

Radio Sound and Auditory Nostalgia in Toni Morrison's *Love*

LI Ming-jiao

Guangdong University of Foreign Studies; Guangzhou Xinhua University, Guangzhou, China

Radio sound is a key signal sound in Toni Morrison's 2003 novel *Love*. The intertwining of memories and radio music constitutes an intriguing window on how radio sound serves as a vehicle for exploring the cultural and historical implications of African American women's listening experiences with home radio, as is presented by Toni Morrison in her first new millennium novel *Love*. Far from a simple sonic link with the larger external world, radio sound in is a primary means for individual nostalgia, collective memory, and expression of auditory aesthetics. It is a mechanical sound which conveys a particular "black restorative nostalgia."

Keywords: radio, nostalgia, memory, auditory aesthetic

Introduction

The word "nostalgia" has its origin from two Greek roots, *nostos*—returning home, and *algia*—longing. Coined in 1688 by Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer, the term was first used to refer to "the medical condition afflicting people displaced from their native home, such as immigrants and soldiers" (Street, 2015, p. 80). Based on Jofer's study, Svetlana Boym identifies two major forms of nostalgia: "restorative nostalgia"—a condition evoking national pasts and futures, and "reflective nostalgia"—a condition evoking people's awareness of the gap between identity and resemblance (Boym, 2001, p. 50). According to Boym, nostalgia can be triggered not only by a smell or an image, but also by a sound. Memories aroused by sound, especially those elicited by music or modern sound technologies emerging in the twentieth century have drawn much critical attention in sound studies. Michael Bull, for instance, coins the term "auditory nostalgia" to refer to the restoring of memory by listening to familiar sounds in the past through the record player, the portable audio technologies such as portable radio and the iPod (Bull, 2001, p. 83). Auditory nostalgia, as Bull argues, not only helps "locate the subject in the world" and "give them a sense of coherence," but also "warms up the space of movement in a mobile world in which users increasingly deflect away from the spaces and time traversed" (Bull, 2001, p. 85).

Since its emergence in the late nineteenth century, radio has been used as a vital means in the storing and reproducing of the sounds of the past. But it is from the late 1950s onward that radio begins to play an increasingly significant role in the production of auditory nostalgia. Music from live radio or cassette tapes serves as a vehicle for reminiscence and glues particular experiences to both individual and collective memory. People's expectation that they will feel the same response each time a piece of recorded music is played "stems from a craving to relive the past-as-it-was—as if the past were also a record" (Dijck, 2009, p. 109). Nevertheless, it is

LI Ming-jiao, Ph.D. candidate, lecturer, Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies; School of Foreign Languages, Guangzhou Xinhua University.

improbable that repeated listening over a lifetime would leave an “original” emotion intact, as Geoffrey O’Brien eloquently points out in his musical memoir, “The age of recording is necessarily an age of nostalgia—when was the past so hauntingly accessible?—but its bitterest insight is the incapacity of even the most perfectly captured sound to restore the moment of its first inscribing. That world is no longer there” (O’Brien, 2004, p. 16). The intertwining of memories and radio music constitutes an intriguing window on how radio sound serves as a vehicle for exploring the cultural and historical implications of African American women’s listening experiences with home radio, as is presented by Toni Morrison in her first new millennium novel *Love*.

Radio Sound as Individual Auditory Nostalgia

Radio sound is pervasive in black homes in *Love* and utilized by African American women in quite different ways. Far from a simple sonic link with the larger external world, radio sound in *Love* is a primary means of “black restorative nostalgia”.¹ Radio makes its first sonic presence through Vida’s listening experience. In the Chapter entitled “Friend,” Morrison vividly depicts the scene of Vida’s daily listening to her home radio as an act of auditory nostalgia. When Sandler Gibbons enters the kitchen one evening, his wife Vida is “folding clothes and singing along to some bluesy country music on the radio” (Morrison, 2003, p. 52). This scene, trivial as it appears, offers a representative picture of radio’s role in African American families and its close relation to African American women in the novel. Despite a general socioeconomic uplift during the three decades following the Civil Rights Movement, modern technologies like the TV, telephone and Internet are still unavailable for most African American families until the late 1990s. Therefore, for most African American families, radio has remained to be the most important means of home entertainment even in the last decade of twentieth century.

Radio sound pervasive in Vida’s house is first and foremost an expression of individual nostalgia for an idealized past. Although Vida loves listening to radio, what she likes is not the popular music that Mavis and Gigi love, but “some bluesy country music”—a combination of the blues and the country music, which is especially popular in the American South in the 1930s and 1940s when Vida is still in her girlhood. Vida’s particular interest in the “bluesy country music” indicates her yearning for a return to a sonic past infused with the familiar musical sounds in her childhood. The agency of radio music lies in part in its capability to activate powerful nostalgic feelings. The “bluesy country music” on radio triggers her memories of the good old days in a black haven resonated with similar black music. This is why despite living in the 1990s with a decent job, Vida still misses the past deeply, especially the job which reminds her of a satisfying past, as the narrator says, “the good fortune of her current job did not prevent her from preferring the long-ago one that paid less in every way but satisfaction” (Morrison, 2003, p. 41). “The long-ago one” refers to the job Vida takes as an assistant in Cosey’s Resort during the nine years from 1962 to 1971 which, as Vida recollects, is the period when “she squeezed only sweetness” (Morrison, 2003, p. 40). Vida’s sweet memories of these nine years merge with her childhood recollections of the amazing sound in Cosey’s Resort, a place vibrant with “good music” that people dance to “till the sun came up” (Morrison, 2003, p. 74). While Vida does miss “the good old days,” what she misses most is the musical sound

¹ “Black restorative nostalgia” mainly involves a revival of a black communal spirit of resistance and solidarity made through intentional intertextuality with the imagery, iconography, and sound of the civil rights and Black Power eras. For more detailed discussion on this term, see Badia Ahad-Legardy, *Afro-Nostalgia: Feeling Good in Contemporary Black Culture*.

that keeps vibrating in Cosey's Resort as well as in her childhood memory. For Vida, her act of listening to radio music becomes "a journey through the iconic moments and periods" in her life (Bull, 2009, p. 88).

Radio Sound as Collective Sonic Memory

Recorded music or cassette record may also "construct a cognitive framework through which collectively constructed meanings are transposed onto individual memory" (Dijck, 2009, p. 110). The "bluesy country music" on the radio not simply evokes individual auditory nostalgia, but more importantly, projects a shared remembrance of a sonic past. The "bluesy country music" is not only enjoyed by Vida, but also successfully elicits Sandler's childhood recollections when he joins Vida in her radio listening. Seeing Vida sing along with the tunes in the radio, Sandler "grabbed her shoulders, turned her around, and held on tight while they danced" (Morrison, 2003, p. 52). Like Vida, Sandler is also brought back to his memories of listening to similarly musical sound in his childhood. According to Michael Bull, each era is defined by a prevailing sound or musical genre and audio technologies help invoke a cultural nostalgia typical for a specific time and age (Bull, 2009, pp. 90-91). In both Vida and Sandler's memories, Cosey's Hotel and Resort, "the best and best-known vacation spot" for black people on the East Coast from the Great Depression to the end of 1960s, is a black haven filled with memorable black sounds, particularly "the endless good music by and for the Blacks only" (Morrison, 2003, p. 12). As radio listeners, both Vida and Sandler are transposed from the present to a general mood of an era onto their childhood.

Despite its exclusion of the local African American community, Cosey's Resort is commonly regarded by the local blacks, poor and rich, as a black kingdom established by "the county's role model" who makes them "feel a tick of entitlement, of longing turned to belonging in the vicinity of the fabulous, successful resort controlled by one of their own. A fairy tale that lived on even after the hotel was dependent for its life on the people it once excluded" (Morrison, 2003, p. 42). As a place frequented by the best African American musicians during the 1940s and the 1960s, Cosey's Resort becomes a black utopia vibrating with the best music of the times, which not only brings wonderful auditory memories to the nearby locals but also creates a strong sense of racial pride and possibility of racial uplift which are hardly acquired during the Jim Crow era. Such sonic presence of Cosey's Resort can be seen in both Vida and Sandler's childhood recollections. While Vida is still a little "Up Beach girl" when Cosey's Resort is at its "best good times," Sandler is a boy deeply attracted by the music flowing from the Resort. At his boyhood, Sandler often "listens to the distant music and dances to it in the dark, the deep dark, between their own houses, in shadow underneath their own windowsills" (Morrison, 2003, p. 40, 47). The music Sandler hears from Cosey's Resort is primarily blues and jazz music performed by some of the most well-known black musicians in the 1940s, such as "Lil Green, Jimmy Lunceford, the Drops of Joy" (Morrison, 2003, p. 12). The radio music that Vida sings to bears similar characteristics with the blues music that Sandler listens and dances to when he is a child. Therefore, the familiar ring of the radio music immediately evokes a context which elicits collective reminiscence of the heaven of black music for both Vida and Sandler.

Radio Sound and Black Auditory Aesthetic

Radio sound in *Love* not only triggers individual and collective nostalgia, but also reflects differences in musical tastes and auditory aesthetics within black families. Both Vida and her grandson Romen love listening to

radio, but in different ways. Whereas Vida enjoys listening to the “bluesy country music,” Romen prefers the “hammering music” which cheers up “the nineties children” (Morrison, 2003, p. 157). The music Romen loves is disturbingly unbearable for Vida because it is not only noisy, but also “polluting and disfiguring the natural mind,” “straight no chaser,” and “direct as a bullet” (Morrison, 2003, pp. 156-157). Due to Vida’s dislike of the music, Romen is forced to “wear headphones to hear” it at home. The huge differences in Vida and Romen’s musical tastes and aesthetics reveal that radio sound has become an identity marker of listeners of different generations. Despite living in the 1990s, Vida still demonstrates a yearning for a return to the sonic past through listening to familiar sounds in radio. What makes such nostalgia stand out is her preference of the bluesy country music over the hip-hop music that Romen and his peers listen to. Through her home radio Vida creates a unique soundtrack in her house which enables both her and Sandler to achieve an audiomobility which transcends the temporal and spatial limits and can be fulfilled only with the modern sound technologies.

Auditory nostalgia through the agency of radio sound is also seen in Heed’s attempt to restore sounds of doo-wop in Cosey’s Resort. With Cosey’s death in the early 1970s, the subsequent poor management by the Cosey Girls, and the nationwide desegregation wave following the Civil Rights Movement, Cosey’s Resort suffers a quick decline and is no longer an attraction frequented by wealthy blacks who would travel distance to hear music. To save her husband’s business, Cosey’s widow Heed the Night turns to radio music for help. She believes she will be able to draw visitors back if familiar music of the past resounds in the Resort. Therefore, she asks the disc jockey in the hotel to play the doo-wop tunes in the tape recorder. With a gospel origin, doo-wop is a popular music associated with and produced by teenagers, both white and black (Taylor, 2009, p. 95). Despite its great popularity in the 1950s, it quickly becomes “relegated to the sidelines of popular music and the property of collectors and anthologizers with the rise of rock and roll in the 1960s” (Melnick, 1997, p. 137). Playing the doo-wop tunes in the tape recorder in Cosey’s Resort in the 1970s is a typical example of taking radio sound as a means of auditory nostalgia for the sake of business. Heed’s belief in doo-wop’s power to elicit nostalgic feelings toward the good old days of Cosey’s Resort does make sense to some degree. After all, for African Americans, doo-wop is indeed both a mixture of nostalgia for times past and a lost youth, and a symbol of racial integration peacefully achieved through music (Taylor, 2009, p. 96). Nevertheless, despite its power to activate musical reminiscence, doo-wop turns out an infeasible choice and fails to save the Resort from decline. This is not only because with more accessibility to radio, especially portable radios in the 1970s, local blacks need not to come to the hotel to listen to such music, but also because for young teenagers, both black and white, radio is not a means for nostalgia, but an instrument whereby they construct a private sonic space of escapism and different youth identity, as Andreas Fickers contends, “a catalyst and mediator of strong personal feelings and emotions, mainly through its function of putting revolutionary sounds into air” (Fickers, 2009, p. 123).

Through Vida and Heed, Morrison represents how African American women take radio sound as an agency of auditory nostalgia for different purposes. For Vida, radio sound not only elicits her individual memories of the sonic past, but more importantly, activates a collective reminiscence of a black paradise vibrant with black sound. Such type of auditory nostalgia is in essence a “black restorative nostalgia” whereby African Americans like Vida and Sandler get the chance of returning to the shining moments of black resistance and pride made through the flourishing of black music. While Vida achieves a “black restorative nostalgia” through radio sound, Heed Cosey fails in her efforts to turn radio sound into an agency of auditory nostalgia for a more practical purpose. Heed’s

selection of doo-wop as a means of nostalgia is by no means workable because she fails to realize that as time passes, both black music and the ways that African Americans listen to music have changed dramatically. With an increasing accessibility to modern audio technologies, African Americans have more freedom in their choice of music and the way they listen to it. Just as is presented through Vida's auditory nostalgia, with radio sound African American women enter a world which they gain a freer rein over and therefore claim a black female audiomobility that transcends not simply the limits of time and space, but also the barriers in terms of race and class.

Conclusion

Radio sound plays an integral part in shaping the affective contours of the black women listeners' lives. In *Love*, nearly each of African American women finds some room to interpret radio sounds' meanings for themselves, despite within very constrained space. In their own ways, African American women manage to navigate agency in and through radio sound and take it as important means of auditory nostalgia, cultural memory, as well as expressions of auditory aesthetics.

References

- Ahad-Legardy, B. (2021). *Afro-Nostalgia: Feeling good in contemporary black culture*. Urbana: U of Illinois P.
- Boym, S. (2001). *The future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bull, M. (2001). Soundscape of the car: A critical ethnography of automobile habitation. In D. Miller (Ed.), *Car cultures* (pp. 185-203). Oxford: Berg.
- Bull, M. (2005). Automobility and the Power of Sound. In M. Featherstone, N. Thrift and J. Urry (Eds.), *Automobilities* (pp. 243-260). London: SAGE Publications.
- Bull, M. (2009). The Auditory Nostalgia of iPod culture. In K. Bijsterveld and J. van Dijck (Eds.), *Sound souvenirs: Audio technologies, memory and cultural practices* (pp. 83-93). Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP.
- Dijck, J. V. (2009). Remembering songs through telling stories: Pop music as a resource for memory. In K. Bijsterveld and J. van Dijck (Eds.), *Sound souvenirs: Audio technologies, memory and cultural practice* (pp. 107-122). Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP.
- Fickers, A. (2009). Tuning in Nostalgia Wavelengths: Transistor memories set to music. In K. Bijsterveld and J. van Dijck (Eds.), *Sound souvenirs: Audio technologies, memory and cultural practices* (pp. 123- 138). Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP.
- Melnick, J. (1997). "Story Untold": The black men and white sounds of Doo-Wop. In M. Mill (Ed.), *Whiteness: A critical reader*. New York: New York UP.
- Morrison, T. (2003). *Love*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- O'Brien, G. (2004). *Sonata for Jukebox. Pop music, memory, and the imagined life*. New York: Counterpoint.
- Street, S. (2015). *The memory of sound: Preserving the sonic past*. New York: Routledge.
- Taylor, T. D. (2009). Performance and Nostalgia on the Oldies Circuit. In K. Bijsterveld and J. van Dijck (Eds.), *Sound souvenirs: Audio technologies, memory, and cultural practice* (pp. 94-106). Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP.