character of both jazz and individual subjectivity (Evans 2000, p. 291). Echoing K.A. Appiah (quoted in Back 2002B, p. 230), who questions race-based claims to 'culturally marked' expressive modes, a sometimes frustrated LC has long endured 'the snubs and "attitude" of no-playing clowns who claim they own jazz but don't respect it enough to learn how to *play* it; they think they're better than the music! *Players*, black or white, know different'.⁷ An esteemed local jazz player who has worked as a sideman with many internationally known 'name' musicians, LC is experienced in the ways that jazz scenes are informed by the politics of race.⁸ 'For me, it cuts both ways. I've been hired because I'm white; I've been *not* hired because I'm white'. What LC has left unclear is who is doing the hiring or the 'not hiring' and for what reasons and under what conditions. What is clear, however, is that LC's attempts to disobey the rules of whiteness and evince otherness within the everyday conditions of local jazz scenes are complicated when 'the culture of sound is interpreted only through the visual lens of racial difference' (Back 2002B, p. 231).

I believe in the Truth, and I believe in searching for it

If, as Keil (1991, p. vii) asserts, individuals 'hear in the blues, essentially what they *want* to hear, find in the blues ethos what they expect to find', then LC heard the 'truth'. 'It's hard to describe, but I know it when I hear it; it's something you can only go for'. For him, the truth is ineffable and intangible, something *felt* rather than apprehended.⁹ Closely tied to the ideology of soul, the truth of the blues and jazz is self-evident, it informs and defines degrees of musical integrity and commitment. Although formally delineable (e.g. 'blue' notes, harmonic progressions, etc.), the truth of the blues transcends the limitations implied by such analysis, a condition recognised by Baker, for whom the blues 'exist, not as a function of formal inscription, but as a forceful condition of Afro-American inscription itself' (Baker 1984, p. 4). LC's perception of an individuated blues impulse (Ellison 1964, p. 78) permits him to seek and proclaim *his* truth, an ineluctable expression of personal values and beliefs; for him, a socially grounded truth lies at the heart of his aesthetic, not as an abstraction but as lived experience. When he refers to *bebop* (and the blues impulse within which it is embedded) as 'the truth', or comments upon the truth of someone's music, he is speaking metaphorically in reference to a complex of meanings that encompass both the syntactic systematics of the music and its social history, a 'truth content', as Adorno (quoted in Agawu 1997, p. 298) insisted, 'mediated through . . . *technical structure*'. The truth content inherent in bebop offers LC a means by which he sonically interrogates his own subjectivity with regard to African American music. But, truth is not a consequential effect of a subjective imposition of meaning; truth is intrinsic to the understanding that results from dialogue among interlocutors (Mitcherling 1998, p. 37).

The creation of an aesthetics of jazz has constituted a site of contestation for virtually the entire history of the music, beginning with debates over whether or not jazz was, in fact, *music*. The discourses of jazz have been constructed predominantly by whites and thus reflect the social ideology and aesthetic values of those responsible

for their creation and continued relevance. Espousing a linear, evolutionary narrative of jazz, wherein a succession of jazz styles is said to cohere within a unitary 'tradition', conventional jazz histories efface the enormous diversity within the music for the sake of a desired continuity (DeVeaux 1991, p. 540). Often steeped in Kantian notions pertaining to a disinterested, autonomous art, jazz historiography has tended toward an 'art for art's sake' view of the music and evaluated it in terms of its timeless, formal beauty. But, counters Charles Hartman,

jazz players do not divide the world in a way that makes 'art for art's sake' a meaningful proposition. Jazz is quite capable of adopting aestheticist ideals . . . [b]ut something in at least the history of jazz keeps subverting those ideals. (Hartman 1991, p. 143)¹⁰

Frequently abstracted from its social context and ignored in its local manifestations, while bestowing canonicity upon select historical works and figures, jazz discourses define the parameters by which some sounds are construed as 'jazz' and others are not.¹¹

I'm a product of those times; I came up in the '60s and '70s

That a Black Aesthetic of jazz could privilege culture over race (Ramsey 1996, p. 31) and reflect the political perhaps was expressed most forcefully in the writings of LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka] (1963; 1967; 1987) and in a collection of essays edited by Addison Gayle, Jr (1971) entitled *The Black Aesthetic*. The tenacious influence of the ideas put forth in these writings continues to have consequences both positive and negative for LC as he negotiates the jazz life. Redolent of the black cultural nationalism of the late 1960s – LC's formative jazz years – these writings called for the creation of an Afrocentric, functional, revolutionary black arts. On this point, Maulana Ron Karenga (1971, p. 36) insisted that non-revolutionary art was by definition 'invalid'. Gayle, in rejecting the formalism of white critical discourses, asserted that a Black Aesthetic should function as a 'corrective – a means of helping black people out of the polluted mainstream of Americanism' (Gayle 1971, p. xxii). This stance contradicted Ralph Ellison's (1964, p. 56) earlier contention that intercultural transaction had created an American 'mainstream' of which African Americans were inextricably a part. But by the late 1960s, his view was decidedly out of fashion among both black separatists and white 'revolutionaries'. Race traitors like LC were struggling to divest themselves of a prescriptive and delimiting whiteness, seeking a way out of the very 'mainstream' that expected them to obey the rules of that ascribed identity. 'This', LC remembers, 'was the time of the [Black] Panthers and the anti-war movement, and we felt that being 'down with the *bruthas*', so to speak, was a way of showing solidarity. I played those clubs downtown all the time'.

Although the notion of 'corrective' was forcefully privileged, no clear consensus among African American writers, musicians and intellectuals concerning the social and aesthetic goals of a black arts movement evolved. In an effort to rescue African American music from the 'junk pile of admirable objects and data the West knows as *culture*' (Jones 1963, p. 18), some black aestheticians framed their analyses within an ahistorical rhetoric of purity and authenticity, the intention of which was, according to Baker 'to inscribe and close a black critical circle around Afro-American expressive culture' (Baker 1984, p. 83). Others, following Ellison's positive view of the transcultural interplay that produced multi-racial jazz, counter the notion that traditional approaches to black music analysis constituted a formalist conspiracy fostered by whites.¹² Baker (1984, p. 84) acknowledges that

there have been white critics who have entered a black critical circle 'not as superordinate authorities, but as scholars working in harmony with fundamental postulates of the Black Aesthetic', a subject position also inhabited by LC, whose intuitive tendency toward a strategic, wrong-way assimilation encouraged an engagement with 'otherness' through the medium of music. Vron Ware (2002, p. 165) goes as far as to 'allow for the possibility of [white] individuals being drawn to aspects of revolutionary or creative cultural forms on the basis of respect and admiration', a statement certainly true of LC, who not only valorised the achievements of black musicians but, having come of age in the late 1960s, embraced the revolutionary attitudes of those years.

You have to know what came before; you can't fake this music

Jazz musicians such as LC 'signify' (Gates 1988) on the jazz tradition, reinterpreting a musical usable past by learning its codes and reinscribing them with new meanings that, in turn, are subject to varied interpretations. LC's insistence that one know the 'language' of bebop, rather than 'fake' it, is directed not only toward stylistic appropriateness but also toward a signification embedded within a dialogical understanding of and engagement with the music's history (Bakhtin 1981).¹³ It is a truism that jazz performativity is a 'model of pragmatic socialism' (Meltzer 1993, p. 22), that is, individual expression is encouraged within a context of collective interaction. Jazz, as Ralph Ellison understood it, is 'an art of individual assertion within and against the group', one in which 'each solo flight, or improvisation represents . . . a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition' (Ellison 1964, p. 234). When LC plays, he 'converses' with the other members of the ensemble, audiences, the history of the music, and with himself through remembrances of past performances. The dialogical foundation of the 'jazz act' (Gebhardt 2001, p. 1) guards performance against solipsism, or as LC states it, 'cats just out for themselves'. When LC insists that he 'listens to the catchy, communicable elements in someone's playing', the social, dialogical facts of jazz performativity become apparent, that is, as Nicholas Gebhardt writes, 'the jazz act, prior to any process of individual self-expression, is already a social act' (Gebhardt 2001, p. 2). A complex set of musical and social actions, physical gestures, and utterances, that is, the *performance* in which he is dialogically and socially engaged, presents LC with an opportunity to signify on the musical rhetoric of past masters, recontextualising and re-voicing the jazz tradition in an idiosyncratic but communicable manner. As a mode of interpretation and reinterpretation, a dialogical framework for both musical and social connection offers LC a sonic discourse that 'is able to reveal even newer *ways to mean*' (Bakhtin 1981, p. 346).

I kept looking for a big hero to follow, but I knew that's not what it's about; you have to develop your own voice

Jazz musicians often speak of developing a personal instrumental 'voice', a process informed by the interrelatedness of issues of style, 'sound' (timbre), vocabulary, technique, gesture, and performativity (Berliner 1994, pp. 273–6). 'Voice' informs identity, the projection of the self distinguished from other voices/selves. Saxophonist Jimmy Heath noted the importance of developing an individual instrumental voice:

... there were so many different tenor players I could identify just by listening to them. If you listened to the radio and Gene Ammons came on, you knew Gene Ammons. If Dexter Gordon came on, you knew right away. You knew Lucky Thompson, Don Byas, Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins and Ben Webster; they all had their own identity. (Wilmer 1977, p. 68)

One's 'voice' does not sound in isolation, rather, it interacts with other socially and historically situated voices; past performances enable present voices to mean. As a sonic marker of identity and its representation, the jazz musician's instrumental 'voice' evinces the bundle of influences from which it has emerged and with which it is in continual dialogue; influence – the music's historicity – is not denied but acknowledged. The oral/aural and literate transmission of jazz creates a circumstance in which it is virtually impossible for the practising musician to develop a voice devoid of prior voices. Jazz players, therefore, must negotiate the fine line that distinguishes influence from imitation; the former is susceptible to a deliberate and creative misreading in the quest for uniqueness while the latter is considered an act of 'devouring' (Ellison 1964, p. 234), a practice anathema to fundamental jazz aesthetic values.

A counterfeit voice, by definition inauthentic, will assuredly invite the opprobrium of jazz musicians, who equate imitation with the assumption of an identity not one's own. Critical of musicians who 'cop' other players' ideas – *devour* them – but aware of how seductive the temptation to do so can be, LC prefers to 'hear what a player has to offer', listening for those 'communicable elements', but disappointed when a player has 'nothing to say'. Such language metaphors are common currency among jazz players for whom meaningful social and musical interaction evinces the qualities of conversation (Berliner 1994, pp. 354–5; Monson 1996, pp. 77–87). Although the jazz musician is dialogically engaged with the voices of the jazz tradition, he or she must create a unique voice within it, one that signifies repetition-with-a-difference, invokes a 'changing same', yet is not merely derivative. Many musicians – including LC – accept the legitimacy of the 'jazz tradition', as well as their connection to it as individual 'links in the chain', but resist being subsumed in it, refusing to succumb to a unitary and singular musical voice no matter how dominant. Rather, they listen to prior voices as a necessary condition for creating their own. Jazz aesthetic requirements encourage the musician to situate his or her voice within an *internally persuasive discourse*, the aim of which is the development of the ability to retell in one's own words what has been told before (Bakhtin 1981, p. 346). It is axiomatic among jazz musicians that one's playing should 'tell a story', that is, give voice to personal experience, a voice that is itself enmeshed in a complex of prior and present voices. But, crucially, LC adds that 'it should be a story that people want to hear and can relate to', emphasising the specific dialogical relationship within jazz performativity between players and audients.

LC asserts that one's musical voice gradually develops via processes of assimilation (Berliner 1994, pp. 120; Korsyn 2001, p. 57), which results from the conscious act of listening to, and thus *hearing*, other voices; in this way one's own voice is enabled.¹⁴ Defined, in part, by one's sound and capabilities – musical, physical, and interactional – he insists that 'your voice finds *you*, not the other way around; it's what you can do and it's what you *hear*'. In short, the successful development of an identifying voice results by default from the *failure* to devour a prior voice. It is instructive to consider Bakhtin's distinction between *authoritative discourse* and an *internally persuasive discourse*. Authoritative discourses 'may embody various contents: authority as such, or the authoritativeness of tradition, of generally

acknowledged truths, of the official line and other similar authorities' (Bakhtin 1981, p. 344). Monological by definition, authoritative discourse is a *prior* discourse, one that demands internalisation and transmission via mimesis. Internally persuasive discourse, however, evinces the struggle to assert one's own voice among many by assimilating and restating that which has been told before. An internally persuasive discourse is 'half ours and half-someone else's' (Bakhtin 1988, p. 345). Thus, one's own sonic discourse, achieved dialogically and voiced authentically, is the aim of serious jazz musicians like LC. By means of an imaginative, 'enacted criticism' (Geoff Dyer 1991, p. 170), he has assimilated prior musical voices of the jazz past, internalised them, and recast them according to a jazz aesthetic that promotes individual expression within a framework of collective musical dialogue and interaction.

Problematising the aesthetic concerns of an individual jazz musician by means of applying modes of literary theory that affect new ways to mean is not intended to suggest a direct interchangeability of modes of analysis between music and language.¹⁵ Rather, they are offered as potentially profitable alternatives to traditional approaches that remain deficient in their relation to jazz. Jazz musicians do, however, speak of learning the 'language', acquiring a 'vocabulary', 'telling a story', playing 'gibberish', 'bullshitting', and so on. Audients sometimes implore musicians to 'tell it' or respond to particularly meaningful musical utterances with 'that's what I'm talking about'. It is by 'knowing the language' that individual players, each with his or her unique voice, are able to play together and communicate with each other and with audients and thereby create a context for socially produced meaning.

I want to create my own thing; tell it my way

LC's personal aesthetic reflects a broader jazz ethos that valorises the Bakhtinian internally persuasive voice over one that is merely imitative of another. And although many musical influences – 'big heroes' – have impinged upon his playing style and thus have enabled it, he refrains from reciting other players' ideas. 'Someone once told me I sounded like [guitarist] Kenny [Burrell]; I didn't think so, but it made me realise that I hadn't gotten there yet, *being me*'. He acquired the vocabulary of bebop by assimilating the 'voices' of past jazz masters, a deliberate and ongoing process of intensive listening, imagining, thinking, and finally, *hearing* the music. Although the transcription and memorisation of recorded performances is a common method by which one acquires a jazz vocabulary, 'copping lines' is not only contrary to LC's aesthetic ethos and ethical values, but it stifles the creative potential of transcription itself. In going beyond being merely a report of the improviser's original work, transcription's value and ongoing interest inheres in its capacity to comment on and creatively misread that work, even where it is readily available (Davies 1988, p. 226). In LC's view, slavishly reproducing transcriptions lamentably can result in what he awkwardly terms the 'Jamey Aebersold-ization' of jazz, a condition in which mere imitation as an end in itself precludes the development of the kind of unique musical identity of which Jimmy Heath spoke.¹⁶ 'These guys', LC believes, 'all listen to the same stuff, learn the same patterns, and sound the same; they could be anybody'. Approached, however, as templates rather than prescriptions for improvisation, transcribed jazz performances can serve as material models of hearing from which basic concepts and approaches can be assimilated, the goal of such processes being the creation of a singular identity, that is, as LC put it, *'being me'*.

A not uncommon misconception about jazz is that players extemporise their music out of nothingness, that jazz improvisation is unbounded by recognisable rules, a sonic expatiation shrouded in mystery. To continue the analogy with language, de Saussure (1966, p. 9) described the operation of language in terms of that which conceivably might be spoken and the constraints placed upon that which is ungrammatical.¹⁷ Similarly, theoretical and stylistic constraints prevent the jazz player, who, in Raymond Kennedy's words, 'creates within a learned probability system of stylistic norms, [from] saying anything ungrammatical' (Kennedy 1987, p. 47). Echoing Gates's 'Signifyin(g)' practices as well as Bakhtin's theory of an 'internally persuasive discourse', David Lichtenstein posits a 'latent text' from which a jazz improvisation emerges, that is, pre-existing but unnoticed possibilities 'are discovered about the latent text at the same time as they are inventions based upon it' (Lichtenstein 1993, p. 232). The jazz improviser must possess a command of those codes that permit an intelligible interpretation of the music, a *telling* command that has its linguistic analogue in Noam Chomsky's (1982, pp. 62–9) theory of competence and performance, in which newly formed utterances are grammatically correct and thus, comprehensible and, to use LC's word, 'communicable'. As a speaker does with words, the jazz player acquires a musical vocabulary that is applied in a manner consistent with the stylistic and 'grammatical' requirements of a socially sanctioned musical language. Just as a speaker utilises extant utterances of prior voices, in Bakhtin's formulation, the jazz musician, by means of transformative processes inherent in improvisation, gives singular voice to that which has been said – and *heard* – before. Metaphorically, new meanings arise from new representations of previously heard utterances; metonymically, new statements make oblique reference to those uttered in the past without creating a new sense but rather, making novel linkages with familiar signs (Lichtenstein 1993, pp. 234–5). Like all serious jazz musicians, LC works to create a unique rhetoric of improvisation, the effectiveness of which – its *telling* quality – is directly related to the degree of competence achieved in its expression and by its reception.

I could have been successful playing other styles of jazz, but I wouldn't have been happy

LC's participation in the jazz life dates from the 1970s. Jazz presented new possibilities for musicians like him, who believed that rock was exhausted as a musical form and drained of its cultural force. By this time, bebop had long been divested of its revolutionary meanings and redefined aesthetically as the 'new mainstream', a development indicative of an ideological shift in perception from its original avant-garde stance. LC's commitment to bebop ran counter to prevailing jazz trends, particularly the synthesis of jazz and rock music commonly known as *fusion*. Commercially successful but denigrated by many critics and musicians, fusion jazz was viewed as a sell-out to the demands of a recording industry eager to exploit the mass audience for rock music. Champions of fusion argued that those accusations, which centred upon the music's commercial appeal, reflected an elitism resulting from an ahistorical reading of jazz and its relationship to the marketplace (DeVeaux 1991, p. 530). Furthermore, partisans of fusion insisted, jazz has *always* been a product of the synthesis of disparate musical forms, and the 'fusion' that occurred in the 1970s was consistent with that aspect of the music's heritage.¹⁸

The ideological struggle over the legitimacy of fusion cast LC in the role of a latter-day 'mouldy fig' in the eyes of many players.¹⁹ 'Those *fuzak* guys thought I was

a dinosaur. Even though I didn't like it, I could play that stuff. But they didn't know it, so they didn't call me. I lost a lot of work'. The conflict inherent in choosing between jazz values and commercial ones is reflected in the dilemma faced by LC: 'Should I play bop, or should I play "modren" ' [sic]?²⁰ Given the scarcity of remunerated opportunities for playing jazz of *any* style, the question is often merely rhetorical; he, like most working musicians on local jazz scenes, has performed in a variety of jazz (and non-jazz) contexts, but clearly his ideological commitment to bop practice had economic consequences.

Despite the cacophony of competing musical pressures, LC worked primarily on *hard bop* scenes, a contemporary reinvestigation of the 1950s and early 1960s bebop-derived, 'funky' jazz redolent with the tropes of virility and hip (read, *black*) street attitudes (Rosenthal 1992, pp. 101–16). A confluence of musical and social experiences had prepared him for the moment when he could finally *hear* the music and thus, in pianist David Sudnow's (quoted in Gebhardt 2001, p. 18) words, 'go for jazz'. After years of playing in blues, rock, soul, funk and jam bands, the epiphany provided by hard bop served to enable his search for a personal jazz truth, one conditioned by conventional masculine tropes.

If romanticised notions of black expressive culture inform LC's aesthetic – although expressed with a knowing, signifyin(g) irony consonant with his attempts to disobey the rules of whiteness – so too does the idealisation of constructed masculine behaviours. The competitive, largely homosocial world of jazz demands and privileges musical and social codes that are expressive of an assertive, unambiguous masculinity, a machismo, as Valerie Wilmer recognised, 'evident in the lifestyle of most musicians and manifested in heavy hanging-out rituals and self-conscious comradeship' (Wilmer 1977, p. 194). Inclusive of everything from the agonistic 'cutting session' to one's instrumental sound, to 'play like a man' is ideationally foundational to conventional jazz aesthetic tenets and to the hip ethic.²¹ In a milieu in which women historically have been expected to be supportive of, rather than full participants in the music (except, tellingly, as singers), homosexuality or feminine-coded behaviour is often regarded with deep suspicion. 'Blowing a masculine stick', as poet Ted Joans (quoted in Wilmer 1980, p. 204) wrote, '[and] avoiding the faggot's trick' is recommended on jazz scenes in which musical and social interactions assume an unmistakable heterosexual orientation, one that enables non-threatening male bonding, the rituals of which are implicitly acknowledged and sanctioned by insiders.

The ambivalence with which whites historically have regarded the sexuality of African Americans – a combination of fascination and fear – encouraged what Krin Gabbard (1992, p. 45) has called the 'demasculization' of black men, a coercive act of representation by which the black male body is simultaneously hypermasculinised, feminised and infantilised. White ideas about black sexuality have their musical analogue in romanticised notions of black corporeality and spontaneity. While serving to stereotype African Americans, such perceptions also caricature whites who, accordingly, in Phillip Tagg's estimation, 'use music [they] imagine to be little or none of [their] doing as a corporeal panacea for [their] own problems of subjectivity, powerlessness and alienation' (Tagg 1989, p. 294). In both instances such 'genetic logic' encourages a 'crude correspondence between racial attributes and musical property' (Back 2002B, p. 230).

Yet male jazz musicians – regardless of race or ethnicity – generally accept the idea that African American jazzmen model a contemporary masculinity of

considerable influence (Sidran 1971, p. 178). Robin D.G. Kelley proposes that black men in the 1950s ‘offered an alternative model of masculinity in the age of the gray flannel suit, suburbia, and other emasculating forces’ (Kelley 1999, p. 139). Certainly, such an ‘alternative model of masculinity’ has informed the stance and attitude assumed by LC; ‘jazz’, in his view, ‘is a “dick thing”, and only the strong survive’. His jazz aesthetic, inextricable from a demonstrative heterosexual and homophobic subject position, stresses such commonly asserted masculine attributes as ‘toughness’, ‘virility’, and ‘balls’, all expressed within an unequivocal context of symbolic phallic display. To *play* the music is to play it according to ‘a white idea about blacks’, one rooted in the myth of African American sexual prowess and evocative of assumed and expected qualities of assertiveness, swagger, and a potent (hyper)masculinity. In LC’s conception, a thorough knowledge and command of bebop performativity is tantamount to the normative qualities of a conventionally coded masculinity, albeit one informed by racialised imaginings (even so, his associations with black musicians and audiences are devoid of both self-congratulatory hubris and white guilt).

Upon relocating to a large mid-Atlantic city, he found most of his playing opportunities in the so-called ‘black clubs’.

I could ‘play black’, that grits-and-gravy thing. You had to in those places. If you played ‘white and polite’, you were gone! Early on, a lot of people thought I was black until they saw me.

Given the possibility of racial misidentification, to characterise LC’s jazz act as merely ‘passing for black’, rather than as a sonic attempt to disobey whiteness, is to ignore the potential of aural culture ‘to dislodge the easy elision of race and culture precisely because it cannot be circumscribed by the visual regimes of racism’ (Back 2002b, p. 255).

Descriptive terminology employed by LC, such as ‘swinging hard’, ‘digging in’, ‘kicking ass’, and ‘poppin’ and burnin’’, testifies to an active, aggressive phallogocentricity. To execute musical passages with speed, accuracy, and a *check this out* bravado – collectively, ‘chops’ – is to assert an aura of potency manifested as sonic ‘dick-waving’. LC extends this idea to include even the timbre of his guitar, characterising it as ‘masculine’, a gendered *sound* that ‘affects the way I play’. The musician whose playing lacks qualities informed by an alternative model of masculinity is apt to be regarded not only as inept or inexperienced but also as ‘too white’ and/or effeminate. To be labelled as such means potentially to incur the opprobrium of musicians whose lot it is to compete for playing opportunities within a degraded jazz ecology of scarce remunerative resources, one marked by a social and musical Darwinism that rewards those who employ strategies of survival sanctioned within jazz scenes that set the parameters of acceptable, appropriately coded musical and social behaviours.²²

LC’s aesthetic embraces sedimented jazz systematics that reflect the established values of that which he identifies as the ‘jazz tradition’. Within a construction that valorises competence and innovation within prescribed limits, he signifies on a jazz past that requires a close reading of its ‘scripts’ (Cook 2003, p. 206) in order that they may be continuously (re)voiced and (re)heard.²³ By riffing upon the tropes of a received, reified ‘tradition’, he continually reinterprets – and thus invests with new meanings – the music’s historicity, a process of dialogism that simultaneously grounds him in that tradition yet adheres to the imperative to ‘make it new’. His refiguring of the bebop aesthetic is not intended simply to (re)produce an objectified, formal artifact for public admiration but, rather, to mediate a dialogue between a

recast jazz past and contemporary listeners. It is his belief that, ultimately, 'you've got to play to the people' in order to engage them dialogically, that is, 'to hip them to the truth'.

For LC, a local 'foot soldier' (Collier 1993, p. 275) in the jazz army, questions pertaining to identity, masculinity, musical style, tradition and aesthetics collectively inform and problematise an approach to musicking that reveals a life lived in pursuit of existential meaning, self-representation, and a jazz truth, a *way of being* in a world of contested and polyglot identities. That pursuit, like the music he lives, is, finally, its own reward.²⁴

Endnotes

1. I employ the term 'scene' rather than the ubiquitous 'community' to characterise jazz milieus so as not to perpetuate an idealised view of the jazz life. The term 'community', once used to evoke the organic, cooperative virtues of medieval village life, contradicts the experience of work-a-day musicians who, like an animal species endangered by loss of habitat, are compelled to compete among themselves for recognition and remunerative opportunities within a fragile jazz ecology of increasingly limited resources. Put to me succinctly by a 'name' pianist, confirmed by 'LC', the subject of this article, and consonant with my own experience, 'Cats will cut your throat for a gig'!
2. 'LC' is a pseudonym employed at his insistence and in his words, 'to protect the guilty'. In the course of my research, this request was not uncommon; a 'name' trumpeter who requested anonymity was concerned that critical remarks made by him would rebound to his professional disadvantage.
3. All epigraphs, quotes and statements attributed to 'LC' are the result of hundreds of hours of discussions, interviews and musical and social interaction with the author between 1993 and 2001.
4. Jon Michael Spencer states that 'a theology for the blues proceeds from the premise that blues tells the *truth* and that *truth*, as the highest value of the blues, is the principle of orthodox blues belief and the missing ethical element requisite to considering blues religious' (Spencer 1988, p. 2). The ontological status of African American blues is echoed by Julio Finn who asserts that 'the roots of the blues lie in the psyche of all peoples of African origin' (Finn 1992, p. 1). Similarly, LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka] views the blues as 'inviolable', inextricably linked to the collective experience and fate of African Americans (Jones 1963, pp. 147–8).
5. See Christopher Waterman on Mississippi 'bluesman' Bo Chatmon's 'voraciously cosmopolitan sensibility' (Waterman 2000, p. 177).
6. Les Back is concerned that white musicians playing black music are consigned to 'a very limited range of archetypal possibilities', in which 'distinctions among musicians ... are elided within the language of appropriation', and that 'the identification of white people with black music is too often reduced to the binomial of pernicious envy and vicarious exoticism' (Ware and Back 2002, pp. 229–30). On the 'black through white syndrome', see Hewitt (1983).
7. Appiah rejects the view that 'jazz belongs to a black person who knows nothing about it more fully or naturally than it does to a white jazzman' (quoted in Ware and Back 2002, p. 90).
8. A partial list of 'name' players with whom LC has performed would include Dizzy Gillespie, Gary Bartz, Billy Hart, Junior Cook, Julius Hemphill, Woody Shaw, Barry Harris, Ira Sullivan, Red Rodney, Sonny Stitt, Jack McDuff, Larry Goldings and Ken McIntyre.
9. The ineffable, hard-to-pin-down quality of the truth of the blues is evident in saxophonist Julian 'Cannonball' Adderley's assertion that 'People just know' (Adderley 1973, p. 121).
10. Ted Gioia has argued that an aesthetic discourse that places undue emphasis on the objectivisation of autonomous art is anathema to jazz values, that is, 'almost every aspect of the music rebels against such an approach – by nature it is ephemeral, spontaneous, and informal' (Gioia 1988, pp. 100–1). Gioia's own aesthetic criteria, however, evince Kantian disinterestedness. See Horn (1991), Werner (1994, p. 272) and Ramsey (1996, p. 33). Contemporary modes of critical discourse assert that issues pertaining to class, gender, race, power and ideology are inherent in traditional aesthetic theories, that is, judgements reflect the values and preferences of particular social formations. Hans-Georg Gadamer rejects the notion of 'aesthetic distance', insisting that it is conceptually abstract; art, artist and audience, in his view, are all historically emergent and socially situated. He dismisses the false objectivism of positivist thought on the grounds that it separates knowledge from practical matters (quoted in Wolff 1983, p. 20). The social production of meaning takes place discursively and, according to Janet Wolff, 'offers us a notion of the specificity of the aesthetic in terms of the particular discursive practices which constitute it, while leaving open the possibility of relating the aesthetic and its discourse to extra-aesthetic factors' (Wolff 1983,

- p. 94). Despite their profound differences, traditional and contemporary theories are similarly deficient in that they often privilege aesthetics over social facts.
11. Attempts to define what is and is not 'jazz' continue, perhaps most controversially with regard to those of two influential African Americans, trumpeter Wynton Marsalis and writer Stanley Crouch, both of whose public statements on this issue have engendered much debate. Interestingly, their aesthetic criteria for evaluating – and thus, defining jazz – often reiterate those of the much-maligned white critical establishment, whose 'internalist' (Clark, 2001, p. 4) reading of the music has resulted in an allegedly distorted interpretation of its history. Amiri Baraka insisted that undue European influence served to 'desoul' the music, rendering it something other than jazz, a 'Tail Europe school . . . which seeks to make African American music an appendage of European concert music' (Baraka 1987, pp. 274–5).
 12. See Stanley Crouch's rebuttal to Amiri Baraka (Crouch 1990). Although Baraka has often levelled the charge of 'formalism' against the white critical establishment, he also has cited approvingly numerous of its members for 'deal[ing] with intriguing aspects of the music technically, historically, aesthetically, and socially', taking up 'some of the burning social questions related to the music and its principal players' (Baraka 1987, pp. 254, 259). Baraka's privileging of the 'principal players', however, perpetuates a 'Great Man' theory of jazz that this paper – a 'history from below' – interrogates. For further implications with regard to the 'new musicology' versus 'formalism', see Agawu (1997). Ron Welburn's initial denunciation of Western aesthetic values imposed upon jazz was later tempered to such an extent that he could acknowledge that 'through their concern and love for the music, [the white critical establishment] helped establish genuine criteria for the assessment of jazz performances' (Welburn 1971, pp. 126–42), a view shared by Guthrie Ramsey, albeit with some reservations (1996, pp. 30–7). In a review of three books on jazz written by white academics, he finds regrettable 'the lack of white scholars theorising how their own subjectivities shape their interpretations of black music'. Invoking what he views critically as 'the taken-for-granted, naturalized "Critical White I"', Ramsey is 'less sensitive to white scholars doing the historical work rather than the hard-hitting theorizing of black identity politics' (Ramsey 1999, p. 214). A proprietary stance toward, and a certain anxiety about what white scholars 'do' with regard to black music research is not unique to Ramsey. Portia Maultsby, in her review of Dena Epstein's book, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War*, praises the author for amassing data and states – with evident approval – that Epstein 'does not attempt to interpret or elaborate on the facts' (Maultsby 1980, p. 127).
 13. With regard to the study of aesthetics, jazz, and the social production of meaning, recent scholarship suggests that literary theory offers a profitable alternative to more traditional modes of inquiry. As examples, Henry Louis Gates's (1988) theory of 'Signifyin(g)' and Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) concept of 'dialogism' evince similar interpretive strategies, the former in terms of black vernacular meanings, the latter in relation to the novel and the diversity of voices contained therein, that is, its heteroglossia. As a mode of black discourse, Signifyin(g) refers less to qualities of literalness, logic, connotation, and the definitiveness of meaning than to oral, denotative, multivocal, parodistic, figurative and improvisational ones. As a rhetorical practice, Signifyin(g) refers to the creative potential of its users to construct a web of oblique but negotiable meanings, all of which are socially and historically grounded. Although somewhat totalising, Signifyin(g), by valorising repetition-with-a-difference, revision, variation, inflection and nuance, constructs a world of meaningful double-play, one in which creative (re)interpretation within prescribed limits assumes priority over radical revision; it allows for a less constrained but socially sanctioned interpretation of texts than do traditional approaches. See Baker (1984), Gates (1988), Tomlinson (1991), Floyd (1991), Gabbard (1992), Walser (1993), Werner (1994), Hollerbach (1995) and Monson (1996). Although Signifyin(g) has its utility as a means of theorising black music, like its oft-cited theoretical relative, DuBois's notion of 'double-consciousness', it is not without its limitations within that context, as noted by Graham Lock: 'Signifyin(g) . . . seems to have become the post-modern equivalent of "natural rhythm", in that all African American musicians are now presumed to have it in their music – and those who do not are deemed in some way "inauthentic"' (Lock 1999, p. 7). Similarly, Andrew Bartlett – echoing Baraka's 'Tail Europe' thesis – questions the application of Gates's theory to the music of pianist Cecil Taylor, citing the 'lack . . . of the seemingly "essential" elements Gates outlines in his concept of Signifyin(g)' (Bartlett 1995, p. 285). Bakhtin viewed literary history as a site of ideological rift between an established tradition (poetry), which he characterised in terms of monologic, hegemonic authoritarianism, and other genres (the novel) that 'speak' with a polyphony of voices in noisy, subversive dialogue and, thus, pose a threat to the established order. As Christopher Norris suggests, applied to music, the monological authority of 'art music' is counterpoised with non-hierarchical, heteroglossic, vernacular musics the meanings of which are negotiated dialogically (Norris 1989, p. 10). For Bakhtin, understanding results from dialogue, achieved not by authoritarian decree but through 'noisy', voiced contestation. See Bakhtin (1981), Gunn (1987), Norris (1989), Hartman (1991), Bowen

- (1993), Hollerbach (1995), Monson (1996), Middleton (2000), Korsyn (2001) and Toynbee (2003).
14. Paul Berliner invokes pianist Walter Bishop Jr's formulation of successive stages of jazz expertise: imitation–assimilation–innovation. It is in the assimilation stage that players 'typically develop a unique voice within the bounds of a particular performance school' (Berliner 1994, p. 274). Bakhtin asserts that processes of language acquisition require 'the *assimilation* – more or less creative – of others' words . . .' (quoted in Korsyn 2001, p. 57).
 15. Linguistic models applied to jazz include Velleman (1978), Perlman and Greenblatt (1981) and Steedman (1984).
 16. Jamey Aebersold is both a jazz educator and successful publisher of jazz instructional materials. LC's contention is that the ubiquity of Aebersold's method threatens, in his words, 'to create an army of jazz clones'.
 17. According to de Saussure, language 'is both a social product of the faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty' (Saussure 1966, p. 9). For further discussion of de Saussure and jazz, see Monson (1996, pp. 85).
 18. For accounts of *fusion* jazz and the debates that surround it, see Coryell and Friedman (1979), Tomlinson (1991) *passim*, Nicholson (1998). In Baraka's view, 'fusion . . . had no soul, because it smelled of commercial dilution and money tricks' (Baraka 1987, p. 274).
 19. A derogatory term invoked by swing fans during the early 1940s to denote old-fashioned music and attitudes, *mouldy fig* historically refers to 'revivalist' aficionados of New Orleans- and Chicago-style 'trad' jazz of the 1920s. A war of words and definitions erupted between the two factions, aided and abetted by the jazz press. With the emergence of bebop, swing proponents were cast in the role of mouldy figs. By the 1960s, bop had become the new jazz orthodoxy and would subsequently be opposed to 'free jazz' and, later, fusion. See Leonard (1987, pp. 139–43) and Gendron (1993, pp. 130–57). For LC, it was ironic that his allegiance to what was once 'modern' – bebop – now refigured him as old-fashioned.
 20. A deliberate malapropism, best uttered with dripping sarcasm. Reserved for post-bop players, it signifies contempt for the apparent unwillingness, or inability to play bebop. Players who 'skate over' the chord changes during improvised solos by relying heavily on an ambiguous chromaticism, harmonically amorphous linear patterns built on the interval of the fourth, pentatonic, whole-tone, and synthetic scales are accused of 'faking it' and 'bullshitting'. The term 'fuzak' is a derogatory conflation of *fusion* and *Muzak*, the latter referring to 'canned' music intended as unobtrusive background to other activities – such as shopping – and often denigrated as 'aural wallpaper'.
 21. For discussions of hipster tropes, see Sidran (1971, pp. 108–14), Ross (1989) and Monson (1995).
 22. With regard to gender coding in jazz, see Ake (1998) and Tucker (1998). Homosexuality is marginally less stigmatised within jazz scenes today than in the past. If gay musicians once were inclined to keep their sexual preference a private matter, changing attitudes have encouraged some – such as respected pianist Fred Hersch – to publicly disclose their homosexuality.
 23. Nicholas Cook proposes substituting *script* for *text* with regard to the artifacts and practices encountered within specific cultural contexts in order to foreground the social, interactive nature of performance. Rather than to think of a musical 'text' as something to be *reproduced* in performance, to view it as a 'script' is 'to see it as choreographing a series of real-time, social interactions between players', which are communicated to audiences situated within the structure of the jazz act (Cook 2003, p. 206).
 24. James Lincoln Collier writes: 'These local players are essential in jazz. They are the foot soldiers in the army, and in the end it is the foot soldiers, not the generals, who win wars' (Collier 1993, p. 275). David Meltzer suggests that a "'thicker" history of jazz' may uncover musicians who 'might have been (or were) of equal originality and brilliance as those of the pantheon' (Meltzer 1993, p. 14).

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