Jazz women power: “marginalized” identity as a tool of empowerment

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Introduction

Feminists argue that men and the culture of masculinity are always the dominative one in both private and public spheres. Women and the culture of femininity are in the marginalized and disempowered position. This explains why feminists argue women should link up an alliance to promote own rights and status. The above discourse towards the relationship between men and women could be applied in the jazz culture. “Men’s experiences within jazz culture, as performers, producers, and consumers, predominate in popular and critical discussions about the music and its history” (Rustin 446). However, there are still “jazz women” who develop their career well though we often treat jazz as a playground of men.

Regarding to the success of jazz women, we may query the reasons in at least two aspects:

1. their genius and efforts towards music/career;
2. their “seemed” marginalized identity can also be a “tool” of empowerment and help fighting for success.

In this essay, the discussion will start with the jazz women’s “masculinity” and “femininity”. Then, I will analyze how “women” as the identity of inferiority may also be helpful in getting advantageous position in the jazz world. This differs from the traditional feminists’ hypothesis which women are always in the suppressed position as they could reverse such kind of fixed power relationship by women identity. Two jazz women are selected as the samples in the discussion:

- Mary Lou Williams, a popular female jazz musician from the early to middle time of last century in USA
- Bianca Wu (胡琳), a female jazz/pop singer in Hong Kong since 2006
Their use of the “marginalized” women identity as the road to success will be articulated and analyzed. Williams’s “black” identity will not be a main concern in this essay because her major competitors in the jazz world were the black men. In addition, “race” may no longer be a key variable in the case of Bianca. Hence, this paper does not choose to tackle the aspect of race. Since the essay will focus on the two jazz women’s career development, any positive influences on their career/work may treat as the empowerment for them.

Mary Lou Williams: First Successful Jazz Woman

Mary Lou Williams showed her genius in music when she was 3 years old. She could play like an inborn piano performer and impressed people by her skills and young age. When growing up, she joined the vaudeville show of Buzzin’ Harris and His Hits’n Bits as the professional music player. She was only 14 years old at that time. This established the foundation for her to be a successful pianist, performer, composer and arranger. Apart from standing in the frontline of music performing and creation, she also helped the musicians who were lack of luck with the basic living necessities.

Reviewing the success of Williams, her music technique and creation became one of the main reasons that made her popular in the male dominated jazz world. She showed her genius in the music and impressed the audiences. This is interesting to point out one significant description about her, though she was a woman, people were willing to use the terms “men” and “masculine” to describe her:
“While on stage Mary Lou Williams’s performance proved her as powerful as a man…” (Rustin 456). Her ex-husband also felt “the masculine power coming from the young girls’ body…” (Rustin 455). Williams not only did not resist from such kinds of notion but argued jazz women should play like a man: “Working with men, you get to think like a man when you play” (Rustin 449). She did not have the idea to reinforce the gender stereotype of jazz culture by building up the “feminine jazz style”, moreover, she was willing to adopt it as part of “performing guidance”. Simply to say, she used her “masculinity” to win audiences’ supports and her successful career. Her genius and efforts were widely recognized by men (jazz men, audiences, etc.) because she accepted and followed the game rules established by men (male dominated jazz culture). She was a “man” on the stage.

The above was only a part of Williams’s successful factor. Unlike the jazz men, Williams always needed to respond to the questions concerning about her gender identity that should not be related to her music genius. Nevertheless, the general public usually found this was worth to ask:

“People ask me how it is to be a woman musician. I don’t think about so much, and I guess that is because I am first of all a musician…. There have never been any problems performing because I was a woman. You just have to be as good or better than the man is. And if you get carried away in your work you really don’t know if you are a woman or a man. [Williams answered.] (Rustin 449)”

From Williams point of view, her woman identity did not contain significant meaning towards her career. Paradoxically, Williams’ gender identity became her “trademark”. When people thought of her, they also thought of her gender identity more or less rather than merely her music talents. She might be correct that gender was not a problem about her performance, however, this surely was a question why a jazz woman drove out many jazz men and finally got a predominate position in the male dominated jazz world. Williams said that she had to “be as good or better than the man is” but this still could not explain “why” she was successful. Many jazz men were also played “as good or better than the other jazz men” but why they couldn’t be successful? The situation was that only very few jazz women could get recognition in the jazz world when women were marginalized in the field.

Nevertheless, Foucault argues that “identity” is not fixed and could move to the centre and margins. “Power is exercised from innumerable points” so nil absolute oppressive power relationship could be maintained without any change or even no binary
“oppressive vs. suppressive” relationship can be established. Thus, as the first jazz woman, Williams might get the advantage from her “seemed” marginalized woman identity. When people asked about her gender identity, this also means people recognized her effort. Women should not have any places in the jazz field, but she did! This kind of question helped empowering her and made her became a special icon in the jazz world. It is no doubt that Williams’s genius in music nourished her success, but Rustin argues “discussions of black women in jazz… have tended to obscure both the myths and the realities of their genius” (Rustin 447). The identity of “first jazz woman” shifted her from the marginal place to a “legend” position.

The Unforgettable Gender Identity

Williams might hardly agree with my argument as she said she “didn’t know” she was woman or man on the stage. Actually, she might not have the intention to make use of her woman identity as the tool of empowerment. She seemed not care about her gender identity in her career and believed in her own effort and ability. However, no matter how her attitude was, she still couldn’t deny she was a “jazz woman”. Young argues the difference of social group was very different:

“The achievement of formal equality does not eliminate social differences, and rhetorical commitment to the sameness of persons makes it impossible even to name how those differences presently structure privilege and oppression. (Young 164).”

The golden time of Williams’s career was from the early to middle time of 20th century. It was before the second wave of feminist movement so that she hasn’t benefited much from the gender equality social thoughts and movement in 1960s. The power difference between men and women was bigger in her time than nowadays. Perhaps, Williams did found that she was “de-gendered” on stage, she was still a woman in itself. People felt interested in her jazz woman identity that she couldn’t deny. To conclude, the two reasons contributed to William’s successful career included her masculinity expression on the stage and her jazz woman identity. She tried hard to drill her music skills and creation that fulfilled the expectation of audiences and followed the game rules of male dominated jazz culture. At the same time, as the first jazz woman, her “marginalized” identity became her trademark.

Bianca Wu: Jazz Woman Identification
One obvious difference between Mary Lou Williams and Bianca Wu is that Wu is also a pop singer who sings different kinds of song such as R & B, pop and funk while Williams played Jazz only.

When Wu’s first album *Love Notes* (《愛音符》) released in 2006, her album was promoted with a slogan: “New York Jazz x Hong Kong Pop”\(^1\). The mixing work of *Love Notes* was completed by a jazz musician Norah Jones and her task force in New York, the city of jazz, which was a place Wu lived for five years previously. She also got prizes from the singing competitions there. In the same year, her second album *Bianca Sings Timeless* was released and most of the songs collected were jazz. This was a risky choice as jazz is never a mainstream music in Hong Kong or even the whole world (Tsing, 29-30). Foucault argues that identity is a “process” which people can develop own identity by practicing the actions. Wu is becoming the jazz woman when she (and her company) is identifying her with a jazz woman image by music style, advertising, self description. Till now, she has released five albums in total and all of them contain the elements of jazz.

**Cultivation of Genius and Femininities**

I watched Wu’s live performance in 2006 and I haven’t listened to her song before that. I have had a high expectation on her live performance as I heard that she sings very well from the media.

In Hong Kong, when pop singers have pretty outlook/cool image but do not sing well, they are most likely to be categorized as the “idol”. (偶像派) “Karaoke song” (k-song) is a kind of song they always sings. Since k-song is easy to sing and listen. It is widely accepted and supported by the pop music fans, especially, the teenagers.

For the pop singers who could sing well may also try other music genres (eg. Hacken Lee co-operated with Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra). If Wu only sings k-songs, she will just similar to the other new singers and would have no unique image. Nevertheless, when her “jazz woman” identity is constructed, people would treat her as different kind of singer. People would remember her as she is a rare jazz singer in Hong Kong. She was the only new jazz woman in 2006.

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In Hong Kong, jazz maybe a kind of stylish music genre. Jazz is uncommon in the local music market. It is said that nearly 80% seats couldn’t be filled up in the concert of jazz musician Eugene Bao (包以正) even his technique was in the international level. (Tsing 29). Pop singer, William So (蘇永康), who has released the jazz albums but it is hard for the audiences to remember his jazz songs. When Wu tries to link up jazz and pop music, the following may be imagined:

1. She is a genius singer because she can manage jazz.
2. She is not a down-to-earth pop singer who only knows how to sing k-songs. She is a jazz singer and her music is closer to the “high culture”.
3. In spite of jazz elements, audiences may still easy to accept her music style because it is not as “complicated” as the classical jazz. Moreover, she still performs different kinds of song including k-songs.
4. When people associates Bianca Wu, jazz, high culture and life-style together, they may imagine that they “know” more about high culture or even become stylish when they listen to Wu’s music.

Wu said in an interview that she really loves jazz: “I became flirtatious with jazz and eventually fell in love with it.” (Time Out Hong Kong) For her, “jazz” is like a tool in helping her to get better position in her career. As I mentioned before, jazz makes her different from the other “k-song singers” and develops her unique style in the market. People tend to believe that she is a genius rather than just an “idol”. Hence, singing jazz helps her to be empowered.

Apart from jazz, Wu also has another selling point which may be both supported and against by the feminists paradoxically. The image of Wu is sexy as always wears low-cut top, miniskirt, and hot pant in her Music video and on the stage. She is motivated to show her body that attracts audiences. In the commercial market, everything could be the commodity for exchange. However, radical feminists argue that male gaze on women’s body is a kind of exploitation in the patriarchal world. Male gaze is a patriarchal power over women by objectifying women’s body for men’s pleasure. Barry argues:

“As a practice of sexual exploitation, women perform in pornography and they perform pornography in their personal relationships…. Pornography is at once a practice of sexual exploitation and the ideology for it. The function of ideology is to justify, legitimize and normalize power relations that produce oppression.”
To a certain extent, Wu’s performance is regarded as a kind of “soft pornography”. Perhaps, Wu would say she is willing to show her body and she did not feel any exploitation. Radical feminists may still argue that Wu is blinded by the patriarchal ideology. Liberal feminists have counter-argument. They believe woman is the rational human-being who has subjectivity and active agency so that she can decide how to make use of self body. Body is also the capital in the commercial world hence sex work should be decriminalized and destigmatized. When Wu shows her sexy body as a weapon to draw attention voluntarily, how comes the others object for this? If we agree with Foucault’s argument, power relationship is never fixed but fluid, this is hardly to accept radical feminists’ view as they treat male gaze is the power over women absolutely. When Wu’s fans buy her album and concert tickets, vote for her in the year-end music prize presentation ceremonies… do everything contribute to her career success because of her sexy body, whose power is really over the others?
When Williams “forgot” her gender on the stage and the others said she was full of masculinity in the performance, Wu tries hard to show her femininities as tool to attract spectatorship. In the historical context of Williams times, this might be the best strategy for her to develop masculinities if she wanted to get the successful career. After reflecting the experiences of social movements in 1906s, Young (1990) argues the strategy of “politics of difference” is a way for the disempowered group to pace on the road of social equality and empowerment:

“This politics asserts that oppressed groups have distinct cultures, experiences, and perspectives on social life with humanly positive meaning, some of which may even be superior to the culture and perspectives of mainstream society.
(Young166)”

Apart from good performance, Wu makes use of her femininities as a way of empowerment which cannot be found from the jazz men. We do not see any jazz men show his “femininities” on the stage in Hong Kong. In the traditional notion about genius, the singers/musicians have to sing well and play well. However, woman’s body has the very intimate relationship with the woman and it belongs to herself rather than the audiences’ or under the exploitation of male gaze. Radical feminists’ assumption towards male gaze eliminates the subjectivity of women and the potential subversion generated by women’s body display and performing. Every woman should have autonomy to make use of and to insert positive meaning into her body display approach. Following Young’s politics of difference strategy, Wu’s body display and performing may be a concrete action for her to be empowered out of the male dominated jazz culture as she does not follow the games rules of jazz men blindly (to pursuit the genius such as technique and creation). On the other hand, jazz women are having more tools for grasping power in Hong Kong music market nowadays.

Conclusion
Mary Lou Williams developed her successful music career by her genius and people found that she was full of masculinity on the stage because she could play as good as or better than the men did. Even though she did not think that her gender is a problem for her work but the public concerned this much and her “first jazz woman” identity was empowered.

Another local singer, Bianca Wu, is identifying her as a jazz woman that can help to construct her genius. Unlike Williams, Wu is willing to show her body of femininities
as a way to be empowered. The two jazz women are not in the similar social and historical context but their “marginalized” women identity could also help to develop their career. It is different from the discourse that jazz women are always oppressed by the male dominated jazz culture.
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