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Up in the Sound: Form and Voice in Jazz and Post-War American Poetry

By

Benjamin Richard Lempert

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## Abstract

Up in the Sound: Form and Voice in Jazz and Post-War American Poetry

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Rhetoric

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In this study, I build a case for redrawing the conceptual lines of American post-war poetry and music. My overall argument is that the post-war American and African American poets who engaged with jazz most profoundly were those who heard the music not simply as a set of sounds, but as an ongoing argument about the nature of aesthetic form. These poets responded to the conceptual innovations of jazz by thinking in new ways about the body, and about how a body of sound could relate to the body of the poet. In setting lyric's material limits against its trans-medial aspirations, I show, jazz empowered poets to rethink the very nature of poetic activity, and in turn to construct a powerful new model of race-inflected aesthetics.

The dissertation is divided into two sections, each of which pairs music and poetry to outline a larger historical or theoretical argument. In this it leverages the many years I have spent as a practicing jazz musician. In the first section, I use musicological analysis to develop a new account of jazz-inspired lyric based in Charlie Parker's approach to musical narrative. What Parker's music offers, I argue in Chapter One, is not only a set of imitable sounds, but an improvisational organization of those sounds that resists their being heard as "telling a story," and instead turns musical form into a multi-layered, dialectical phenomenon. In Chapter Two, I use Langston Hughes's 1951 sequence *Montage of a Dream Deferred* and the poetry and poetics of Charles Olson to establish the poetic resonances of this account, articulating a theory of poetic musicality in which poetry's music becomes a matter less of how a poem sounds than how effectively it translates the structure of hermeneutic opacity that Parker's solos put in place. In the second section, the music of Miles Davis's mid-60's band anchors my excavation of a powerful but overlooked model of (African) American avant-garde performance. Davis's key aesthetic move, I argue, is to play sensuous presence against intellectual reception, so oversaturating notes and rhythms with potential meaning that pinning any of them down to a single implication becomes constitutively impossible. Chapter Four pairs Langston Hughes's 1961 poem *Ask Your Mama* with the work of Robert Creeley to push this aesthetic into the realm of language, detailing a theory of poetic representation in which language's inherent falsehoods forge identity as a permanently dispersed condition. The dissertation's final chapter extends this model in the work of two contemporary poets, Harryette Mullen and Ed Roberson, who unsettle traditional aesthetics of "blackness" by teasing apart the multiple sensory registers upon which the concept usually rests.

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## INTRODUCTION:

### Up in the Sound

In this study, I build a case for redrawing the conceptual lines of American post-war poetry and music. The contours of this landscape follow a number of crucial developments in a resolutely American aesthetic: jazz. In particular, I read two musical moments – Charlie Parker’s bebop revolution of the 1940’s and the recordings of Miles Davis’s famous mid-1960’s quintet – as conceptual provocations asking us to rethink the relationships between sound, race, and aesthetic form. These analyses then underpin a series of readings of post-war poetry that show post-war poets expanding, reconfiguring, commenting on, and complicating these aesthetic models. Moving from Langston Hughes’s 1951 sequence *Montage of a Dream Deferred* to Harryette Mullen’s 2002 collection *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, and including along the way Charles Olson’s *Maximus Poems*, Robert Creeley’s *Words*, Hughes’s 1961 long poem *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods For Jazz*, and contemporary poet Ed Roberson’s *Lucid Interval as Integral Music* and *City Eclogue*, I argue that the significance of these poets’ work rests in their hearing jazz not simply as a set of imitable sounds, but as an ongoing argument about the nature of aesthetic form. Engaging with the ideas Parker and Davis present in notes and rhythms, I argue, empowered poets to rethink the very nature of poetic activity, newly accommodate lyric’s material limits to its trans-medial aspirations, and in turn construct a powerful new model of race-inflected aesthetics.

While I generally present readings in chronological sequence, as a whole the project offers less a historical narrative than an evolutionary account of a mode of thinking that ties sound to race, and bodies to representation. For both the poets and the musicians in this study, sound functions in two ways, as material, embodied phenomenon on one hand and as signifying trope on the other. Sound is both experience and figure, the medium in which arguments are made and an identifiably racial feature of musical and textual performances. In part, this study aims to show how the coding of bodies as raced proceeds through sound; to inhabit the matrix of race is to be “up in it.”

Because the materials in which it traffics are sounds and bodies, jazz offers the foundational moments of the argument whose evolution this study outlines. As I argue throughout, jazz’s aesthetic traction rests in its ability to offer not only an evolving set of sounds, but an evolving way to think about how sound comes to *mean*. And the way sound comes to mean is deeply intertwined with historical representations of blackness. In reconceiving not only *what* specific notes and rhythms come to signify (or to evade signification), but *how* specific notes and rhythms come to signify, then, Parker and Davis generate new models for performing race.

For the poets I examine in this study, then, what matters is the turn to jazz not only as figure, or even the turn to jazz as technique (though both of those turns are certainly important), but the turn to jazz as a reservoir of conceptual approaches. Incorporating the conceptual advances proffered by the musical tradition allows these poets to recast what “musicality” comes to mean in a poetic context, and what powers that musicality might have. This process further contributes to poetry’s ability to capture or express racialized identity. Put differently, wrestling with the conceptual schemas articulated by the jazz tradition frees these poets to work as musicians do, putting sounds together in new ways and rethinking what sound means for the

medium in which they work.

As I discuss in Chapter Two, this account does run on lines askew to more standard accounts of “jazz poetry.” This is largely because of what this study takes “jazz poetry” to mean. Traditionally (as I also discuss in Chapter Two), “jazz poetry” is understood as taking one of three general forms. Most commonly, it designates poetry that is meant to sound *like* jazz. Rarely addressed is the fact that “sounding like jazz” more often than not indicates less a poem’s *actual* sound than it does a poem’s trafficking in the range of poetic codes (scat syllables, for instance), that have come to signify “jazziness.” In another vein, the term indicates poetry that takes either the music itself or a specific musician as its subject. Examples here (there are many) might include Frank O’Hara’s “The Day Lady Died,” for example, or Michael Harper’s “Dear John, Dear Coltrane.” Finally, the term often specifies poetry that is written according to some version of the improvisatory experience, however construed. The primary example here would be Allen Ginsburg and Jack Kerouac’s theories of spontaneous composition.

While all these are important modes of poetizing, and as such deserve attention, in this study, “jazz poetry” indicates less any of these models than poetry that thinks about itself in a jazz-inspired manner. For my purposes, that is, “jazz poetry” is poetry that employs the strategies of jazz to rethink its own condition of possibility. What matters less is whether these poems sound like jazz, or demonstrate an allegiance to jazz through choice of content, but whether they consciously extend the ways of thinking about sound and representation, particularly racial representation, inaugurated in the music whose details I limn.

Put differently, what matters about this poetry is its ability to take the full measure of the jazz tradition. By “the full measure” I mean the multiple identities that “jazz” as signifier has come to connote. Indeed, pace the famous but apocryphal description of jazz attributed to Louis Armstrong, “If you have to ask what it is, you’ll never know,” in this study “jazz” does maintain a definable identity, if a complex one. This identity has the word signifying (at least) three things, and as such represents the ongoing interaction between them. First, “jazz” indicates a *style of playing music*, an approach to music-making which counts improvisation as a major component. As I detail below, what “improvisation” means in this context is relatively well-delineated; nonetheless, there is some truth to saxophonist Sonny Rollins’ claim that “jazz is the type of music that can absorb so many things and still be jazz.”<sup>1</sup> Second, “jazz” represents a recognizable *body of sounds*, sounds produced by specific musicians, bequeathed to us in recordings and transcriptions and nightly developed on the bandstand. This is jazz in the sense of “She started off playing some blues, but as her set continued she moved more into jazz.” Finally, “jazz” signifies as an *African American aesthetic*. In this sense the word designates a music whose origins lie in African American culture and the history of ways that certain sounds (the second definition above) have come to bespeak (or not) African American culture writ large.

That “jazz” is such a complicated signifier means that taking stock of the advances that characterize the music’s tradition necessarily entails an examination of how the music works. By this I do not mean an account of the order of events in a typical jazz performance (though that account will be important, especially in Chapter Three’s analysis of the music of Miles Davis’s mid-60’s quintet), but rather an account of how the sounds issuing from the instruments of jazz’s performers come to signify beyond the strictly musical contexts in which they appear. Thus while the chapters in this study that engage the music directly – Chapter One, on Charlie Parker, and Chapter Three, on Miles Davis’s second great quintet – offer readings of improvised moments that quantify those moments’ wider meanings, they simultaneously develop a theory of

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<sup>1</sup> (All About Jazz)



*how* the sounds of jazz come to signify outwards. Put differently, my examinations of jazz solos and interactions aims both to perform musicological analysis and to situate that musicological analysis within a broader conception of jazz's technical workings. And both, I argue, are equally important. To make claims about the music without delineating the *musical* impact of notes and rhythms, the way those gestures signify within the musical contexts of which they are part, is to ignore the way musicians like Parker and Davis manipulate the traditions and materials of their medium in the manner of all artists. Yet to focus *only* on the musical meanings of these solos and interactions is to lose sight of the broader cultural and philosophical context in which they take place.

Given this, my analysis thereby proceeds by positing the interaction of an improvised solo with underlying *form* as the key, and often ignored, relationship through which musical statements acquire a meaning outside of their strictly musical contexts. To be more specific: as I explain in Chapter One, while common parlance often imagines "improvisation" to be something like "random outbursts of sound," in actuality jazz improvisation is the activity of creating new melodies over a loosely agreed-upon sequence of chords. This sequence of chords then provides a framework for musicians to follow; it is this underlying harmonic, rhythmic, and narrative structure that musicians call "form." Given this, what jazz improvisation reveals is thereby less raw musical outbursts of the improviser than an individual or collective interpretation of the possibilities of form. Within this purview, every jazz solo can be understood as a *reading* of form, a localized account of what a given set of chords can be said to *mean*.

It is this structure that makes the improvisations of Parker and Davis relevant extra-musically. For, read against the backdrop of form, the music of both Parker and Davis comes to challenge a certain set of hermeneutic expectations. These are the expectations that take an improvised solo to be, definitively, an unmediated outpouring of the inner emotional life of the musician performing it. Or, more perniciously, a representative statement of racial identity. What Parker's music in particular shows us, I argue in Chapter One, is that these interpretations – interpretations that assume an improvised solo to be a musician's "telling a story" about herself – rely on an improvised solo's conforming to the prescriptions of underlying form in a particular way. By upsetting these conventional relations of improvised sound to underlying form, Parker's music shows us that this hermeneutic depends *on* those conventional relations, and, consequently, that there are other modes by which improvised sound might signify relative to the body of the musician producing them. More specifically, Parker's improvisational strategies upset the conventions that read sound as indicative of race. Now, it is not that the result eschews all claims to be making a statement about racial identity. Rather, the musical statements that both Parker and Davis make – though differing in key ways – redescribe what sound might be able to say about race. In both of their works, "blackness" moves from being the phenomenon directly articulated in improvised sound to a phenomenon defined as the *resistance* to being read in these conventional manners, or as the *evasion* of hermeneutic stability. In this context, sound comes to describe race as that phenomenon which sound cannot describe.

There is one more crucial axis on which this study focuses. This is the body, especially as that body is constituted relative to sounds that bear a history of signifying race. And in accounting for the ways that jazz's sounds come to be taken as racially significant, a brief examination of the way jazz as an aesthetic engages the body is necessary. As I read it, jazz implicates the body in two ways. On one hand, because jazz is a performative aesthetic, its sounds inevitably manifest the lineaments of the musician's body – the hands, lips, tongue, feet, etc., that collectively produce sound. On the other, that jazz is a performative aesthetic taking

place in the present means that a jazz improvisation necessarily foregrounds the body of the musician making it, putting that body's racially-identifiable exterior on display. As I argue in Chapter One, that jazz evokes the (generally black) body in this manner is a primary way that jazz comes to be read as reflecting something important or essential about African-American culture. And that puts race, to a degree, at the core of whatever textual (i.e. "strictly" musical) meaning a given solo may produce, since regardless of the *textual* status of the sounds that issue from the improviser's body, the possibility of their being read *as* text depends on that body's signifying within the matrix of race.

As I detail in Chapters Two, Four, and Five, that jazz engages in the body in this manner is what allows many of the poets in this study to rethink the nature of poetic activity, incorporating the body into the poetic process. For Charles Olson, for example, whose work I assay in Chapter Two, poetic musicality should rightly be a measure not of the phenomenological resemblance of poetry to music – the way both poetry and music develop sounds over time – but of the degree to which a poem is the product of a poet's comporting her body in the manner of an improvising musician. For Robert Creeley, whose poetry I discuss in Chapter Four, it is the their sensuous presence of his poems – the fact of their music – that provides the only reliable barrier against solipsism. In Chapter Five, both Ed Roberson and Harryette Mullen extend this model, Roberson by writing poetry that aims to sunder his readers' bodies into a set of incommensurate sensory modalities, and Mullen by writing poems that pose race as a category vacillating between visual and aural modes of recognition. In all cases, the use of music, or jazz, proceeds from jazz's doubled invocation of the body.

To accommodate these varying approaches to the music, throughout this study I develop a concept that I term "voice." I choose this particular word because its implications tie hearable sound to representative capacity, and thereby embodied activity to racialized identity. "Voice" as I read it thus works to bind together the dimensions through which jazz works, both as a musical practice and as the impetus for the poetic developments I trace. On one hand, "voice" indicates the sonic emanations of a corporeal body, the literal sounds that issue from a speaker's mouth. On the other, as Chapter One describes, "voice" connotes perspective, viewpoint, or opinion, what the OED calls "a mode of expression or point of view."<sup>2</sup> This definition also extends into poetry, wherein "voice" designates a poem's implied speaker. In the context of my analysis, it is this "voice" that is often the most directly racialized one, though many of the poems I examine help explain how this latter notion of voice is imbricated with the first. There is finally the use of "voice" in a grammatical context – passive or active voice, for example – which will come to claim particular attention when discussing Hughes's *Ask Your Mama* and Robert Creeley's *Words*.

Rather than focus on any one of these definitions in isolation, however, what this study aims to do is explore the way these different implications interact with one another. That "voice" understood as a sonic production comes to be read as "voice" taken as a racially-identifiable viewpoint; that poetic voice works itself out by being read as sound; that grammatical voice might undermine the possibility of a poem's realizing a stable account of its own ontological status: the development of the concept allows this project to engage all these dimensions. And, even more crucially, read all of them as fundamentally stemming from the exploration of sound and representation developed in the music that forms the backbone of my analysis.

A brief breakdown of chapters, highlighting the argument and aims of each: Chapter One,

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<sup>2</sup> (Online, *Voice*, N.)

as I briefly described above, takes the music of Charlie Parker's music as an occasion for thinking about the way jazz works, as well as evaluating the monumental impact Parker had on post-war aesthetics. Specifically, it focuses on Parker's approach to musical narrative. Analyzing the musical structure of his solos, I show how Parker's music fragments overall narrative into discrete moments of virtuosity that refuse to cohere into the larger narrative structure prescribed by the song forms over which Parker's improvisations take place. This fragmentation does two things. First, it makes the sounds of Parker's solos opaque to the hermeneutic model described above, that which presumes a jazz solo to be "telling a story" about the musician performing it – an unmediated expression of that musician's inner psychological state, or, more problematically, a representative statement of racial identity. Second, it uses improvisation to generate a new, negative reading of the song forms underlying his solos. By undermining the normative prescriptions of these song forms while keeping those prescriptions audible, Parker transforms "form" itself into a multi-layered, dialectical phenomenon.

Chapter Two turns to Langston Hughes's 1951 sequence *Montage of a Dream Deferred* and the poetry and poetics of Black Mountain progenitor Charles Olson to articulate a theory of racially-engaged, non-mimetic poetic musicality that derives from the advances developed by Parker. For Hughes, the opacity Parker's music institutes adheres in the chasm *Montage* imposes between its own musicality and the actual music of bebop. By foregrounding the fact that Hughes's poems are not literally bebop, that is, *Montage* paradoxically allows them to enact bebop's non-representative structure. For Olson, in contrast, poetry becomes properly musical not when it sounds like music, but when its genesis lies in the body's adopting the precise physical and intellectual compartments operative in jazz improvisation. Because both projects fundamentally stem from the separation Parker's music imposes between the body understood as a set of sound-producing capacities and the body viewed as racially-marked exterior, I argue, their pairing newly describes lyric's capacity to reflect race as an external referent.

Pairing Hughes and Olson also help trace out a new history of post-war poetry. Despite Olson's occasional expressions of interest in Charlie Parker, the idea that Black Mountain poetics and the work of Hughes would be working on a shared project is not one to which many critics of American poetry would subscribe. Reading Hughes and Olson as collectively developing a non-mimetic jazz poetics, then, realizes two goals. First, it redraws the historical boundaries of American post-war poetry along newly uncovered lines, opening up new directions for historical and conceptual accounts of the innovation of the period. Second, it places an engagement with race (if implicit) at the center of a poetic lineage – that commonly known as the "Black Mountain school" – for which race is more often considered a tangential concern at best. In so doing, it opens up Olson's ideas about poetry to future scholars of race-directed poetry.

The second half of the study – its final three chapters – excavates a powerful but largely overlooked model of African American avant-garde performance, one whose conceptual foundations I trace to the music of Miles Davis's famous mid-60's quintet, which I examine in Chapter Three. Featuring saxophonist Wayne Shorter, pianist Herbie Hancock, drummer Tony Williams, and bassist Ron Carter, Davis's group is considered by many musicians to have reached an unmatched pinnacle in the tradition, having pushed the potentials of group improvisation to degree unrealized by any band before or since. Scholarly attention to this band's music, however, has been woefully meager. This chapter aims to rectify this situation. Providing an analysis of some of the group's main musical strategies, I identify Davis's group's music as the conceptual inheritors of the innovations inaugurated by Charlie Parker nearly

twenty years earlier.

The difference between Parker and Davis, however, is that between outright resistance to interpretation and the strategic evasion of meaning. Specifically, I identify Davis's group's key aesthetic move as playing sensuous presence against intellectual reception, so oversaturating individual notes and rhythms with potential meaning that sounds come interact on two levels simultaneously: as readings of underlying form on one hand and as sounds independent of that form on the other. The hermeneutic mystification that results makes constitutively indeterminate the difference between "underlying form" and "interpretation of underlying form," and, consequently, makes constitutively unclear how any specific note or rhythm might be read extra-musically. "Blackness" thus moves from being the direct resistance to meaning posed by Parker's music to the active evasion of explanation, one which ensures that all associations between statement and meaning remain neither adequate nor sufficient.

Chapter Four establishes the poetic resonances of this aesthetic, pairing the Hughes's *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* with Robert Creeley's mid-1960's volume *Words* to describe a Davis-inspired approach to poetic language. Though superficially different, I argue, both poets gain force from exploiting language's communicative limitations. For Hughes, this move proceeds by way of a double gesture, separating text into "musical" and "poetic" components on one hand but structurally aligning the 12-bar blues (sincerity) with the "dozens" (fabrication) on the other. While the result inaugurates a new formal model for Black diasporic poetics, it does so hesitantly, suggesting that the impossibility of naming what ties this diasporic community together inheres at the basic level of language. Most important here is Hughes's complete abandonment of the goal of having his poetry recreate the music it holds so dear. In this poem, what emerges as the music upon which the poem pins it hopes for uniting the diaspora it describes remains a music unhearable. This strategy then mobilizes the poem to do the work of this music, producing its larger effects without resorting to sound to do so. For Creeley, in contrast, the reduction of content to near banality strips language of its deictic contexts, keeping his poetry caught between saying and observing itself saying. Though this situation perpetually threatens Creeley's poetry with the possibility of solipsism, it also enables this work to de-emphasize *what* it says in favor of its raw *that-ness*, what Creeley calls "a tall sense of enclosure." The effect is to conceive musicality as the dispersion of identity, rather than its consolidation.

My final chapter, Chapter Five, examines the work of two contemporary Black experimental poets, Ed Roberson and Harryette Mullen, both of whom chart the possibilities for using jazz to reimagining the idea of "blackness" in the wake of some more contemporary understandings of the term. In so doing, both give us poetry that teases apart the various sensory registers that collectively form the concept. And both use jazz to do so. Roberson's invocation of jazz comes by way of giving the name "jazz" to what I call a "hermeneutic of unresolved pattern." Locating this constitutive experience of unresolve at the center of his work, Roberson develops an approach to poetry that aims to sunders the body into isolated sensory capacities. The possibility for doing so is enabled by the historical condition of blackness, which he describes as being a "moment of border," the permanent inhabitation of a history dissolved into discrete experiences. By breaking apart the bodies of his readers, then, Roberson aims to engender a situation in which all subjects are equally discontinuous. Mullen performs a similar action, but she does so by filtering the idea of jazz through various strands of contemporary experimentalism, LANGUAGE and Oulipo poetry most notably. In so doing, she poses words as proliferating meanings visually, sonically, and semantically, in mutually exclusive ways. And

when these words are those that refer to a historical representation of Blackness, particularly that arriving through jazz, the result is a reading of race that sees the concept not only as a representable historical or sociological condition, but as the continuing coordination of different registers of embodied activity.

Read together, my aim in this chapter is to trace out the way “blackness” emerges as a phenomenon at once sonic, textual, phenomenological, and linguistic. By repositioning the coordinates of post-war American aesthetics, my goal is to situate all of these works where they rightly belong: up in the sound.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Charlie Parker and the Forms of Opacity

Disruptive and defiant, bebop music arrived in 1945 with a definite goal of remaking the future. Or, at least, scrambling whatever sense could be read out of the present. Arriving after three years of recorded silence – the wartime ban on musical recording imposed by the American Federation of Musicians had left listeners disconnected from the music’s ongoing development – the six songs Charlie Parker (“Bird”) recorded for Savoy Records dropped with the same sense of finality the atom bomb had brought three months earlier, unconditionally cleaving history into two periods: before and after.<sup>1</sup> Difficult, intellectual, resolutely urban, these performances seemed to capture the sense of restlessness and opposition animating post-war African American culture. Historians, musicians, and critics have been clearing the rubble ever since.<sup>2</sup>

There have been no lack of attempts to get at the core of Parker’s music. Intimate knowledge of Parker’s advances is expected of any jazz musician; there are few living musicians who have not spent significant time absorbing Parker’s vocabulary, phrasing, and sense of harmony. In this Parker himself represents the font from which post-war jazz has flown. As Scott DeVeaux notes, “Bebop is a music that has been kept alive by having been absorbed into the present; in a sense, it *constitutes* the present” (2). Still, despite the fact that nearly every note Parker played has been transcribed and memorized, taking the measure of his achievement has still left critics, to summon one of Parker’s song titles, “chasing the bird.” For more than merely offering a new approach to music, Charlie Parker’s playing offers a new aesthetic model, one that seems to perpetually resist our registers of knowing. Not only does it tell us how jazz might be newly played, or newly heard, it tell us how jazz might newly *mean*.

This chapter’s goal is to examine this new experience of meaning, especially as it traces out a larger argument about Blackness and sound. What I argue is that Parker’s music introduced into American culture not only a new set of sounds, a body of solos and compositions that sounded different from what had come before (or, that took up the materials provided by the tradition and synthesized them in an entirely new way), but an entirely new way of thinking *about* sound. This new way of thinking about sound then offers a new way of thinking about Blackness as a concept, especially as that concept emerges as a *sounded* phenomenon.

These larger claims, however, still emerge from the music. It is therefore the music with which one must start. Harmonically, for example, Parker radically expanded the palette, introducing a host of new techniques that would soon become jazz’s *lingua franca*: extensive use of notes from chordal “upper regions”; flat-5 substitutions; upper- and lower-neighbor

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<sup>1</sup> Whether bebop marks a decisive break with swing or is merely an extension of it (whether, to borrow Scott DeVeaux’s words, the shift is best described as “evolution or revolution” (1)), remains an ongoing debate, one addressed with notable precision by DeVeaux in his *The Birth of Bebop: a Social and Musical History*. Though there are good arguments for both positions (or, as DeVeaux finally decides, for seeing neither as definitive), I tend to hold with the history of Parker’s reception among actual musicians, for the majority of whom Parker’s music does represent as a seismic shift – a “cut,” as it were – in the tradition. Chico O’Farrell, for example: “I think anything that came afterwards wasn’t as drastic as that particular first step from swing to bop. I think in a sense bop probably marks the real cut-off point of the old concept of swinging” (qtd. in (Gitler 153)).

<sup>2</sup> As Eric Lott writes, “almost fifty years on, the story of how the crash crew made a revolution at Minton’s Playhouse is so worn that we forget how disruptive bebop actually was” (Lott, 597).

chromaticism; superimposition of ii-V sequences over moments of harmonic stasis.<sup>3</sup> Rhythmically and dynamically, Parker's solos remain no less thrilling: initiating and ending phrases on unexpected beats, rapidly fluctuating between eighth-note and triplet feels, dynamically emphasizing unexpected notes to create internal counter- and cross-rhythms, Parker's lines seem to toy with time more than they coordinate with it.

Other characteristics are less technical, but equally noteworthy. Among these one could count Parker's vibrato-less tone, famously described by Ralph Ellison as the "sound of amateurish ineffectuality," or the redistribution of musical roles in Parker's groups.<sup>4</sup> Handing the swing-era drummer's role as a group's main time-keeper over to the bassist, bebop freed the drummer to become a more primary colorist. Chordal accompaniment ("comping") also became looser and more individualistic, with pianists devising both new, complex chords and new, complex rhythms with which to play them. The result was a significant revision of what counted as foreground and what as background: while individual solos in big-band and swing-era music often acquired force by being posed against a more stable background accompaniment, bebop's having made comping as dynamic and improvisational an activity as soloing helped usher in jazz's first true era of collectively-realized improvisation.<sup>5</sup>

Above these, perhaps most disconcerting were the punishingly fast tempos with which Parker and his confederates unleashed their music. Upending the swing-era directive that its music above all be made for dancing, one implicitly dictating that even the wildest individual exploits be embedded in tempos solicitous of rhythmic movement – if not dancing, then at least foot-tapping or head-bobbing (and in this establishing Duke Ellington's "It Don't Mean a Thing if it Ain't Got that Swing" as the progenitor of George Clinton's "Free Your Mind, and Your Ass Will Follow") – bebop's blistering tempos effectively foreclosed the possibility of casual, bodily absorption.<sup>6</sup> The resulting mode of bodily attention bebop effectively imposed on its listeners – individuating, cerebral – proved more redolent of the art gallery or lecture hall than the juke joint or ballroom.

Today, of course, it is not solely (or, arguably, even primarily) the music by which bebop is remembered. If today's pop culture artifacts are to be a guide, the music defining post-war American counterculture has come to take a backseat in our cultural memory to the clothes, language and generalized hipster ethos of the period. Which is not to devalue these cultural

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<sup>3</sup> "Upper-regions" of a chord (or the chord's "extensions") name the chord's 9<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 13<sup>th</sup> degrees. "Flat-5 substitution" is a technique that calls for an improviser to substitute for the chord specified by the underlying form a chord whose root is a tri-tone (a "flat-5th") away from it. Since the important notes (the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>) of both a dominant chord and its flat-5 substitute resolve in the exact same way, the technique is an easy and effective way to add tension to an improvised line. "Chromaticism" in general indicates the use of notes that are not a part of the key prevailing at a given moment of a musical piece. "Upper and lower neighbor chromaticism" in particular specifies the use of the chromatic notes that surround the diatonic (i.e. "in the key") note to which a given phrase is leading. A "ii-V" sequence designates a specific chord progression, one of the most common progressions in jazz. Superimposing ii-V sequences over static chords (i.e. playing lines that make it sound *as if* the underlying chords specify a ii-V sequence) gives otherwise monotonous passages a sense of forward movement.

<sup>4</sup> (Ellison, "On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz" 230)

<sup>5</sup> On the perceived breakdown of identifiable performative roles and structures, it is worth remembering drummer Davey Tough's infamous (and oft-quoted) description: "Those cats snatched up their horns and blew crazy stuff. One would stop all of a sudden and another would start for no reason at all. We never could tell when a solo was supposed to begin or end" (Stearns 224-25).

<sup>6</sup> In his analysis of Lester Young's "Shoe Shine Boy" solo, Lawrence Gushee suggests that dancing may in fact be the primary way that listeners internalize of the structure of "four- and eight-measure phrases" through which swing-era soloing generally proceeds.

markers, since they too lent their wielders (particularly the ones who happened to be black) significant power in a pre-civil-rights era where such power was in gratuitously short supply. The sartorial choices of musicians like Parker and trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, for example – berets, sharp suits, shades – functioned not only to lend an air of intellectualism to a music many still considered essentially primitive, but also to carve out a secure space which, because it seemed so inscrutable from the outside, allowed the musicians a measure of creative freedom.<sup>7</sup> The same could be said of the culture’s cryptic argot, (calculatedly) indecipherable to all but a select few. So too with the affected body language and widespread drug use shared by bebop devotees, both of which, like the features just listed, helped demarcate the clear line separating insider from outsider, hipster from square.<sup>8</sup>

Inasmuch as the music does legitimately fit into this larger story, such an approach contributes much to our understanding of post-war jazz culture. Given this, it is understandably tempting to identify bebop’s *musical* impact as merely one element (if an undoubtedly important one) within a larger narrative of cultural shift. This is, for example, the conclusion Eric Lott reaches in his otherwise masterful reading: “the music,” Lott argues, “attempted to resolve on the level of style what the militancy combated in the streets.”<sup>9</sup> Ramsey Guthrie, too, in his affecting *Race Music*, ultimately understands “African American music ... in the 1940’s” as “a site for expressing some of the paradoxes, contradictions, tensions, and, of course, the joys and pleasures of African American life in those years ... music and the critical discourses it inspired became conspicuous public activities within which these issues were sorted out, expressed, and debated.”<sup>10</sup>

That these post-war years designate an important period of American (especially African-American) culture is of course true, and this historically-oriented work helps us significantly in calculating its lasting import. If one is to take the music of this period *itself* as critically important, however, this approach reveals some potential limitations, of which two are paramount. The first is that reading bebop primarily as an expression of culture, style or economics tends to obscure the way jazz, as a predominantly *musical* practice, intervenes into these discourses of race, culture and history. To read the music as a signifier of culture rather than its catalyst, that is, glosses over (at least potentially) the unique material operations that make jazz an aesthetic unlike any other, and therefore ignores the formal musical mechanisms that tie the specific musical choices improvisers make to their larger racial, cultural and philosophical meanings. Put differently, this approach presupposes the derivative status of music as such, and thus begs the question of what specific musical choices might mean. While the goal of this chapter is therefore to point out some important features of Charlie Parker’s music and to draw out some wider implications of those features, this project will necessarily proceed hand-in-hand with a provisional description of the distinctive material and historical properties that make jazz, as an aesthetic, an important site of cultural intervention. As I will argue, much of what ties jazz’s sounds to its broader meanings can be explained by turning to the body, with the latter realized in two capacities: as a site of the music’s production (the emitter of sound) on one hand and the

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<sup>7</sup> The best articulation of this idea, perhaps, comes from the famous scene in *Invisible Man* where the narrator encounters three black zoot-suiters on the train and begins to see them for the first time: “I stared as they seemed to move like dancers in some kind of funeral ceremony ... their black faces secret ... For they were men outside of historical time, they were untouched ... But who knew (and now I began to tremble so violently I had to lean against a refuse can)—who knew but that they were the saviors, the true leaders, the bearers of something precious?” (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 440-41).

<sup>8</sup> For a helpful discussion of the hipster figure as read through the music and literature of the period, see (Saul).

<sup>9</sup> (Lott 599)

<sup>10</sup> (Ramsey 97,98)



racialized entity to which these sounds come to be attached on the other.

Even beyond this potential failure to attend to the music's material and procedural dimensions, however, there remains a perhaps more hazardous problem with reading bebop, or Charlie Parker's music in particular, primarily as an expression of a wider cultural or racial experience. Though engaging this problem will take up a significant portion of this chapter, in broader terms its outlines are these: to understand bebop as a cultural or racial signifier is, arguably, to rob the music of one of its most powerful claims. This is the claim, made by Charlie Parker in resolutely *musical* terms, that at a fundamental level his music cannot, or should not, be taken as an expression of cultural or racial identity, that at its most effective the music retains an stubbornly untranslatable dimension as music. To read the music most essentially as a larger racial or cultural communiqué, this argument goes, is to enervate the purely *sonic* character of the music – the fact that its argument is essentially musical – by rendering it in essentially *non-musical* terms. Part of Parker's project, I argue, proceeds as a pre-emption of this potential reading, one that aims to restore to his music – in a way that importantly still responds to the cultural conditions that make the music legible in the first place – a version of irreducible *sonicity* resistant to any extant hermeneutical framework.<sup>11</sup>

Both of these aims – elucidating the meanings, both musical and cultural, Charlie Parker's musical choices put in place, and accounting for the ways the jazz aesthetic facilitates the making of those meanings – are deeply embedded in discourses of race. What this chapter adds to this story is an analysis that helps account for jazz's participation in the larger operations (historical, musical, cultural) that establish race as a phenomenon partially rooted in *sound*. In so doing it speaks to the way the history of “blackness” has seen it both associated with and in part derivable from the circulation of music, speech, rhythm and other modes of sound-making.<sup>12</sup> At core here are the two related developments that have helped to associate and reduce blackness to a historically specific set of sounds, a pair of developments at whose crossroads one finds jazz.<sup>13</sup> They are these: on one hand, there is the fact that jazz, as both a historical body of sounds and an ongoing aesthetic practice, emerges largely *from* a subset of people racially identifiable as “Black.” This is a historically traceable phenomenon, at least insofar as audio recordings allow us to trace the music's aesthetic development and other forms of historical documentation allow us to match these sounds to a group of people identifiable under racial rubrics. On the other hand, however – and it is an other – there is the history of those sounds' and gestures' having, on their own, even in the *absence* of visual correlates, come to represent or speak *for* blackness, the way certain sounds have come to “sound black.” The way a bent note on a guitar automatically inserts its player into arguments about the “authenticity” and “blues,” the way popular singers become “soulful” by summoning the vocal manipulations of gospel, the way radio listeners in 1954 heard Elvis Presley for the first time and assumed they were listening to a black man, are all examples of this latter phenomenon.

Despite their easy association, the correspondence between these two phenomena is clearly not one-to-one, with the style and degree of their interpenetration reflecting, as does any conceptual phenomenon, historical developments, performances, acquiescences, resistances, and

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<sup>11</sup> That this irreducible presence of sound then inevitably comes to acquire its own racial implications, that it, in a sense, becomes the very mode of racial performance Charlie Parker's music works so hard to disavow is of course a crucial element in the story I am trying to tell.

<sup>12</sup> For a historical account that aims to specify how the idea of “blackness” came to be understood as an essentially rhythmic phenomenon, see Ronald Radano's *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music*.

<sup>13</sup> For an interesting discussion of the gains and losses to be had by associating blackness with music, see Ingrid Monson's introduction to her edited volume *The African Diaspora: A Musical Perspective*.

most crucially, matrices of recognition. And that jazz stands (or has stood, for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) in the center of these developments is one of the factors that lends the specifically musical choices its practitioners make no small degree of influence in reconfiguring the relation between race and sound. The specific force with which jazz does this, I call “voice.” As a descriptive term, “voice” aims to pull together the various strands of aesthetic, cultural, racial, performative and philosophical import that circle around the music. Indeed, the primary claim of this chapter will be that Charlie Parker’s music provides a new version of “voice,” one that uses sound – with the latter figured simultaneously as bodily production, material entity and cultural sign – to reimagine the codes that structure both *what* and *how* that sound can communicate.<sup>14</sup> Working through *musical* means to reenvision the relationship between sound and body, Parker relates sound to the body primarily through the disavowal of sound’s being able to speak *for* that body, at least in traditionally recognizable hermeneutical models. Blackness, as a result, becomes as a sonically-realizable condition only insofar as it is *evades* being spoken in sound. The dialectical relation at the heart of this operation represents Parker’s enormous intervention into and restructuring of what “blackness” comes to mean in post-war America. As we move into the music, then, let us remember that while racially-marked aesthetic formations often render bodies legible by attaching those bodies to certain sounds, or certain ways of hearing, sounds themselves can always be harnessed to refuse, disrupt or unsettle those constrictions.

### FORM AND NARRATIVE: “THE WAY YOU LOOK TONIGHT”

As I briefly listed above, analyses of Parker’s music have tended to break that music down along numerous lines - harmonic, rhythmic, timbral, dynamic. What exploring these components considered in isolation tends to miss, however, is the way they collectively unfold relative to the underlying chord changes of a given tune. For to ignore this last detail – which helps explain jazz’s particular mode of generating meaning – is to ignore the way improvisation actually works. Despite the popular understanding of “improvisation” as something akin to “unmediated outburst of random sound,” that is, in actuality jazz improvisation involves musicians’ creation of new melodies over a loosely agreed-upon sequence of chords. This sequence of chords – what musicians are referring to when they say “form” – then gives an individual or group a rough framework for their improvisations to follow. Form itself thereby plays a crucial role in the jazz aesthetic, since in the jazz setting notes and rhythms played by members of a group are never received as isolated entities, but always as responses to or engagements with this underlying form. In general, the less the notes a musician plays invoke the basic chord structures of form, the more “outside” she is said to be playing; the more her musical choices reinforce those chords, the more “inside.” Within a given solo a musician can build or release tension by moving from inside to outside and back again.

I raise these issues to make the simple point that what jazz improvisation thereby reveals is less the raw musical outbursts of the improviser than an individual or collective *interpretation* of the possibilities of this underlying form, that every jazz solo is in part a *reading* of form. In exploiting the tensions between actual sounds a musician plays and the expectations of sound

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<sup>14</sup> In this sense, my analysis attempts to satisfy the goal Paul Gilroy sets for critics of Black music: ““The power of music in developing black struggles by communicating information, organizing consciousness, and testing out or deploying the forms of subjectivity which are required by political agency, whether individual or collective, defensive or transformational, demands attention to both the formal attributes of this expressive culture and its distinctive *moral* basis” (Gilroy’s emphasis). (Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* 36)

prescribed by this underlying form, a jazz solo is always a localized reading of what those chords can potentially *mean*. To ignore this fact – that jazz improvisation is in many ways an ongoing meditation *on* form – is thereby to miss the stakes, both historical and musical, set up by any particular solo. Indeed, seen this way, jazz’s history itself might be seen as that of various musicians’ expanding the range of what sounds come to be understood as being authorized by a given set of chords.<sup>15</sup>

While I therefore began with a short list of some isolated aspects of Parker’s music, my aim in doing so was to show how these individual elements are subtended by the overall structure of his solos. For while it is inarguable that Parker’s approaches to harmony, melody, rhythmic phrasing and harmonic rhythm have deeply permeated the standard improvisatory vocabulary, considering Parker’s music through its relation to form, as spelled out above, suggests that these various aspects of Parker’s style can collectively be viewed as one improvisatory dimension, and the overall structure to which Parker submits them another. And while the critical literature has granted the former – Parker’s approach to harmony and rhythm – the lion’s share of its attention, I would like to argue for the critical importance of the latter, Parker’s overall structural concerns, what one could call his approach to musical *narrative*.

Some indication of Parker’s particular narrative style does come to us from the careful work of Scott DeVeaux in his *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History*. Using a comparison with Coleman Hawkins’ music, DeVeaux describes how Parker’s “concise and streamlined” (267) approach to soloing worked to frustrate (and often to upend in bandstand “cutting sessions”) the more straightforward, drawn-out narrative style of his Swing-era predecessors. While Hawkins’ solos, DeVeaux notes, generally conform to a more linear model, one that steadily builds intensity, “continually deferring closure ... until he attains a simultaneous climax of timbre, register and volume” (267), Parker’s solos take the opposite approach, “[delighting] in sudden and disorienting shifts of rhetoric” (380). Whether or not Parker’s startling and virtuosic jumps in style fulfill the ideal of pure improvisation announced by the cliché that Parker “never played the same thing twice” (376) (a description that even a cursory examination proves either grossly untrue, or true only in the most banal sense) or are actually “skillfully molded” results of planning and artifice, Parker’s music nonetheless works less to endear than to “provoke, startle and delight” (372). Mixing dirty blues, European chromaticism, Swing-era steadiness and bebop asymmetry with seeming abandon, Parker’s music above all seems geared to keep its listeners guessing, to deny them the satisfaction of predicting what will come next. Or, even more accurately, Parker’s music expands the range of what sorts of musical statements can generally be expected to succeed other musical statements.<sup>16</sup>

While this description is certainly correct, it acquires a slightly different valence when

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<sup>15</sup> For an example of an analysis of a solo that does focus on the relation of that solo to its underlying form, see the aforementioned Lawrence Gushee’s “Lester Young’s ‘Shoe Shine Boy.’”

<sup>16</sup> The level at which Parker’s music keeps listeners guessing is of course somewhat circumscribed, given that his music still operates within many standard protocols of jazz performance. This larger claim is (arguably) too compromised by the cultural history of the music’s reception, in which Parker’s denial of certain listener expectations was quickly (as someone like Adorno might have predicted) reabsorbed into the very structure of audience expectation, so that “surprising his listeners” became the very expectation Parker’s performances came to fulfill. From this perspective, the open question is then whether or not Parker’s aesthetic strategy maintains the negativity necessary to retain something like true novelty in the Adornian sense of the word. Though I certainly do not claim to offer a definitive answer to this question (nor to directly engage Adorno’s critique of jazz), I do hope to suggest, if even implicitly, the possibility of an affirmative answer.

read in terms of my suggestion that jazz solos be read as meditations on form. For if this claim is true, then Parker's having repackaged the process by which jazz improvisation works ultimately describes a new understanding of form's potential to communicate, and therefore a new conception of both what and how jazz could mean.

To explain, I move to a reading of Parker's 1947 recording "Klaun Stance." Though played less often than many of Parker's other tunes, "Klaun Stance" is particularly instructive because it encapsulates in a few short choruses much of what is most provocative, and most intransigent, about Parker's work. The first salient thing to notice is that "Klaun Stance," like many other bebop tunes, borrows its chords from a well-known standard, in this case Jerome Kern and Dorothy Fields' "The Way You Look Tonight." Even though the practice of borrowing song forms from popular music in order to turn them into vehicles for improvisation did not begin with bebop, it has historically been one of the key features by which bebop, or even jazz as a whole, is often identified.<sup>17</sup> Langston Hughes, for example, describes jazz as "a *way of playing* music ... almost any music can become jazz if it is played with jazz treatment," and saxophonist Sonny Rollins similarly notes that "jazz is the type of music that can absorb so many things and still be jazz."<sup>18</sup> Yet while the mere fact of this borrowing has often seemed sufficient evidence to justify broader claims, what is more important for my argument are the specific shapes this borrowing took. Before I dig into "Klaun Stance," then, let us examine some significant elements of the tune from which it borrows.

If one of the standards by which melodies are judged is the apparent ease with which they generate and maintain narrative interest, then "The Way You Look Tonight" is by all measures a classic of its genre. Indeed, its deep command of melodic structure keeps Kern's tune far more recognizable, even popular, than the majority of other songs from its era, most of which have faded from public memory. Even the mere shape of the melody (below, rendered in two forms) well demonstrates the tune's masterful use of classic narrative technique, the way the tune almost effortlessly builds and resolves tension:

## SEE BELOW

Looking at the musical notation, one can see how the tune from its very beginning leverages its chords to maximize melodic potency. The tune's first two bars, for example, dexterously set three (at least) separate operations in motion. First, the sharp drop in pitch, from C to F, with which the melody begins (**A**), immediately captures interest. Second, this drop, in classic narrative style, foreshadows (indeed, renders in miniature) the moment of high climax to which the melody will ultimately lead, the octave drop that arrives in bars 9 and 10. Third, these two notes shrewdly capitalize on the tune's underlying chords to generate forward movement: while the notes themselves spell out "5-1" in the tune's home key, and thereby reinforce the "home base" quality of F major, the implied stability of this melodic movement is countered by a harmonic movement from the I chord to the vi chord, so that arrival at the most stable *note*, F, is temporally matched by a departure from the more stable *chord*. This slight rub sets up a feeling of concurrent stability *and* movement that persists throughout the tune.

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<sup>17</sup> The chord changes to George Gershwin's "I've Got Rhythm," for example, have stood as one of jazz's most basic song forms for more than 80 years. This is so much the case that over time the name "I've Got Rhythm" became shortened to "Rhythm changes," or even merely "Rhythm." It would not be inappropriate for a leader on the bandstand to indicate the next number to her fellow musicians by merely calling out "'Rhythm' in A-flat!"

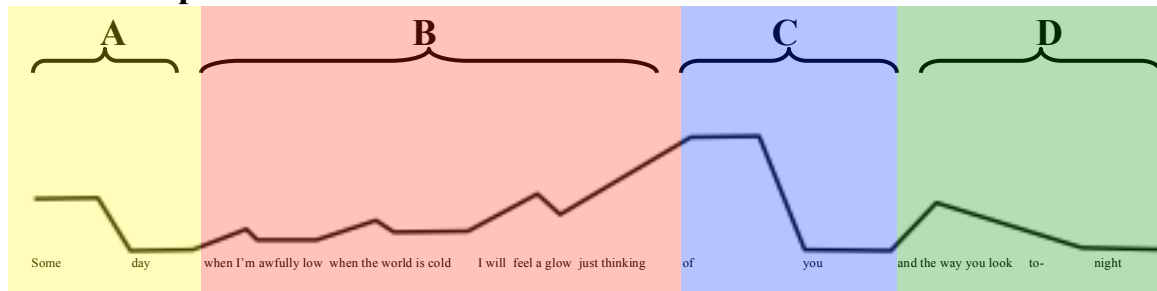
<sup>18</sup>(Hughes, *The First Book of Jazz* 46), (All About Jazz)

**Actual melody:**

**The Way You Look Tonight - A section**

Some day when aw- fully low  
 when the world is cold I will feel a glow just think- ing  
 of you and the way you look to -  
 night

**Shape:**



After this initial drawing of interest, the upward steps in pitch that follow **(B)** lap like waves, carrying the tune forwards. The steady but inexorable movement upwards (the highest notes of each little phrase, taken individually, articulate an ascending major scale) raises tension most directly by implying a movement *towards* a point of resolution looming in the distance. The way the melody here simultaneously implies that its end point lies ahead but withholds the immediate satisfaction of reaching it represents a paradigm example of tension-and-release composition; the control with which it operates is easily demonstrated by the way this upward-moving line stealthily takes control of the body of its implied performer, practically forcing its singer or player to render the line with a steady but seemingly unforced increase in volume (try it yourself and see if this is not the case).

Having repeatedly shortened the rest time between phrases, this ascending movement raises tension further by accelerating towards its goal, the climactic moment in bar 9 **(C)**. It is here that the tune perhaps reveals its true genius. Again, two simple notes – this time, a high F

held for a bar and then a low F held for a bar – perform multiple, if inconspicuous, operations. First, these two notes, by standing as the highest and lowest notes the melody will reach, bind that melody, defining its scope and thereby contextualizing what has come before. Second, and more important, the octave drop here recapitulates and extends the drop from C to F with which the tune began. As a moment of maximum release, it therefore gives us exactly what we wanted but were not aware we wanted, fulfilling the tune’s initial promise that its end was all along in its beginning. Third, the tune also performs a modest modulation, from the key of F-major to that of Bb-major, which brings a new note, Eb, into the tune’s harmonic field.

Now, these last two techniques in general – a large drop up or down in pitch, especially when played in contrast to a mostly step-wise line, and the introduction at a crucial moment of a new but related key – are on their own classic songwriting techniques, and as such provide the memorable moments of many popular songs.<sup>19</sup> The brilliance of “The Way You Look Tonight,” however, lies in the way it joins these two separate techniques in a single two-note sequence, so that this climactic moment becomes both satisfying *and* interesting, reaching the end point it has posited all along while slyly withholding just a bit more from the listener. Thus while we learn in reaching it that we have been waiting for this moment all along, the experience is not one of abrupt termination, for the ear still wants the modulation to resolve itself. The short scalar passage that follows (**D**) – the cigarette after the climax, so to speak – thereby carries the tune gracefully to a point of rest, resolving the harmonic ambiguity and giving the melody time to gather itself before beginning another cycle.

Though I have only described the A section of the tune, these sixteen measures demonstrate just how effectively “The Way You Look Tonight” mobilizes the traditional features of straightforward narrative: initial drawing of interest, teleological movement forward, thematic development. And as we turn to Parker’s version of the tune, let us keep these narrative techniques in mind. For despite Parker’s harmonic and rhythmic advances, it is the way Parker reconfigures *these* codes – the way melody works relative to the chords over which it proceeds – that holds importance for the argument I am making.

## BLACKNESS, FORM AND HISTORY

The issue, as I read it, has to do with the mode of presentation a given musical relation to form allows. For while Parker’s expanded harmonies and rhythmic asymmetries in his purview represent ways to elaborate or reinterpret (even if quite strikingly) the forms he borrows from outside, Parker’s music nonetheless argues that these improvisatory techniques *on their own* do not make a decisive statement *about* that form – both in its strictly musical guises and in its wider cultural role – if in the end they merely repeat the narrative gestures already supplied *by* that form. That is to say, even if an improviser does employ those expanded harmonic, rhythmic or timbral techniques, to do so in the service of a linear narrative that exhibits the same narrative and emotional dynamics of the text upon which one is signifying, to create, in essence, a linear narrative that can *substitute* for the tune’s original melody, is nonetheless to allow oneself to be bound by the expectations of form, instead of performing one’s mastery over it.<sup>20</sup>

What is at stake here, to put the matter somewhat differently, is the traditional reading of

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<sup>19</sup> It is, in fact, the bits of songs that contain events like these that are most likely to be remembered by listeners.

<sup>20</sup> I take these terms from Houston Baker, whose “deformation of mastery” argument in his *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* has been crucial to my work here. I address Baker’s argument more fully shortly.

a jazz solo as a musician's "telling his story." This is, of course, a standard trope of the idiom.<sup>21</sup> As such, it has been heavily theorized. Even so, before we move to a reading of Charlie Parker's music, it is worth situating that music within the theoretical and historical trajectories that articulate its stakes. As a brief review, let us remember that what counts as "story" in this story is of critical importance for the understandings of African-American aesthetics it has yielded. Key to these understandings is the idea that African-American aesthetics, insofar as they are identifiable as African-American, roughly proceed along techniques describable by, in Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s words, "repetition with a signal difference" or Amiri Baraka's, "the changing same."<sup>22</sup> Rather than set as its goal the accumulation of new forms, this aesthetic model works through performers' passing down (or borrowing) a given set of conventions or loose details, the performance of which then lends its performer her particular artistic identity. Zora Neale Hurston's seminal ethnographic work describes it well: "What we really mean by originality," she writes, "is the modification of ideas ... While [the Negro] lives in and moves in the midst of a white civilization, everything that he touches is re-interpreted for his own use."<sup>23</sup>

Theoretically, this idea has come to be constitutively significant in two ways. On one hand, "repetition" (to borrow somewhat arbitrarily James Snead's word; there are a number of equally apposite choices, among them Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s "signifyin(g)," Houston Baker, Jr.'s "mastery of form/deformation of mastery," even Fred Moten's "break") highlights the distinctiveness each iteration of a repeated form exhibits relative to its others, the way individual identity emerges as a distinctive rendering of a commonly-shared form rather than a product of an author's having created a new one.<sup>24</sup> Within this circular mode of temporality (an idea discussed by Snead, but whose most extensive articulation is found in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*), the crucial activity becomes "performance" far more than "authorship"; or, put differently, the latter term becomes significant only when folded into or read out of the former.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, the aesthetic of repetition becomes the mark of an initial aesthetic differentiation relative to the European-derived culture of which it is both part and not-part, so that the employment of repetition itself comes on its own to denote "blackness." Circular time here comes to signify within and comment on the linear, accumulative mode of time in which it is allegedly embedded.<sup>26</sup>

From this perspective, what a more Euro-centric literary critic might describe as jazz's inherent intertextuality merely reflects the music's developmental affinity with other African-American aesthetics. Yet the story is of course not this simple, since the specific racial dynamics

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<sup>21</sup> This trope is so pervasive that documenting its importance is almost unnecessary. Nonetheless, see, for example, Robert O'Meally's introduction to Part 5 of *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*: "Among this music's most magical words are those reminding its players to 'tell the story.' This is jazz's profoundest invocation, its most deep-voiced invitation ... to 'tell the story' means to find an artistic voice and language of one's own and to recite with style one's own personal history." Or Paul Berliner: "Improvisers illuminate these principles with perhaps the richest of their language material, storytelling, whose multilayered meanings have been passed from generation to generation within the jazz community since its earliest days" (Berliner 200).

<sup>22</sup> (Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* xxiv), (Jones, L)

<sup>23</sup> (Hurston 37)

<sup>24</sup> (Snead), (Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*), (Baker), (Moten).

Listing these together is by no means meant to minimize the difference between them, only to note that all at some level view the repetition of as loosely emblematic of African-American aesthetics.

<sup>25</sup> See Snead: "Repetition in black culture finds its most characteristic shape in performance: rhythm in music, dance and language" (Snead 68).

<sup>26</sup> See Snead: "what recent Western culture repeats continuously is precisely the belief that there is no repetition in culture but only a difference, defined as progress and growth" (60).

involved in *jazz's* intertextual formation – the fact that the forms over which its musicians improvised were often borrowed from non-jazz, mostly white composers – too result from specific historical circumstances. To a not-insignificant degree, the particular form of intertextuality seen in Parker's music reflects simple economic realities: because a composer could gain composition credits for a tune based solely on melody, regardless of the similar chord structures that song might share with others, bebop musicians would often improvise new melodies in the studio in order to gain income-generating songwriting credits from them.<sup>27</sup> On a more abstract level, however, these economic motives clearly bled into the social realm: barred from spheres of popular culture, which rendered black musicians visible largely only in the marginalized realm of "race music," in appropriating the musical forms created by white composers jazz musicians were able to nonetheless use these forms within the frameworks of their own developing aesthetic. This aesthetic recognized creativity not in the dissemination of written inscription, but in the ephemeral yet materially identifiable moment of the music's performance.<sup>28</sup>

Within this environment, as the critics listed above might observe, the mode of telling became a new kind of content. Artistry was found not in the mere creation of new forms, but in the revelation of individuality through an improviser's ability to adapt a given form to the specific, contingent, localizable circumstances of his life and experience. Yet unlike other, mostly written aesthetics, jazz – and this is crucial – required for its very existence the presence in time and space of the body of its producer. This formal requirement then paid cultural dividends: employing these forms to signify its being both part *of* the tradition having created them yet simultaneously apart from it,<sup>29</sup> jazz became a modernism whose very existence asserted the simultaneous existence of the often historically ignored person producing sound. Later in this chapter I address the specific role of the body in the jazz aesthetic. For now, however, let us note that it is this dynamic that shapes the very idea of a musician's "telling his story," that "telling one's story" has often rendered bodies recognizable by becoming the primary means of attaching sounds *to* those bodies.

As a result, the process has come to situate (or engender) blackness, or at least the version of blackness that sees the concept as being most forcefully expressed in sound, as a relation between two conditions: the performance of musical sound on one hand and the hermeneutic expectations that make such sound legible on the other. And let us also observe that while understanding jazz improvisation as the transmission of an individual story tends to rest critical attention on the storyteller, the success of this model – that we *can* understand a jazz solo as telling a story about its producer – still depends for its success on a number of factors. First, since the aesthetic is essentially one of repetition, its success depends on the underlying form's being recognizable as such, even if in highly ornamented or embellished form. Second, it requires hearing the story through the hermeneutic assumption that the "story" an improviser tells us be representative *of* that improviser, that it be readable as "*his* story." This "his" can then function in multiple ways. On one hand it can be read as revelatory of the inner state, emotional core, or perspective on the world of the improviser considered as an individual. The history of jazz, however, has often seen the concept extended to a wider realm, so that the story thus told is

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<sup>27</sup> See DeVeaux, among others.

<sup>28</sup> At least until later, when learning solos from transcriptions became one of the prominent ways the jazz language is learned.

<sup>29</sup> In this sense Du Boisian double consciousness may still stand as the fundamental critical lens from which to understand these activities.



taken to be a story, occasionally *the* story, of blackness itself, with the improviser's sounds taken to be revealing something essential about what it means to be African-American.

The history of this tradition – of the relationship between aesthetic productions and the reading to which they have been submitted, even perhaps before their having been created – is of course quite long and complicated. It is, perhaps, possible to read the history of black performance itself as, simultaneously, the development of each of these activities and the degree to which they have shaped each other. Yet that any such interpretive hermeneutic is always the product of specific historical, musical, cultural and philosophical circumstances need not obscure the fact that it has been embraced, or at least manipulated, by readers on all sides of the political spectrum, that it has been employed to both “bad” and “good” effects. Thus while there have been no lack of quotes like Norman Mailer's that “in [the Negro's] music he gave voice to the character and quality of his existence, to his rage and the infinite variations of joy, lust, languor, growl, cramp, pinch, scream and despair of his orgasm,” there are also many that come from African-American interpreters, like Amiri Baraka's (then LeRoi Jones) famous argument that “Negro music is essentially the expression of an attitude, or a collection of attitudes, about the world, and only secondarily an attitude about the way music is made.”<sup>30</sup>

On a larger scale, the various operations of this particular hermeneutic within the jazz tradition has often been *the* process producing black bodies *as* readable in various historically-recognizable ways. This is the background against which Charlie Parker's music operates. And what his music does most effectively, I hope to show, is to intervene in this process by exposing its workings, the complicities accepted by both musician and listener that make it possible in the first place. This intervention, I am arguing, occurs most primarily on a musical level, and the site from which it is lobbied is, precisely, form. For it is ultimately the way he rewrites form as an expectation that simultaneously bears its own critique that Parker forges a new mode of black performance.

### **KLAUN STANCE AND THE DISARTICULATION OF FORM**

Returning to “Klaun Stance,” then, let us observe that Parker's improvised rewriting of “The Way You Look Tonight” seems calculated at almost every moment simultaneously to expose the inner workings of the tune *and* to display Parker's dismantling of them. If the mastery of “The Way You Look Tonight” lies in its leading listeners through a well-controlled (and historically familiar) series of expectations and fulfillments, “Klaun Stance” (**transcription on page 26**) takes the opposite approach, yielding little in the way of familiar ground. From the beginning, the song's tempo, a blistering 300 beats per minute, easily undermines whatever expectation listeners may have of dancing, singing along, or even tapping their toes. Second, and even more disorienting, the tune is played without a head, instead beginning directly with Parker's solo.<sup>31</sup>

Now, in the standard reading, bebop heads themselves count as radical (usually

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<sup>30</sup> (Mailer 347), (Jones, “Jazz and the White Critic” 13).

<sup>31</sup> In jazz, a “head” is a tune's original melody, generally played in unison by the front-line instruments before individual solos begin. For a more detailed breakdown of the standard components and order of events in a jazz performance, see (Jackson).

“Klaun Stance” is certainly not the first (nor even a prominent) example of a tune beginning with a solo; Coleman Hawkins' enormously popular 1939 version of “Body and Soul,” for example, consists of nothing but Hawkins' soloing over the tune's changes. Hawkins' performance, however, is much more geared towards enhancing rather than distorting this form, as the tune's slow tempo, title, and vertically-oriented improvisation all make clear.

enduringly so) revisions of the original melodies of the tunes from which they come. As DeVeaux argues, bebop heads, being asymmetrically phrased and melodically unstable, “concentrated all that was most novel and disorienting in their new musical language. By placing it *first* – before the listener could situate the improvisation within some recognizable context – the beboppers made it impossible to hear their music as a version, a ‘jazzing,’ of some other repertory” (425). As a mode of engagement with a recognizable canon of American music, bebop heads in this reading succeed at publicly registering their music’s vexed relationship to that canon, their being at once inside and outside of it.

While this characterization undoubtedly holds some truth, one might still be somewhat skeptical of the claim that bebop heads succeed at fully obscuring their source texts in this manner. Or, even if they do, that their having done so represents the radical gesture it is posed as being. For while this description explains the initial encounter with a bebop head, it becomes (and historically became) significantly less accurate after time. Despite the apparent radicality of Parker’s heads, the truth is that once they entered the common jazz argot, beginning to be widely recorded and performed, these heads themselves quickly came to fulfill the anchoring function played by the melodies they set out to replace. The very novelty with which bebop heads obscured their sources was what enabled their functional recuperation as substitutes for the heads they aimed to repress, since the more inventively any given head rewrote its source text, the more likely it was to be memorized and played by other musicians.

My point here is not to malign this reading, but instead to embed it in a larger framework that better explains how, exactly, Parker’s music intervenes into the cultural and racial discourses it addresses. For despite the sheer sense of alterity with which bebop both was and is trumpeted (and, perhaps, even legitimately experienced), the truth about Parker’s aesthetic is that its potency comes not from erasing earlier approaches to improvisation, but from engaging with them in a way that undermines much of the prescriptive force with which they had been associated. It is not that Parker’s music – including his heads – made itself impossible to hear as a revision of another repertoire, but that at its most successful it performs itself precisely *as* a revisionist negation of a canonized repertoire, keeping many of the terms of that repertoire in place but enervating much of its coercive potential.

Of course, by forgoing the head entirely in “Klaun Stance,” Parker arguably pushes this dialectical approach even deeper into the form, dispensing even with the stable ground of recuperated function. Beginning the tune instead with his own improvised solo, Parker ensures that the only people likely to feel situated in the form are other musicians, or, maybe, listeners with exceptional ears. In a further nod to their implied control over the form, at the *end* of the tune, after solos are finished, Parker and a young Miles Davis (Parker’s front-line conspirator on the date) play a quasi-unison passage (below) that simplifies the melody of “The Way You Look Tonight” to, in essence, an outline of the tune’s guide tones, played as a series of descending 5<sup>th</sup>s.<sup>32</sup> Appearing after the fact as it does here, this faux-head (which was in fact the out-head from Kern’s original show version of *The Way You Look Tonight*), like a magician’s revealing the secret to a trick immediately after having performed it, serves as an announcement by Parker and Davis that despite the seeming speed and chaos of what has come before, they were in fact in full control all along.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> “Guide tones” are the notes of a chord that most clearly identify the chord’s harmonic meaning, generally the chord’s 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> degrees. When an improvisation contains many guide notes played on dominant beats, listeners can generally identify the underlying chords of the tune, and the improviser is said to be “hitting the changes.”

<sup>33</sup> (Koch 126)

## “Faux Head”

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The first staff, labeled '22', contains a melodic line with notes and rests. Above the staff are chord symbols: F, D-, G-, C7, F, and D7. A triplet of eighth notes is marked with a '3' above it. The second staff, labeled '23', continues the melodic line with notes and rests. Above the staff are chord symbols: G-, C7, C-, C-, and F7. A triplet of eighth notes is also marked with a '3' above it.

Turning to Parker’s actual solo (**page 27**), one can see that even though his improvisations may initially sound bewilderingly complex, especially when played at breakneck speed, and while abrupt juxtaposition of contradictory rhetoric is important to their success, in actuality their complex hermeneutical value far more often results from Parker’s simple repositioning of repeated elements relative to underlying form. While “repeated elements” here may seem to imply a theme-and-variations approach, however, it is for Parker emphatically the opposite. Eschewing linear development, Parker’s approach is, rather, anagrammatic: repeating licks and phrases, combining them in novel ways, lending complexity to simple lines by playing them at unexpected moments, Parker retains the familiar components of musical narrative, but reorganizes them in ways that obviate their cogency. What remains is less a forward-moving theme and variations than a series of pieces that rigorously maintain their independence.<sup>34</sup>

The very beginning of his solo makes this clear. Starting off with *nine straight measures* of eighth notes, enhanced occasionally by an triplet phrase but unbroken by any rest, Parker leaves no room for a motif to be stated, let alone developed. The saturation of notes overwhelms, and at first listen it is perhaps not difficult to hear why so many saw Parker as a source of wild, unrestrained inventiveness. Hearing this remarkable string of notes as simple musical stream-of-consciousness, however, misses the subtle way the line works. In measure 1, for example, Parker starts off by playing the first five notes of the F major scale, ascending (**A**). F-G-A-Bb-C: this simple beginning could be the content of a child’s first music lesson. By the end of the measure (**B**), however, Parker has already repurposed these notes to sharply inventive use: taking the exact three notes he has just played – A, Bb, and C – Parker phrases them so as to imply an A7b9 chord, a chord not explicitly indicated by the form, but one that nonetheless anticipates the D7 in the next bar. While this implied superimposition thereby expands the potential meaning of the tune’s underlying chords, turning an otherwise unremarkable moment into one fraught with drama and potency, the important observation is that Parker performs it without in the least modifying his melodic vocabulary. Rather than adding complexity by importing new notes into the measure, Parker’s simple repositioning and rhythmic phrasing

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<sup>34</sup> There are clearly those whose analyses of Parker disagree with mine. Henry Martin’s *Charlie Parker and Thematic Improvisation*, for example, offers a detailed musicological reading that addresses the thematic coherence of Parker’s improvisational style. It is clear, however, that by “thematic” Martin means the way individual pieces of Parker’s solos reference the initial head of the tune, not necessarily the way those pieces *themselves* form an overall narrative. Indeed, as Martin acknowledges, “Parker was not especially interested in thematic *development*, despite frequent *reference* to the thematic material” (120, italics in original), and therefore, that “thematic interconnection [in Parker’s improvisations], if it exists, must be sought elsewhere than in conscious motivic development” (4).

extracts new harmonic meanings from those already there.

This general strategy of repeating and recontextualizing in a way that rigorously avoids thematic development extends throughout the solo. In measure 2, for example, Parker plays a four-note arpeggio, spelling out the 3<sup>rd</sup> through the flat-9<sup>th</sup> (F#-A-C-Eb) of the D7 chord sounding underneath him (**C**). Now, from one perspective, the mere use of the b9 (“flat-9”) in this context, especially when employed to such clear harmonic directives, represents *the* noteworthy element of this phrase. Notes like the b9 were, in fact, a significant bebop-era additions to the improvisatory vocabulary; that it and other altered notes are now considered standard is a direct consequence of solos like this one. For our context, however, the mere presence of this note is less important than the way the phrase in which it is embedded repeats across the chorus. A mere two measures later, that is, we see (hear) the *exact* same four-note arpeggio played again, though altered to fit a new context, with Parker playing it a whole-step lower and shifted one beat earlier in the measure, in order to fit over the C7 called for by the form (**C'**). In bar 6 – we are still within the stream of Parker’s initial nine-measure salvo, let us remember – Parker approaches the second D7 chord of the tune by playing the *exact* same arpeggio yet again, but this time lowered a full octave (**C''**). Even the short portion of Parker’s solo reprinted below – not even a full chorus – sees Parker incorporating this lick twice more (in bars 14 and 24, both of which see it played over D7 (**C'''** and **C''''**)), making, in total, five repetitions in a mere 32 bars.

Other examples of this strategy abound. To pick another one that also first appears in the opening bars of the solo: in bar 2, Parker follows up the lick just discussed with a four-note upper-neighbor + chromatic ascent phrase (**D**). Even in this initial context, the lick – another pet phrase of Parker’s – is wonderfully suggestive: preceding the D that ends the phrase, the Eb, C and C# that set it up delay gratification just long enough to keep things interesting, yet when the D note does appear, its delayed arrival allows it to work as a bridge of sorts between measure 2 and measure 3, since the note D functions as both the root of the chord in bar 2 (D7) and the 5<sup>th</sup> of the chord (G-minor) in bar 3. Just as with the lick above, it does not take long for this short phrase to start to pepper the rest of the solo. In bar 6, for example (again, we are still within the initial nine bars), Parker repeats bar 2 note-for-note, though playing the notes an octave lower than the original and shifted one beat earlier in the measure (**D'**). Bars 22 and 23, too, see the gesture of bars 2-3 repeated almost verbatim, with Parker using the lick’s final “D” to link D7 to G-minor, though the sequence is again modified by being played in the lower octave (**D'''**). Bar 12 sees an even more inventive use of this phrase: using the lick twice in rapid succession, the first time to spell out the 5<sup>th</sup> of the chord at hand, the second time to spell out the chord’s 3<sup>rd</sup> (**D''**); the chord is Bb-major; its 5<sup>th</sup> is F and its 3<sup>rd</sup> is D), Parker makes repetition near-universally applicable. These five appearances of this lick are not all, as the phrase pops up at least four more times over the course of Bird’s solo (in bars 30, 47, 54, and 63).

These examples are, of course, somewhat arbitrary; one could identify any number of similar small phrases in this solo, or in fact in nearly every solo Parker plays. Yet the fact that there are so many examples to choose from is, in many ways, the point: though the specific content of these phrases is clearly important, my aim is not so much to describe any of them individually. Nor is it merely to observe that Parker’s improvisations often comprise an arsenal of stock phrases; as DeVaux tells us, “the fact that Parker systematically repeated himself is a basic insight that jazz musicians long ago discovered for themselves” (377). It is rather to indicate the strategy by which Parker’s solo uses these little licks to articulate itself relative to the underlying chords of the tune.

By way of contrast, let us remember how the melody of “The Way You Look Tonight” works: setting up a long-term strategy of expectation and fulfillment, the tune leverages the inherent drama of its chords to generate a melody marked by many of the hallmarks used (at least since Aristotle) to identify effective narrative: teleology, developmental variation, climax and denouement. Now look at what Parker’s solo does to those same chords. The key is this: while repetition of phrases across register, chords and measures might outwardly suggest a theme-and-variations approach, Parker’s repetition of these little riffs – “themes” might be too strong of a word for them, given that “themes” becomes identified as such only by virtue of their having been developed in historically-codified ways over the course of a work – incorporates little to no actual *development*. None of these phrases grows over the course of a solo into a rich, complex idea. None becomes the launch pad to an extended riff. The variation to which each is submitted seems far more a product of the lick’s need to fit into different contexts than it does the marshalling of those contexts by the improviser to tell a broader story. Indeed, providing less a sense of motivic expansion than of non-developmental recurrence, the solo seems to jettison narrative development almost entirely, substituting for it a form of simple, *mere* repetition, one in which its musical components accrue little significance or meaning for having been repeated.<sup>35</sup>

It is not that there are no dramatic moments in the solo; even in the short passages discussed above, there are moments of great tension and release, of surprise, of both frustration and fulfillment of expectation. But the key is that these moments come not from their being embedded in (or collectively engendering) a larger story which will ultimately make sense of them, a broader architecture that will subsume the whole. Pace the melody of “The Way You Look Tonight,” whose teleological movement forward feels inevitable, each measure, phrase and sequence in Bird’s improvisation seems unconditioned by what has come before and uncontextualized by what follows.<sup>36</sup> Even the nine-measure passage that opens Parker’s solo, for example, striking as it is, claims no special distinction for being located at the solo’s beginning; one would not be surprised to find it at any point in one of Parker’s improvisations.

From a strategic perspective, we can use this moment to begin tracing out the broader meanings put in place by the specific relationships to form Parker’s solo develops. On one hand, the sheer pervasiveness of Parker’s modular approach dramatically recontextualizes the speed at which the music is performed. For even as the surging tempo pushes forward, this forward-directed movement is counterpoised by Parker’s rigorous *avoidance* of forward-moving storytelling. The relationship thus poses the song’s melody (if it can even be called that) as an explicit response to, rather the naïve corroboration of, the forward-directed movement of the tune’s underlying rhythm. Stripped of its customary narrative assistance, tempo therefore becomes an isolated element of the music, its seemingly inescapable forward movement reduced to *mere* propulsion.

But while the untangling of tempo from narrative is one way the solo aims to disarticulate form as given, its ultimate aims are larger. What I am trying to disaggregate here are the two separate but related readings of form – both major advances from the jazz that had come earlier – that Parker’s improvisations put in place. On one hand there is the introduction of new harmonic vocabulary, the altered and chromatic notes that saturate Parker’s improvisations. Often identified as the major contribution of bebop to the music, these extended and altered harmonies

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<sup>35</sup> Other than the way I am weighing them with significance, of course, a second-order weighing in which their repetition becomes significant precisely by *not* becoming significant.

<sup>36</sup> Or, strictly speaking, conditioned by different, negatively-realized mechanisms.

indelibly shaped the jazz that was to follow.<sup>37</sup> So thoroughly did they suffuse the idiom, in fact, that by the mid-1950's, players not playing Parker-inspired lines sounded almost instantly outdated. It is furthermore a testament to these harmonic innovations that harmony became *the* axis against which future expansions of the idiom were measured.<sup>38</sup>

Yet, as Parker's improvisations eloquently show, positioned against this is the way these moment of harmony collectively unfold along the length of the solo, the story they end up telling relative to the cycle of tensions and resolutions enabled by the harmonic movement of the tune's underlying chords. And merely to ratchet up the harmonic complexity of an improvisation while still acceding to the *narrative* prescriptions of underlying form, Parker's music argues, is nonetheless to bind oneself within a particular hermeneutic that helps establish, before the improvisation even takes place, both *what* and *how* it can mean. It is not that harmony and rhythm are not important, even crucial, to successful improvising, but rather that effective engagement with form proceeds only by coupling these harmonic techniques to a narrative approach that undoes the narrative prescriptions *of* form, and thus resists a solo's being potentially reduced *to* those prescriptions.

Which is exactly what Parker's solo does: figure his improvisation as an accumulation of individual moments of virtuosity spliced together in ever-inventive ways. The result is the dispersive fragmentation of form rather than the yoking of form to emotional swell and diminution. In so doing, Parker replaces the idea of a solo as a grand, unified gesture with one characterized by endless recontextualization. Working less to follow the narrative guidelines provided *by* the chord progression, to solo in a way that embellishes the cohesive narrative structure *it* facilitates, Parker retains the tune's underlying structure but decouples his improvisations from the narrative expectations that structure raises. The result is the detachment of narrative prescription from what Parker plays, so that as a prescriptive document, the form itself gives little indication of the swell and diminution of tension that will take place in his particular solo.

Key to this argument, however, is that is that the disarticulation of form (and all the attendant meanings a given relation to form entails) at stake here proves truly effective only when both of its components – the movement of form and the improvised dismantling of its narrative flow – are foregrounded in Parker's improvisation. For though I have been highlighting the way Parker's music struggles against the narrative prescriptions of form as given, it is not as if his improvisations achieve anything resembling formlessness (were the latter even a real possibility). Quite the contrary, in fact: despite the asymmetric phrasing of the lines within them, Parker's solos still add up to lengths that are multiples of the form, and his lines very clearly still articulate, if with undoubtedly novel and creative embellishment, the underlying chords of the tune he is playing. My point is rather that despite how it may have sounded to whatever at the time, Parker's music represents less the complete destruction of form than the introduction of a new, *dialectical* approach to form, one in which form is made (or shown) to bear its own critique. And it is this figuring of an improvised solo as a multi-layered, multi-purposed text, one expressing aims that are varied, conflicting and often contradictory, that represents Parker's radical innovation, his having pried a new, negative model out of the

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<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Ajay Heble's *Landing on the Wrong Note*, for whom chromaticism is this key innovation. LeRoi Jones similarly notes in *Blues People* that "although it would seem now that bop's rhythmic conceptions were its most complete innovations, during the forties many people ... seemed to be mystified most by its harmonic ideas"(Jones, *Blues People* 196).

<sup>38</sup> I address this issue in Chapter 3, which analyzes the music of Miles Davis's famous mid-60's quintet.

tradition.

To observe this dialectical approach at work, one might direct attention to what “Klaun Stance” does with what I earlier identified as “The Way You Look Tonight”’s most important moment. If the peak of this source tune’s melody takes place in bars 9 and 10, where the octave drop from high-F to low F at once brings the melody to its climax, releases tension, and introduces new harmonic information, one might notice what Parker plays in the exact same spot in the form **(E)**. That’s right: *nothing*. At the moment of peak tension, a moment in which the tune’s chord movement would make almost anything played over it sound interesting, Parker lays out entirely.<sup>39</sup> One can certainly hear the chords passing by, including the introduction of the new note, Eb, into the tune’s harmony. Rather than exploit this moment for the narrative tension it could provide, however, rather than follow its lead, Parker plays nothing, with the result that one can hear *both* the opportunity these chords provide *and* Parker’s choice to ignore it.

The power of this new dialectical reading (or rendering) of form, then, is of making form bear its own critique. It is of cracking open the prescriptive components of form to expose the standard improvisatory model, that which creates a story that repeats the conceptual gestures of the form it borrows, as only one choice out of many. As a result, form in Parker’s hands gains a certain musical potency, since Parker’s music clearly expands the range of form’s potential expressions. At the same time, it loses a great deal of its power to lay out, before a solo is even played, a potential reading of what that solo will mean.

It is Charlie Parker’s ability to relentlessly foreground both sides of this dialectic – the narrative prescriptions of form and his improvisatory disassembling of them – that keep his music largely inimitable even after his approaches to harmony and rhythm have been almost completely absorbed by the idiom. And it is also this virtuosic reading of form that radically alters what his musical strategies come to mean in a larger sense. For my ultimate argument here is not only about Parker’s music qua music, but about Parker’s music as a new and important mode of performing blackness. Tracing out *why* this disarticulation of form, *why* Parker’s sundering of the connections between form and narrative (and his consequent establishment of new modes of connection between them), claims so much importance in this latter field, then, involves a small step outward, into a short discussion of jazz’s particularities as an aesthetic. The crucial site, I hope to show, is the role of the body in jazz improvisation, the body realized in its multiple capacities or modes of presence, and the relation those modes of presence, finally, have with the performance of form.

## VOICE, FORM AND THE BODY IN JAZZ

At stake in this argument are (at least) two intertwined issues. First is the particular role blackness plays in the jazz aesthetic as a whole, the way, in short, that the aesthetic and the historical intertwine in the music. The second is therefore the impact Charlie Parker’s music in particular makes on this aesthetic, considered in as many contexts as possible. Both are best explained, I believe, by examining jazz, or bebop in particular, as an aesthetic taking place within the wider context of modernism.

That bebop is a modernist aesthetic is by now a somewhat standard argument.<sup>40</sup> Both

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<sup>39</sup> To “lay out” is to not play for a period of time.

<sup>40</sup> See Lott: “Bebop, in other words, was one of the great modernisms” (Lott 602); Ramsey: “I should stress here ... that Afro-modernism has similarities to classic (or canonical) modernism, the other experimental developments in

aesthetically and culturally, the classification exhibits a great deal of explanatory power. Even the few features by which I have already identified the music – its fragmentation of narrative, its pervasive intertextuality, its resistance to physical and intellectual internalization, its privileging of formal virtuosity – easily establish Parker’s corpus as a member of the wider family of modernist texts (“The Waste Land,” for example, or Pound’s *Cantos*) for which extra-textual referentiality, rhetorical juxtaposition and formal fragmentation are also constitutive. The dynamic of cultural hermeticism surrounding the music also echoes wider descriptions of modernism.<sup>41</sup> At very least, bebop’s emphasis on surprise and the confounding of expectations easily fulfills Pound’s modernist imperative to “make it new.”

Despite these formal affinities, however, truly taking the measure of jazz’s place within 20<sup>th</sup>-century aesthetics also requires attending to jazz’s distinctiveness as a modernist enterprise. For our purposes, this distinctiveness arises along two poles: the contribution of race to bebop’s inherent modernism on one hand, and on the other the fact that jazz is a fundamentally *sonic* enterprise.

While both are important, I would like to start with the first. This is for the simple reason that while jazz, bebop especially, certainly demonstrates formal features deserving of the title “modernist,” the very fact of their race-based origins lends very different valences *to* those formal features, that despite their being formally akin to the strategies found in other modernist works, these features – whether by intention or reception – signify differently when plotted against the axis of race. Put differently, from a historical perspective the simple acknowledgement that jazz indulges in the same types of formal experimentation one sees in other modernist works ignores the aims for which these formal strategies were used, especially as those strategies reflect economic and historical realities. The difference, I believe, centers around the term I introduced earlier, “voice.” Blending the material and the historical, “voice” aims to capture the fundamental differences jazz exhibits relative to its modernist brethren: while high European and American modernism generally used its intertextual and fragmentary techniques to trouble narrative or authorial cohesion, undermining the alleged link between corporeal author and produced artwork, jazz has worked most often in the opposite mode, borrowing sounds from without in the service of quasi-sincere expressions of personal voice.

To be sure, “voice” is a complicated notion here; from the beginning, though, let us note how the word signifies in two separate but related ways. On one hand, “voice” indicates the literal sonic emanations of a corporeal body. In this meaning, voice invokes raw sound, sound as the material result of a body’s having engages in contexts – talking, singing, music-making – that call for sonic productions. On the other, “voice” connotes perspective, viewpoint, or opinion, what the OED calls “a mode of expression or point of view.”<sup>42</sup> This is voice in the sense of a people’s having a voice, or a poem’s having one.

I choose this word because jazz’s status as a recognizably African-American music, with both of those terms claiming emphasis here, simultaneously engages both of these meanings. In this sense voice is simply the name for jazz’s way of using sound as a mode of cultural

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music, literature and art that emerged in European and American metropolitan centers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (Ramsey 106); Saul: “The bebop head, which became the signature of the genre, fulfilled the modernist imperative of defamiliarization” (Saul 219); even drummer Kenny Clarke: “The music wasn’t called bop ... in fact, we had no name for the music. We called ourselves modern.” (qtd. in (Ramsey 96)).

<sup>41</sup> See Anatole Broyard: “[bebop] established the hipster as a keeper of enigmas, ironical pedagogue, a self-appointed exegete ... that which you heard in bebop was always *something else*, not the thing you expected; it was always negatively derived, abstraction *from*, not *to*” (Broyard 116).

<sup>42</sup> (Online, *Voice*, *N.*)



intervention. The way it does so, I believe, has to do with the body and its relation to sound, and in this capacity “voice” is meant to capture the primary importance of the body in jazz, an importance that is also double-sided. First, there is the very literal way that the great majority of a jazz improviser’s identifiable style – tone, timbre, feel, phrasing – directly implicate the specifics of her body: the fingers, lungs, and embouchure collectively producing sound.<sup>43</sup> Sound, as it always does, thereby reflects and hearkens back to the ongoing set of comportments by which the lived-in body is actualized as such.

Second, and radically different, jazz as a performative aesthetic necessarily requires for its very existence the presence of the body of its producer in time and space, and in this way comes to engage the body’s status as a historical signifier. Regardless of the sounds that may be coming from the body of the improviser, that is, that jazz takes place only in the moment of its being created means that the improvisatory process always foregrounds the materiality of the body. That jazz evokes the (generally black) body in this second capacity is thereby a primary way that jazz can be read as reflecting something important or essential about African-American culture writ large. This puts race, to a degree, at the core of whatever textual (i.e. “strictly” musical) meaning a given solo may produce, since regardless of the *textual* status of the sounds that issue from the improviser’s body, their very possibility for being read *as* text indelibly ties them to their production as “literal” (i.e. sounded) voice.<sup>44</sup> Unlike a written text, which must work to identify itself as racialized in a certain manner, a jazz solo in the very possibility of its existence implies the real existence, the unignorable *visibility*, of the racially-coded subject. As a

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<sup>43</sup> I am aware that using a word like “voice” here could arguably be said to overlook the various physical and technological mediations – on one hand the actual the instruments played, which may not directly involve the bodily capacities generative of sounded, vocalized voice; on the other, the LP’s, CD’s and MP3’s – through which sound reaches listeners. To the first issue, the applicability of this term to a non-wind instrument, for which a word like “voice” seems less appropriate, I offer two responses. First, that jazz is such a saxophone-based idiom that a great deal of “what it makes sense to say” in jazz derives from phrasing that is natural to saxophone playing, and therefore to the movement of the lungs, tongue, and mouth. Singing, too, is, important to jazz improvisation, even if that singing takes place below the audible level. When learning the music, even non-wind instrumentalists are often encouraged to sing what they play, or to not play something they cannot sing. Some musicians, in fact, like pianists Bud Powell and Keith Jarrett, sing along with their playing so loudly that their singing often becomes a distraction to listeners. Second, while the standard understanding of music sees note choice as a primarily intellectual activity and timbre and feel as a primarily physical one, there is a small body of work that is beginning to undermine this often-assumed binary. As more work is done on the phenomenology of improvisation, we will likely see more evidence of the body’s importance for note choice, and therefore being to see even the parts of solos that can be transcribed as constituted partially though the material ways the improviser’s body moves in the world. On this point, see Vijay Iyer’s *Microstructures of Feel, Macrostructures of Sound: Embodied Cognition in West African and African-American Musics*, or David Sudnow’s *Ways of the Hand*. The second issue – the way jazz is most often received through recorded media – of course opens up numerous huge and necessary questions about the role of distribution, circulation and media itself in constituting what counts as authenticity. For some helpful work in this direction, see Alexander Weheliye’s *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*, or Bryan Wagner’s *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and Police Power after Slavery*.

<sup>44</sup> This argument is in many ways an extension of that Houston Baker’s “deformation of mastery” argument, to which I briefly alluded above. In Baker’s account, the deformation of standard cultural tropes into sounds that “[appear] monstrous and deformed ... to the intruder” are best read as “a distinctively Afro-American sounding of events” in which the performer enacts a “loud assertion of possession” (50-52). For Baker, “the Afro-American spokesperson who would perform a deformation of mastery ... must transform an obscene situation, a cursed and tripled metastatus, into a signal self/cultural expression. The birth of such a self is never simply a coming into being, but always, also, a release from a BEING POSSESSED (capitalization in original)” (56). We can see this doubleness of “voice” at work in Baker’s formulation, for whom “being possessed” indicates both literal enslavement and the “inscribed ‘otherness’ of the *con-scripted* (those who come, as necessity, *with* writing)” (53, italics in original).

physically coordinated set of characteristics and movements (and, to the degree an improviser achieves an identifiable style, of characteristic movements), it is the body that enables the actual sonic productions we identify as jazz. But it is also often by recourse to the body's identity as a racially-coated entity to which those sounds are then attributed, that we identify those sounds as *jazz*.

Historically, the stakes of this structure are huge: rather than occasioning the death of the author, turning "voice" into an abstract disruption of the presumably unified source of authorship, as the radical intertextuality of high modernism is often read as having done, jazz's intertextual mode became the very vehicle that allowed for the assertion of "voice" as a localizable, individual mode of expression. Intertextual and multi-layered, yet nonetheless always tied to the material "I" from which it issues, the jazz voice represent both a unique brand of modernism and the mode of performance always linking specific musical decisions to bodily (and racial) presentation. This is why Charlie Parker's overall approach to narrative, I am arguing, carries so much political and social weight, and why being spoken *by* form poses such a problem for him. For if an improvised performance necessarily foregrounds the body of the improviser, then both the content and form of that improvisation necessarily imply means by which that body might be read.

Put in the terms outlined above, the implied performance or hermeneutic against and within which Parker's music works – that traditional mode of reading wherein the actual sounds a musician produces are alleged to provide access to the inner life of that musician's psyche, politics or racialized perspective on the world – operates by either confusing or conflating the two modes of "voice" at stake in any given improvisation. This expressivist mode of reception takes the material, embodied characteristics of a jazz solo – the way its sounds reflect the physical and intellectual capacities of the musician's body – and grafts them to that body's racially-recognizable exterior. The result is the subsumption of musical *capacity* (the solo as indicative of the skill of its player) to the potential signifying effects of the products *of* that capacity (the solo as text). Most obviously, this mode of reading – the hermeneutic into which most jazz solos are placed (and, it is worth remembering, to which most solos accede) – in Parker's view devalues, first, the uniqueness of a musician's capacities, by making them representative of the musician's perspective on the world, and second, the individual body of the musician, by making it representative of blackness as a whole.

Less obvious, however, is the larger transformation through which this first occurs, which forms the more direct stakes of Charlie Parker's music. Regardless of the degree to which a given solo may be read as a story rendering the body of the musician readable along given racial coordinates, or whether it is read only as the expression of that musician's personal history regardless of race, at end this mode of reading minimizes a solo's musicality by assigning to it an essentially *non-musical* function. Making the music's connotative content outstrip its sonic one, this hermeneutic thereby ascribes to the actual sound a musician produces a *transparent materiality*, whereby sound's material presence becomes important only insofar as it can communicate the historical or emotional experience of its producer. To improvisationally conform to the prescriptions of form, then, is to allow the sound one produces to be stripped of its fullness and meaning *as sound*, to allow it to be transformed into a mere vehicle for expression, the bearer of content rather than content itself.

This is why the fragmentation of narrative – of teleological forward movement, of climax and resolution, of accession to underlying structure – becomes the crucial operation in Parker's aesthetic. For even as Parker's harmonic and rhythmic embellishments of form may have

expanded (even revolutionarily so) the potential meaning of individual chord types or common chord sequences, in Parker's view these interactions with form merely modify the way the musician's body is read, perhaps lending that body a different shape or set of features, but at bottom do not – can not – address the structures by which that body becomes readable in the first place. The narrative disruption of form, in contrast – the demonstration that form can be made to produce its own opposite – works by refusing accession to the narrative framework which reduces sound to this initial expectation of narrative communication. The issue Parker puts at stake, that is, is not only how a particular reading of form might lend interpretive shape to the body of its performer, but whether or not a given improvisation subscribes or not to the mechanisms making such an interpretive reading even possible.

If the improvisational style against which Parker's music is posed, then, works according to a process that lends racialized bodies a legitimated form of *recognizability*, Parker's music works in the opposite mode, working within these same channels to conjure from them a new mode of *unrecognizability*. Insofar as structuring a solo so that it conforms to given narrative expectations lends the body of its player recognizability within the wider culture in which that body would otherwise remain invisible, Parker's music argues, the jazz tradition allows an important avenue for presentation. But the hermeneutic coherence that results from "telling a story" also involves the major tradeoffs and reductions listed above: the reduction of sound to a non-sonic communication; the conflation of the two modes of voice (sonic production and perspective on the world); the transformation of whatever voice the participating musician does achieve to a representative token of the state the explanation of which that musician is then made responsible for. Rather than accept these tradeoffs, Parker's music takes the materials of this tradition but refuses the reductions they entail. For clearly, the mode of reading jazz as the expression of emotional interiority or representative racialized perspective is always only a product of a historically agreed-upon set of hermeneutic codes. And rather than either accede to these codes or choose the ironic position the situation offers, Parker's music announces that there are, on a fundamental level, other options available. Rather than improvise in a way that produces a coherently readable body, Parker's music strongly resists its being read as "telling a story" in the first place.

To be clear, it is not so much that Parker invalidates the prescriptive value of form, so much as his music wrenches another possibility out of it. Just as his fragmentation of narrative still produces solos that express their underlying chords, so his assertion of unrecognizability within standard hermeneutic models always already counts as a new mode of recognizability. That Parker makes this assertion through form means that his music finally becomes another reading of form, and that it is this reading of form means that Parker's resistance to "telling a story" finally becomes the actual story his music comes to tell. What turns Parker's music into a mode of critique, however, is the substance of this reading, the fact that it reads form precisely *as* the possibility of its own undermining. Thereby rendering form as, simultaneously, the narrative expectations generated by its harmonic movements *and* the fragmented repudiation of those expectations, Parker makes form spell out a different mode of cultural signification, one that need not bind in any pre-given manner the body of the improviser to the sounds it produces.

In the terms I have offered, then, it is correct to a degree to say that Parker's music, through its unrelenting fragmentation of narrative, decouples the two versions of voice from a relationship that otherwise seems congenital. And one of the key accomplishments of Parker's music is that in severing the apparent link between musical sounds and cultural meaning, it puts those sounds in a position to reacquire an identity *as* sound, as music that remains to a crucial

degree untranslatable. In insisting on the irreducible presence of his music *as* music, Parker lends his sound a solidity and opacity that remain resistant to hermeneutic co-optation. Hammering a wedge between his music's sonic presence and its communicative potentials, Parker's music restores to sound an irreducible presence, one that frustrates sound's wholesale reduction to the handmaiden of immediately translatable meaning. Sundered from the expectation that they express a deeper essence, bebop sounds express precisely the fact that sound *cannot* express all there is to express about the bodies and experiences of its makers. In insisting on the hermeneutic opacity of his music, Parker suggests that sound itself can be creative and virtuosic without necessarily succumbing to the connotative prescriptions under which it might be read.

And because the two modes of bodily presence at work in jazz – roughly, the body as producer of sound and the body as racially-signified object – stand on opposite sides of this newly-instituted chasm between sound and culture, the opacity that characterizes Parker's musical sound then comes to equally characterize the body of the improviser. The result is a fullness of bodily presence, of the body being made present as unique and distinctive in a non-reducible way. What Parker's music says is that the body of the improviser will always retain a material dimension not subsumable to, or forever evasive of, whatever modes of racial interpretation prevail at any given moment. Regardless of the degree to which a jazz performance may render its player's body understandable, visible or legible within racial coordinates, that body can always say, in an *absolute* sense, "you don't know me." The illuminating comparison here is to those (many) modes of black performance that employ irony as a primary strategy. Rather than hiding behind the music, projecting a visual identity to which his "real personality" may not accord, Parker insists on his personal and material presence while not allowing that presence to imply a communicable depth of character. Sundering the two notions of voice, Parker remains visible the whole time, while simultaneously insisting, *musically*, that absolutely nothing can be said about the nature of this visible identity.

The key, however, is the way that Parker nonetheless makes this detachment of sound from hermeneutic expectation, the claim that his music is not reducible to a statement about blackness, speak precisely *as* a mode of performing blackness. For, performing an identifiably African-American music in a body still identifiable as Black, it is not as if Parker's insistence that his music be read against historically-available modes of "telling a Black story" somehow makes race disappear from the situation, reassuring as that prospect might seem. The point, therefore, is not that Parker's music "succeeds" in any enduring way in sonically detaching itself from the racially-coated exterior of the body from which it emerges, for regardless of (or perhaps because of) their musical refusal to speak for blackness writ large, these sounds employ their ostensive detachment from the body precisely as a new mode of attaching themselves to that body. What is important, however, is not whether or not Parker manages to banish race from the equation, but the degree to which his performative refusal to unify his sounds into a translatable story about blackness works both to realize and to open up new possibilities for what "blackness" can mean or even not-mean. For insofar as Parker sonically poses blackness as a condition *not* synechdocally revealed in sound, "blackness" thereby becomes a mark of absolute, not relative, illegibility; it is through this illegibility that Parker modifies the tradition as given.

On one hand, that his music cannot be read as an absolute alternative to the hermeneutic to which it responds is evidenced by the fact that Parker's performance *of* musical illegibility works in one sense as a tool for financial gain. For, as DeVeaux describes, the more hermetic bebop *seemed*, the more profitable it became: "the most visible signs of [bebop's] resistance –

the subcultural wardrobe, the impenetrable lingo, the refusal to play the expected role of entertainer – defined a place for bop in the marketplace” (24). (That most of its profits went to feed Parker’s heroin addiction is a different story.) In this Parker’s aesthetic traffics in some of the most traditional modes of black presentation available: those that see the term itself as being intimately informed by its circulation in the economic world. In coming to signify difference, recognizable resistance to the dominant aesthetic order, to signify, finally a kind of *readable* illegibility, Parkers’ music certainly takes advantage of the long tradition by which Black music is read as “the unknowable.”

Yet at the same time it trades in the expectation that blackness be *the* confounding of expectations, Parker’s music also radically limits the reach of those expectations, and, consequently, expands the range of what *both* “blackness” and “jazz” mean. Inasmuch as his music actively repudiates being read as a window into internal character or perspective, Parker makes “blackness” a condition available and present to both sonic and visual modes of recognition, but, crucially, *reducible* to neither of them. Which means that *readable* illegibility is only part of the story, for, located in between and coordinated through divergent modes of perception and interpretation, “blackness” in Parker’s music becomes a non-originary condition that exists in only a functional sense, not a fundamental one, a fundamental, non-readable absence of legibility.<sup>45</sup> And in maintaining a non-co-optable presence of sound (even partially non-co-optable even *as* “non-co-optable sound”), in positing sound as the negative refusal of accession to any given hermeneutic (even the hermeneutic that reads it precisely *as* this negative refusal), Parker’s music retains the possibility of new modes of creation and presentation.

Given this, we might mark Parker’s moment as that in which jazz became something other, or something more, than race music. Rather, it became, in a sense, exactly what it was – a difficult music playable only by those with near-virtuosic talent. It was not the inner soul of blackness finally speaking forth; it was not even (or even fully) a product reducible to historical circumstances; it was the product of a non-representative cabal of talented musicians, musicians whose music announced that while they happened to be black, that need not be the primary metric by which they were measured.

From a strictly aesthetic perspective, Parker’s musical accomplishments rewrote the standards by which improvised music could (or, perhaps, should) be evaluated. While many of the musicians, poets and other artists in his wake responded by taking up only the harmonic and rhythmic vocabulary he developed, the more radical of his devotees took (whether intentionally or not) Parker’s development of form as an aesthetic challenge. Ornette Coleman’s free jazz, John Coltrane’s “sheets of sound,” the wide-open music of Miles Davis’s mid-60’s group: all share an insistence on the opacity of sound itself. In the larger realm of black performance, Parker’s legacy – the detachment of sonic presence from its alleged ability to communicate a depth of experience, and the attendant foregrounding of sound that actively resists the conceptions by which it would be read – proved to impact a host of other media, as well as modes of black identity in general. In so doing, it left those who succeeded Parker both a powerful gift and a powerful challenge. The gift, of course, was Parker’s having exploded the

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<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Gates’ “‘blackness’ is not a material object or an event but a metaphor; it does not have an essence; as such but is defined by a network of relations that form a particular aesthetic unity” (Gates, HL, Jr. 162), or Fred Moten’s description of blackness as a “transference, a carrying or crossing over, that takes place on the bridge of lost matter, lost maternity, lost mechanics that joins bondage and freedom, that interanimates the body and its ephemeral if productive force, that interarticulates the performance and the reproductive reproduction it always already contains and which contains it” (Moten 18).

codes that tied sound to certain prescribed modes of being read, proving, definitively, that the sonic as such always represents a viable site for disrupting the standard modes of racial reception.

Yet Parker's answer to this potential conscription – to produce music that through its disarticulation of form poses blackness as something *apart* from sound – also poses a potential problem to artists. For once the alleged link between musical sound and racial identity, or even emotional interiority, has been sundered, artists who then desired to employ sound, or representations of sound, to convey an idea of blackness (whatever that concept might mean) would need to imagine more complicated, creative and thoughtful ways of doing so. For stripped of its apparent communicative transparency, such ostensibly communicative methods of engaging sound could be exposed as naïve, ineffectual, or even harmful.

From the poetic perspective (which will occupy Chapters Two, Four and Five of this dissertation), Parker's music posed a problem for those poets interested in working out a jazz-inspired relationship to the world. This is because Bird's music denies the mere poetic imitation of "jazzy" sounds the meanings it had prior to Parker. For if Parker's sounds became most revelatory the moment they resisted their potential transformation into direct signifiers of inner emotional or larger social experience, then direct poetic recreation of these sounds could hardly hope to recuperate this function, and would in fact merely collapse the divides between sound, meaning and appearance his music works so hard to erect. Or if it could, it would have to do so in a manner that reframed the very status of poetic imitation. That this challenge proved also to be an opportunity for rethinking some of the fundamental assumptions underlying lyric poetry as a whole is testified to by the enormously creative responses witnessed in the poetry emerging in Parker's wake. Chapter Two, then, will examine two of the most provocative and generative readings of what a "post-Parker" lyric might look, sound and feel like.

# Klaun Stance

By Charlie Parker

SAVOY 2201 ✓

*♩ = 300*

The musical score consists of eight staves of music. The first staff is marked with a tempo of *♩ = 300*. The music is written in treble clef. Chord markings are placed above the notes, and melodic phrases are bracketed and labeled with letters A through C'''. The staves are numbered 1 through 8 on the left side. The score concludes with the instruction "(turn page)".

Chord markings include: F, D7, G-, C7, C'', D', G-, C7, C-, F7, Bb, Bb, (Eb7), D'', F, C7, F, D7, G-, C7, F, D7, D''', G-, C''', C-, F7, Bb, Bb-, (Eb7), F, Ab-, G-, C7, F, Bb-, Eb7.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### *Bird is the Word: Langston Hughes, Charles Olson and a Non-Representational Jazz Poetics*

A footnote explains: “It must be explained that ancient Greek music ... depended upon its character as an accessory to verse to make its imitative meaning clear ... as far as we know, all music originally served such an accessory function.”<sup>1</sup> The essay from which it comes, Clement Greenberg’s “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” has of course long been standard stock in the modernist critic’s toolkit; its claims are by now both familiar and familiarly problematized. In retrospect, Greenberg may be fairly criticized for his inability to anticipate aesthetic practices like jazz, which can legitimately be described as both “avant-garde” and “folk art,” and jazz poetry, which arguably blends the examples – “a poem by T.S. Eliot and a Tin Pan Alley Song” – whose simple presence ostensibly testifies to the insurmountable chasm separating avant-garde from kitsch. More troubling, the implied medial separation of Greenberg’s theory – that “in turning his attention away from subject matter of common experience, the poet or artist turns it upon the medium of his own craft” (36) – poses problems, for the simple reason that the history of Western poetry has nearly always held “musicality” to be one of the medium’s constitutive components.<sup>2</sup>

So why do I raise it? Because despite the bizarre history implied by the footnote above – one doubts many anthropologists would be compelled by the claim that poetry not only precedes music (“all music,” at that), but actually delivers it into the world – Greenberg’s ideas do help situate the conceptual terrain faced by the poets I discuss in this chapter. The same footnote, after all, observes that “music” is the “abstract art ... which avant-garde poetry has tried so much to emulate” (36). This, of course, is also true for non-avant-garde work; and while the historical relationship between poetry and music has taken turns both cooperative and antagonistic, the enduring force of the comparison does perhaps suggest that a turn *to* “the medium of [one’s] own craft” often involves, precisely, a turn *away* from the presumed form of that medium.

Musicality, of course, is not music. Or, it is not quite music, or not always music. Indeed, for the poets addressed in this dissertation, conceptually untangling the two – musicality and music – often proved an unwelcome task. This was in part a reflection of the fact that these were all poets from whom the music inspiring their poetry (and to which their poetry often aspired) was not “music” considered in the abstract, but an actual, extant body of sound: that having emerged from Charlie Parker’s horn. Of course, calling Parker’s music, too, *merely* a body of sound also misses much of its wider impact. While one would be hard-pressed to find a jazz musician alive today whose style does not bear traces of Parker, the music’s conceptual effects clearly extend beyond the merely musical. Chapter 1 addressed some of these; for our purposes, most prominent was the fact that this was a music that radically reshuffled the coordinates tying music and Blackness, if not sound in general and identity in general, to one

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<sup>1</sup> (Greenberg 36)

<sup>2</sup> The history of Greenberg’s critical reception is, of course, far too long and detailed to be traced out here. For two canonical readings of Greenberg on the issues of aesthetic essentialism briefly raised here, see T.J. Clark’s “Clement Greenberg’s Theory of Art,” and the response from Michael Fried, “How Modernism Works.” For a recent and useful rebuttal of Greenberg’s theory of medial fusion and separation, one that relates more directly to my argument, see Daniel Albright’s *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts*.



another. For many of the artists who followed, especially those whose work bore explicit ties to the tradition of Black music, the challenge lay not only in confronting a new set of sounds, but in learning to navigate a new conceptual landscape.

This chapter examines two poetic mappings of this landscape. These are Langston Hughes's 1951 sequence *Montage of a Dream Deferred* and the poetry and poetics of Black Mountain pioneer Charles Olson. Together helping sketch out a provisional theory of post-Parker poetic musicality, Hughes and Olson in my account represent the two most conceptually generative models of bebop-inspired poetizing of the 1950's. To readers familiar with the standard chartings of post-war American poetry, the decision to pair Hughes and Olson may register as somewhat unconventional. In most accounts, there is little that recommends reading the two together. Though their moments of historical prominence certainly overlapped, there is little indication of any communication, or even mutual awareness, between them. While today, one most often sees Hughes's work mobilized in contexts where race is a primary concern, Olson's importance is seen as coming from his being, in Charles Altieri's words, "the central figure of postmodern poetics," the latter an aesthetic in which questions of race often remain at best tangential.<sup>3</sup> While Hughes's admirers (and detractors) tend to cite his formal and communicative sincerity – Meta Jones astutely notes that the "critical penchant for reviewing Hughes's writing through a primarily racial lens has the unwarranted consequence of obscuring his significance as an experimental writer"<sup>4</sup> – Olson and his descendants are valorized for their work's fragmentation, opacity, and high-brow intellectualism.

While I do not aim to minimize the very real historical and formal differences between the two poets (and, in fact, may even amplify them in what follows), this chapter nonetheless pairs Olson and Hughes according to what I read as a shared investment in the music of and conceptual categories opened by Charlie Parker, as well as a shared willingness to think past the more limited ways Parker's music was often incorporated by their contemporaries. To be sure, Parker's music inspired plenty of poetry. Yet on the whole, poets tended to approach it more as a source for vocabulary or internal subject matter than a call to reevaluate the nature of poetic musicality itself.<sup>5</sup> At the risk of being overly schematic, we could say that the general "Charlie Parker poem" tends to move in one of three directions, largely distinguishable by the way poems figure the signifier "Charlie Parker."

The first of these sees "Charlie Parker" internalized as a specific *body of sounds*, with the corresponding mode of response being what one might call "imitative." See, for example, Ray Bremser's "Blues for Bonnie":

zoo.

a dam-giraff.

whallop, a  
lalapalooza floozie  
on via flamina piazza

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<sup>3</sup> (Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple* 102)

<sup>4</sup> (Jones, "Listening to What the Ear Demands: Langston Hughes and His Critics" 1146)

<sup>5</sup> As Sascha Feinstein asks, "If Charlie Parker could read the thousands of poems written in his honor, would he be delighted enough by the sheer volume to overlook the weakness of the verse itself?" (Feinstein, "Yusef Komunyakaa's "Testimony" and the Humanity of Charlie Parker" 757)

masticating a ruddy pizza  
pie -  
pie-pie.

....  
but  
a hubbalubba drum, hellofa biff-bam hallabaloo  
(fontainebleu in the  
background.)

dribble sinbah,  
tic.<sup>6</sup>

Jazz-wise, the goal here is to announce one's link to Parker's music by employing sonic effects (rhythmic, phonemic, accentual) that allegedly lead a poem to *sound like* jazz. Of course, whether lyric as a genre is actually capable of realizing the extreme degree of onomatopoeia necessary to achieving this goal (the goal being, essentially, to turn lyric into an ersatz audio recording) remains a generally unexamined question. To this end, it is more accurate to describe this imitative mode less as repeating the actual sounds of Parker's horn, Kenny Clarke's drums, or another bebopper's instrument than as trafficking in the poetic codes (many in fact visual) that quickly came to signify a poem's "sounding like Charlie Parker." It is also worth noting that imitative poems inevitably inscribe a near-permanent generic parasitism, since such poems necessarily rely on a non-poetic music for their sonic content.

The second standard post-Parker trope lies in poems' venerating "Charlie Parker" as a Christ-like figure of African-American heroics, "Jesus saves" syncretized as "Bird lives." Figuring Parker as the *savoir* who sacrificed his body so that his sounds could redeem us, these types of poems tend to, as Sascha Feinstein describes, "praise [Parker] with embarrassingly hagiographic detail," often "[relying] on clichés, most obviously 'Bird lives!' but also 'Blow, Bird, blow!' as well as a host of dreadful ornithological metaphors."<sup>7</sup> A relatively well-known example might be Gregory Corso's 1955 poem "Requiem for 'Bird' Parker, Musician":

gone  
BIRD was goner than sound  
broke the barrier with a horn's coo  
BIRD was higher than moon  
BIRD hovered on a roof top, too  
like a weirdy monk he drooped  
horn in hand, high above all  
lookin' down on them people  
with half-shut weirdy eyes  
saying to himself; "yeah, yeah"  
like nothin' meant nothin' at all<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> (Bremser)

<sup>7</sup> (Feinstein, "Yusef Komunyakaa's "Testimony" and the Humanity of Charlie Parker" 757)

<sup>8</sup> (Corso). As with Ray Bremser's example above, my goal in quoting Corso's poetry is not to belittle his work, but only to suggest that it misses some of the deeper implications of Parker's music. Put differently, my criticism is not aesthetic, but interpretive.

The third major mode of poetic engagement with Parker lies in the many attempts made to compose according to procedures labeled “improvisatory.” Though such poems too take many forms, most influential have been those for which “improvisation” equals a sort of free, unmediated spontaneity. Alan Ginsburg’s famous directive, “first thought, best thought” captures the idea well; as Ginsburg describes, improvisation is “like a fountain of instantaneous inspiration that’s available to everybody. All you have to do is turn on the radio or put on a record or pick up an axe yourself and blow.”<sup>9</sup> In retrospect, descriptions like Ginsburg’s represent rather easy objects of ridicule. Certainly, their resemblance to the actual experience of playing jazz is minimal, at best. One might call such descriptions merely naïve, if their racial implications weren’t so enduringly pernicious.<sup>10</sup> Yet to their defense (racial problems notwithstanding), the adequation of poetry to actual music here is arguably less of a goal than adopting this mythic, idealized view of improvisation as a countercultural symbol is.

Despite the earnestness with which all three models claim Parker’s music as an inspiration, that so many of the poems they produced retain interest more as historical documents than aesthetic ones does suggest that despite their superficially radical appearances, many bebop-inspired poems nonetheless demonstrate some rather conservative approaches to poetizing. The issue, at end, is Charlie Parker, and the degree to which poems are able to absorb his more fundamental impacts. Despite the degree to which Parker introduced new sounds – new notes, rhythms and phrases – into the jazz idiom, the conceptual force of his music emerges, I argued in Chapter 1, not from those sounds and rhythms considered in isolation, but in the way they collectively generate as an improvised reading of underlying form. Deeply frustrating the expectation of a solo’s being read as “telling a story” (or, put differently, resignifying what “story” means here), such sounds actively refuse the representative status they would otherwise be given.

The issue for lyric is then the following: if Parker’s music succeeds at decoupling the inherited links tying musical sound to culturally representative function, so that sounds could no longer be read as immediately revelatory of either a musician’s “inner self” or a larger race-based perspective on the world, then poetically *imitating* Parker’s sounds would reinscribe the very structure of reference Parker’s music works so hard to undermine, making poetic sound relevant only as representative of an essentially *non-poetic* experience. Likewise with the naïve models of poetic improvisation, which disregard the fact that Parker’s is always an improvised reading of a pre-given form, and in so doing conceal the dialectic argument at the heart of Parker’s aesthetic. While both processes might yield poems that capture Parker’s cultural importance, or even Parker’s personal character, neither would have learned much from Parker’s

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<sup>9</sup> (Yaffe 46). Yaffe, in fact, follows up this quote by noting just how comical the image of Ginsburg actually “picking up an ‘axe’ and blowing the choruses of ‘Ko Ko’” would be (46).

<sup>10</sup> Most damning in this regard are the claims that viewing jazz as the unrestrained abandon of super-ego traffics in the discourses of primitivism to which African American aesthetics have been submitted since nearly their genesis, discourses by African American artists are inevitably described as more honest, intuitive, and, generally speaking, lacking the inhibitions that Western civilization has imposed on its White inhabitants. These implications, which, as long-standing tropes, valorize “blackness” as the antidote to repressive civilization, certainly cannot be ignored. I may, it might be noted, be picking on Ginsburg a little bit unfairly here, and my aim is not to denigrate the quality of his work (or some of it, at least). But the racial implications of some Beat-era aesthetics, for which Ginsburg was clearly in part responsible, remain undeniably problematic. For an extended, if somewhat polemical, critique of many Beat-era appropriations of jazz, see Jon Panish’s *The Color of Jazz: Race and Representation in Postwar American Culture*. Also see David Yaffe’s *Fascinating Rhythm: Reading Jazz in American Writing*.

actual music.

The importance of Hughes and Olson, then, lies in their poetics' having registered the complex ways in which Parker's music calls jazz-inspired lyric to revise some of its most fundamental assumptions. Both in my account remain crucial for reimagining the relationship between poetic musicality and representative capacity. The two poets realize these goals, of course, in far different, even diametrically-opposed ways: while *Montage of a Dream Deferred* works through on one hand the terms which define imitation as *the* primary mode of African-American poetic musicality, and on the other, the poetic tropes that make this mode of imitation recognizable as such, Olson thinks more directly about the relation between sound, embodiment and musicality, outlining a poetics that places the body itself at the center of its own musical productions. It is, importantly, not that either Hughes or Olson abandons the imitative and improvisatory modes through which jazz-inspired poetics seems to be called to work. It is rather that both poets employ these topoi while simultaneously thinking through their conceptual implications, poetically reflecting on what it means for a poem to adopt either as an explicit response to Parker. While both thus help trace out a loose theory of poetic musicality, they do so without losing a sense of music's importance to lyric qua lyric, not just lyric qua music.

On one hand, then, we have the poem as ostensible musical record, on the other the poem as sounded elaboration of embodied activity. And at end, a brief attempt at synthesis. I begin with the first of these responses, that of Langston Hughes.

### ***A SONG DEFERRED: LANGSTON HUGHES AND THE STAKES OF POETIC IMITATION***

By 1951, Langston Hughes had already secured his position as chief poetic chronicler of African-American music. Having spent the previous three decades forging the sounds and structures of Black music into a sophisticated poetic voice, Hughes had earned an international reputation whose consequence was also to ensconce those sounds and structures as legitimate objects of poetic attention. Given his ties to jazz, it was perhaps inevitable that the first great statement of bebop poetics would emerge from Hughes's pen. This came in the form of the 1951 sequence *Montage of a Dream Deferred*.

Yet given the history of Hughes's poetic reception, what was also perhaps inevitable was that the majority of critical readings of *Montage* would come to (and have continued to) read *Montage* through the frameworks of Hughes's earlier poems. While the aims and conclusions of these readings vary, the overall model remains strikingly consistent: beginning with a brief discussion of the bebop music Hughes's poetry calls upon, this standard critical model shows first how Hughes's poems incorporate these musical features, then points out what this poetic replication communicates about post-war African-American culture, for which Harlem often stands as representative location. The effect is to make ultimately superficial the difference between poetry inspired by bebop and that inspired by earlier forms of jazz: though the new poetry may sound and look different from its predecessors, the manner of this poetry's presentation, the way it figures itself *as* conveying something essential about African-American life, straightforwardly replicates earlier models. While the sounds may change, the song remains

the same, so to speak.<sup>11</sup>

Reasons, many legitimate, for the enduring appeal of this approach are not difficult to find. There is, for example, the historical tendency for critics to read Hughes's work as a statement about race, rather than one about poetics. There is the difficulty of bebop, a thorny music rendered even thornier when matched with the challenge writing about any music poses. More explicitly, there is the fact that *Montage*'s poems *do* pose themselves as both poetic instantiations of bebop music and as windows into the cultural and emotional life of early-1950's Harlem. A quick accounting: as an ostensible poetic rendering of bebop, *Montage* analogizes on a phenomenological level as well as any poem or group of poems the formal features found in Charlie Parker's music. A set of poems of varying lengths, forms, and levels of abstraction, *Montage* easily satisfies DeVaux's description of Parker's improvisations as "[delighting] in sudden and disorienting shifts of rhetoric" (380). Like Parker's solos, *Montage* eschews globally governing structure for small, isolated moments of drama. Voices come and go, none fully authoritative; phrases and ideas often repeat, seemingly without development. If Parker diagnosed relentless musical modularity as the antidote to prescribed narrative, from a formal standpoint *Montage* implicitly argues that a sequence of poems, far more than any single poem could, better captures the phenomenological experience of hearing Parker's improvisations as they develop in time.

That *Montage* internalizes bebop as this structuring conceit is certainly no secret. It is, in fact, explicitly announced by Hughes in his introduction to the sequence, which famously describes:

In terms of current Afro-American popular music and the sources from which it has progressed—jazz, ragtime, swing, blues, boogie-woogie, and be-bop—this poem on contemporary Harlem, like be-bop, is marked by conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms, and passages sometimes in the manner of the jam session, sometimes the popular song, punctuated by the riffs, runs, breaks, and distortions of the music of a community in transition.<sup>12</sup>

Locating bebop's use for lyric in the music's ability to incorporate multiple styles without being reduced to any of them, the statement helps lay out (or circumscribe) in advance an interpretive structure by which the ensuing poems can be read. This being Hughes, form is of course never far from content: "in terms of" Charlie Parker, it is not difficult to see (hear) this long, shifting, paratactic sentence as structurally recollecting the 9-measure phrase that began Parker's "Klaun

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<sup>11</sup> One need not look far to find readings of *Montage* that take this approach. See, for example, Walter Farrell and Patricia Johnson's "Poetic Interpretations of Urban Black Folk Culture: Langston Hughes and the 'Bebop' Era," John Lowney's "Langston Hughes and the 'Nonsense' of Bebop," Robert Hokanson's "Jazzing it Up: The Be-Bop Modernism of Langston Hughes," James Smethurst's "'Don't Say Goodbye to the Porkpie Hat': Langston Hughes, the Left, and the Black Arts Movement," Steven Tracy's *Langston Hughes and the Blues*, or Arnold Rampersad's biography, *The Life of Langston Hughes: Volume II: 1914-1967, I Dream a World*. For readings that move in directions more akin to the one I pursue here, see Anita Patterson's "Jazz, Realism and the Modernist Lyric: The Poetry of Langston Hughes," which addresses Hughes's "constant awareness of the constraints of language as an artistic medium" (681) or the aforementioned Meta Jones' "Listening to What the Ear Demands: Langston Hughes and His Critics."

<sup>12</sup> (Hughes, "Montage of a Dream Deferred" 387)

Stance” solo.<sup>13</sup> Underneath these, however, this description performs its more important work, which is to put into place a chain of substitutions that then becomes a crucial focus of *Montage*’s interpretive energy. As I read it, these substitutions are two, one metonymic and the other generic. First, African-American music is posed as being so constitutive of the culture from which it comes that it can synecdochally stand for that culture. (This same metonymy, it must be noted, is at work in the various readings of African-American art that impulsively privilege that art’s oral components over its visual or literary ones.) Second, lyric’s ability to articulate the psychic and social experiences of this community thus becomes a matter of poetry’s making itself as phenomenologically reminiscent as possible of the actual sounds and rhythms of bebop.

While it is undoubtedly correct to say that these poems do communicate something important about post-war Harlem, this is not *all* they do. Rather than read this description as a simple account of how *Montage* is to work, the poems that follow, I believe, call for seeing in it a set of common assumptions it is *Montage*’s job to examine, with subtlety and rigor. Indeed, if one takes seriously the claim that Charlie Parker’s music rewrote the relation between the sounds of Black music and their alleged representative function, then the story of Hughes’s engagement with these sounds in *Montage* cannot be simply that new social realities gave rise to new sounds which are then lent poetic voice by Hughes. If the conundrum of Charlie Parker’s music is that it becomes most revelatory at the moment it refuses reduction to its representative value, then Hughes’s incorporation of these sounds becomes important not only for what it tells us about life in 1950’s Harlem, but for *how* it communicates (or refuses to communicate) this information, for the way it figures itself as being able to tell us something about life in 1950’s Harlem.

What matters about a sequence like *Montage*, that is, is not only that it identifies bop sounds as representative of Black life, but that it understands these sounds as *working* differently, poetically speaking, than the sounds on which Hughes’s earlier work had relied. Which is finally to suggest that *Montage* be read most forcefully in this capacity less as a meditation on Black life circa 1950, or even as a meditation on the role bebop plays in articulating the experience of that life, but as a meditation on jazz-inspired poetic musicality as such.

To begin to trace out how, exactly, *Montage* leverages Parker’s music to generate this new model of poetic musicality, I offer an extended reading of the sequence’s first poem, the now-iconic “Dream Boogie.”

Good morning, daddy!  
Ain't you heard  
The boogie-woogie rumble  
Of a dream deferred?

Listen closely:  
You'll hear their feet  
Beating out and beating out a --

*You think  
It's a happy beat?*

Listen to it closely:  
Ain't you heard

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<sup>13</sup> See Chapter One.

something underneath  
like a --

*What did I say?*

Sure,  
I'm happy!  
Take it away!

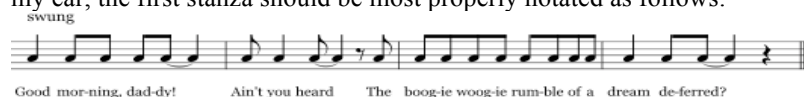
*Hey, pop!*  
*Re-bop!*  
*Mop!*

*Y-e-a-h!*

Its broken rhythms and scat syllables conspicuously displayed, “Dream Boogie” has clearly taken stock of the previous decade’s musical revolution. While most readings of the poem focus on this bebop musicality, however, what is more instructive for our purposes is the shift “Dream Boogie” traces *to* bebop music *from* the earlier modes of musicality with which the poem begins.<sup>14</sup> This historical and formal development, traced out through diction, typeface and spacing, is that transforming the “Good morning, daddy!” with which the poem opens into the “*Hey, pop!*” that augurs its close. Far less respectful (if no less slangy) variations of “Good morning” and “daddy,” “*Hey*” and “*pop*,” by signifying on this opening gesture, announce a shift in tone and generational argot. But the shift is also, more importantly, one of poetic musicality, since unlike “Good morning, daddy!,” “*Hey, pop!*” functions equally well as either address or nonsensical scat syllables, a single metric foot, but absent semantic value. The transition in musicality is too captured in the rhythmic differences separating the standard lines from the italicized lines: while the opening stanzas proceed in a bouncy 4/4 time, the final italicized lines, with their repeated exclamation marks, eschew rhythmic regularity for unpredictable sonic volley.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, most readings of this poem tend to hear its rhythms and pacing as operating in a pure bebop mode. Poet Barry Wallenstein, for example, calls the poem “reminiscent of Dizzy Gillespie’s raps” (Wallenstein 603). Michael Borshuk describes the poem as “[capturing] bebop’s ability to balance revolution and historical comprehensiveness” (Borshuk 75). And Erskine Peters discusses the poem’s “metri-phonetic effects” and “complex rhythmic pace,” showing how the poem establishes a “combination of exclamatory and haltingly suspenseful interrogatory intonations” reminiscent of bebop (Peters 34-35). The one reading of the poem that does recognize the poem’s dialogue as occurring between a bebop-inspired voice and an older, boogie-woogie one is Edward Brunner’s, in his book *Cold War Poetry*, which suggests that “the intrusive, italicized voice aligns itself with bebop,” and that this bebop voice contrasts “the boogie-woogie musical style that dominates the opening” (Brunner 137).

<sup>15</sup> “4/4 time” means that there are four beats in a musical measure, or in this case, 4 beats per line of poetry. Roughly speaking, the difference between hearing stress in this musical manner and hearing it through more traditional metrics is that in a musical framework, rests (silences) also count as beats (or feet), whereas in traditional metrics implied silences occurring at the end of lines more often do not. While Stephen Tracy tries to indicate in quasi-musical fashion how he hears this poem fitting into a 12-bar blues form, I admittedly have difficulty hearing it as Tracy does, though this difficulty may at end reflect my having misunderstood of Tracy’s notational system. To my ear, the first stanza should be most properly notated as follows:



Organizationally, this last group of italicized lines (the four final lines of the poem) directly recalls the structural strategies of bebop, one of whose crowning achievements, we'll remember, was its ability to outline musical form while simultaneously performing its disarticulation. As four lines potentially group-able into a single stanza, these italicized syllables make a bid for fulfilling the pattern set by the poem's earlier non-italicized (and frequently interrupted) 4-line stanzas. The space separating "*Mop!*" from "*Y-e-a-h!*," however, rends a hole in this possibility, allowing the poem to inhabit both options at once. This vacillation between form and its undoing reaches its peak in the poem's very last line, which, unlike the straightforward language with which the poem opens, gives little indication as to how it should actually sound: does "*Y-e-a-h!*," one wonders, call for a long, drawn-out sound, or do the hyphens indicate punctuated emphases whose rhythm might finally be unhearable in the poem itself? Impossible to pin down as either a sharp single syllable or a 4-beat, four-stress measure, the line becomes a musical imitation without a clear musical reference.

More than a mere contrast in musical sound, however, what this displacement of swing-era vocabulary by its bebop counterpart adds up to is a shift in what these musics *mean*. The difference, that is, at end becomes one of *voice*. As I argued earlier, "voice" in a jazz context works by linking the actual sounds issuing from improvising bodies with the perspective those sounds are potentially read as representing. From this perspective, what is most significant about the opening stanzas is not just that they proceed in 4/4 time, but that this 4/4 time rhythmically mirrors the very "boogie-woogie rumble" these lines mention. Given that one of the most identifiable characteristics of boogie-woogie is the steady, repeated rhythm of its pianist's left hand, these non-italicized stanzas enact a sharp alignment of content and form: by both naming *and* sounding the "rumble" and "something underneath" of boogie-woogie (both phrases purring out the "lower frequencies" so important to Ellison's *Invisible Man*), these stanzas pose the music's churning, rhythmic foundation as hearable in both the figural *and* the literal sense.

The doubled mode of hearing posed here – the conceit that the rhythm the poem creates transparently performs the extra-poetic music these lines describe – then raises the stakes of the question these stanzas directly ask. On one hand, the implication is that "boogie-woogie" sound is somehow revelatory enough of the black experience (the "dream deferred") to stand for it. Twice asking the audience to "listen closely," the poem here figures this music (the "boogie-woogie") as an essentially *transparent text*, one whose material identity is important only insofar as it can narrate a larger history of social frustration. We are, here, dispatched into the first substitutional movement of Hughes's introduction. The mere experience of repetition seems enough to enforce this gesture, which, in standard swing-era fashion, is best communicated not by talking, or even singing, but by the movement of the "feet / Beating out and beating out" the boogie-woogie rhythm the lines perform.<sup>16</sup> (The idea that experiential essence is best communicated by unconscious, rhythmic bodily gesture is reaffirmed by the succeeding poem, "Parade," which describes, in part, how the act of "Marching ... marching ... / marching ... / noon till night ..." allows "the whole world" to "see / old black me!")

"Feet" is of course an overloaded term here, indicating not only embodied communication, but also the poetic rhythms (the "feet") of the lines themselves. This sense of

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<sup>16</sup> It is additionally hard not to hear in "beating" a whiff of Hughes's later fictional description of bebop's origin, from his Jess B. Semple stories. As Semple narrates, "Every time a cop hits a Negro with his billy club, that old club says, 'BOP! BOP! ... BE-BOP! ... MOP! ... BOP! ...' That's where Be-Bop came from, beaten right out of some Negro's head into those horns and saxophones and the piano keys that play it..." (Hughes, *The Best of Simple* 118-19)



overloaded signification then carries out the second movement of Hughes's introduction. Bouncing along in their 4/4 rhythm, the "feet" of the poem's non-italicized stanzas thus acquire a transparency akin to that of the boogie-woogie music they describe, a transparency acquired through these feet's figuring themselves as a literal form of music. The implication is that literal boogie-woogie music is now unnecessary, given its poetic replication. Change in tense makes this movement clear: while "Ain't you heard" suggests that boogie-woogie music (whose existence as sound precedes the existence of the poem) has always been hearable as an expression of the dream deferred, "Listen closely" proposes that this content is equally borne by the only music the reader can *actually* hear, which is the "music" of the poem, the rendition of boogie-woogie its own rhythms perform.

From a poetic perspective, the overarching conceit here is that what I have been calling "poetic imitation," a poem's attempt to sonically resemble an extant piece or style of music, ultimately makes *reading* phenomenologically identical to *hearing*. These lines thereby borrow not only the sounds of pre-bebop jazz but also the conceptual categories that allow for those sounds' being imitated poetically: renouncing material presence in favor of what it communicates, poetry is figured as literally the same thing as the music it imitates. Lyric qua lyric here becomes an almost unnecessary phenomenon. Since the rhythms and sounds of pre-bop music sufficiently articulate the structuring experience of contemporary African-American life, then poetry becomes useful only as a bearer of pre-bop music. One might then read the "dream" of the poem as this aspiration of total poetic self-effacement. For the "dream" of these lines is one of near-unmediated communicative presence, of poetry whose properly poetic components fall away as potential resistances to a poem's purely musical presence, thereby realizing an idealized alignment of word, sound, and meaning.

I have been careful to use the words "conceit" and "figure" to describe this goal, since of course the very presence of the poem as words on a page belies this aspiration to material transparency. The point is obvious, but crucial: without the words giving semantic direction to the sounds and rhythms they produce, these sounds and rhythms would not register the specific meaning with which the poem invests them. For these non-italicized lines to even tell us that the hearable content of boogie-woogie music is that of having one's dream deferred, they must already be different from it – semantically, not merely abstractly communicative. Or, put conversely, if boogie-woogie music could actually fully communicate this experience in the unmediated way it is posed as doing, one would hardly need the poem to tell us so. This is why the "dream" of a written poem's literally being a mode of music can only be always already "deferred," and why the idealized overcoming of the divide separating poetry from music can happen only in a future unavailable to the poem. The communicative possibility of that imagined future will always require the semantic presence of lyric that it hopes to overcome; the very structure of this dream therefore crystallizes the difference between poetic music and music proper *as* difference.<sup>17</sup>

The more straightforward experience of deferral in the poem, of course, is that of the italicized stanzas' repeatedly frustrating the closure of the stanzas they interrupt, so that only the first stanza reaches completion. Yet as before, the larger accomplishment of these italicized lines is to dissociate the sounds and rhythms of black music from their allegedly representative meaning. The first intrusion, "*You think / It's a happy beat?*" suggests already a detachment between the rhythms beat out by feet and what the (likely white) audience within the poem

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<sup>17</sup> If one senses the specter of Derrida here, it is because his work describes inordinately well the process of deferral animating the poem. See *Of Grammatology*.

actually hears in the music: yet another iteration of the happy minstrelsy it has been irremediably conditioned to hear. If the non-italicized stanzas seem to believe that rhythm alone, the “rumble” that moves “feet,” can convey deeper social truths, this italicized interruption suggests that in reality, the intellect (“*think*”) is not always led by the body. And as the poem begins to take stock of the realization that not only the sounds of black music, but perhaps also the look and sound of poetry working to imitate black music, cannot carry the communicative weight wished for, the bebop-inspired approaches begin to infiltrate even the non-italicized lines, which, by the poem’s fourth stanza (“Sure, / I’m happy! / Take it away!”), resemble more the lines that follow than the ones coming earlier.

The movement into superficially ebullient syllables at end, then, effectively narrates a disillusionment with music’s communicative potentials and an attendant acquiescence to an ironic (and by now standard) mask of minstrel performance. Moreover, the transformation of voice from enthusiasm to resignation, into a situation where, “Sure / I’m happy!” means its exact opposite, introduces a new relation of sound to meaning, of surface to depth. For against earlier attempts to blend music and word, sound and communicative experience, the syllables that come after (“*Hey, pop! / Re-bop! / Mop!*”), exuberant as they seem, harbor no illusion about the ability to relate depth of experience. Hopeful as they are, the boogie-woogie lines cannot finally overpower the cultural stereotypes they aim to combat. Which is why the more these syllables sound like actual bebop music, the more they approach semantic *nonsense*. In this, they argue, they are not so different from the earlier lines, which, though the naïve speaker there assumed that boogie-woogie music clearly expressed the dream deferred, were themselves received as an absence of meaningful communication.

On a fundamental level, then, the imitative mode at work in “Dream Boogie”’s bebop lines permanently rends open the dream of word and sound being able to substitute for one another. Unlike the opening lines, which contain clear directions for being read (“read” here indicating both “performed” and “understood”), the bebop syllables insert a chasm between the words themselves and their narrative function. If the poem’s non-italicized syllables pose themselves as materially unnecessary, these italicized bebop stanzas work in the opposite mode: that they are unable to communicate the dream deferred is what necessitates their graphic presence on the page. As we saw with Parker, they communicate only their inability to communicate; that they are unable to communicate a depth of historical experience is, more precisely, the experience they communicate.

There is a difference, of course. With Parker, the frustration of hermeneutic expectation was a product of the overall narrative (non-)arc of his solos. Here, overall narrative is not so much the issue – the poem as a whole, in fact, embeds these bebop syllables within a narrative that allegorizes the changing communicative capacities of Black music. “Dream Boogie”’s restructuring of communicative presence, rather, comes from the poem’s bebop syllables’ explicitly advertising their material inability to be the music they ostensibly echo. There is a seeming paradox here: their success at imitating bebop requires the concomitant acknowledgment of the failure of these syllables to actually be bebop. As a result, these syllables insist on an undeniable material presence, yet one that admits no representative capacity. It is not that they become meaningless – symbolically, syllables like these remain clearly readable as signs of Blackness. Yet the *content* of this version of Blackness – whatever they might say Blackness actually *is* – is vacated by these syllables’ lack of semantic reference. Realizing a sort of non-representative representation, these syllables open up a new experimental poetry of Blackness, one able to play with the codes shaping that category without utilizing those

codes as signs of a pre-determined essence.

The poem “Flatted Fifths” further traces out this distinction between bebop’s symbolic referentiality and its semantic function:

Little cullud boys with beards  
re-bop be-bop mop and stop.

Little cullud boys with fears,  
frantic, kick their draftee years  
into flatted fifths and flatter beers  
that at a sudden change become  
sparkling Oriental wines  
rich and strange  
silken bathrobes with gold twines  
and Heilbronner, Crawford,  
Nat-undreamed-of-Lewis combines  
in silver thread and diamond notes  
on trade-marks inside  
Howard coats

Little cullud boys in berets  
*oop pop-a-da*  
horse a fantasy of days  
*ool ya koo*  
and dig all plays.

Like “Dream Boogie,” this poem too narrates a development in the communicative potential of jazz-inspired lyric. Yet if “Dream Boogie” narrated that change through semantic structure, this one occurs most directly on the level of tone. Young and initially naïve, the speaker of “Dream Boogie” eventually comes to inhabit the ironic distance of bop. In this poem, however, the speaker appears to be an older, musically-knowledgeable listener, one whose ostensible objectivity lends an initial skepticism. This is announced first by the poem’s title, which clearly references Dixieland musician Eddie Condon’s famous condemnation of the beboppers, “They flat their fifths; we drink ours.”<sup>18</sup> The opening description is certainly disparaging, with the focus on “beards” (a sign of maturity clearly unearned by the beboppers) helping portray these “little cullud boys” as children playing dress-up. The opening rhyme scheme, too, which repeats the same syllable for four out of the first five lines, renders a verdict on bebop’s ineffectiveness; their modern sounds aside, in this poem the beboppers’ “frantic” bluster enacts little real change. The biggest affront to the bebopper’s sensibilities, however, lies in the poem’s second line. Turning the allegedly resistant poetic syllables of their music into active, narrativizing verbs, the poem absorbs their sounds into its description, neutering whatever disruptive power they would hope to impose.

This somewhat mocking tone thus secured, the poem seems to prepare the way for further delineation of bebop’s impotency. Yet the unexpected happens, and the poem’s skepticism gives way to a grudging sense of admiration. The pivot is the word “change,” in the sixth line.

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<sup>18</sup> (Crow 264)

Narratively, the word marks a change in the poem's focus, from a raw assessment of childish activity to fantasmatic chronicle of luxury. More importantly, "change" marks the slow incorporation of bebop argot into the language of the speaker, since to musicians, "changes" is the dominant slang word for "chords." Not only, it seems, do the musicians' "changes" enable a childish escape from the terrors of grown-up life; they also come to inflect the poem's description of that escape, subtly if significantly reshaping the form, and therefore the tone. As the only internal word in the poem that explicitly rhymes with an end word ("strange"), the appearance of "change" in the poem injects a sense of newness into the otherwise repetitive rhyme scheme, which thereafter becomes far less predictable.

This change's greatest effects are felt on the level of rhythm. While the poem's opening seven lines produce and maintain the same bouncy 4/4 rhythm we saw in "Dream Boogie," the words "rich and strange" in line 8 interrupt this rhythm. Two stressed syllables appearing out of nowhere: the line is strange itself. Yet their more direct function manifests when paired with the "stop." in line 2, the word ending the poem's opening couplet. The difference between them is this: while "stop." narrates a rhythmic break, because it remains within the 4/4 rhythm of its line, it cannot actually perform one. "Rich and strange," in contrast, performs this break simply and without explanation. This shift, then, from a word ("stop.") that *describes* what the beboppers do without actually participating in that activity, and a phrase ("rich and strange") that enacts bebop's broken rhythms *without* needing to describe them, helps identify the poem's larger transformation in tone. This transformation is felt most explicitly in the way the poem comes to linger, indulgently, in its richly-developed description of the magical world that bebop allegedly creates. Despite its initial skepticism, the poem seems to positively revel in the opportunity to describe the luxurious life otherwise unavailable to it. Indeed, many of the words seen in these eight lines – "silver," "gold," "diamonds" – appear literally nowhere else in *Montage*, enabling a reprieve from the gritty world of the rest of the sequence.

Initially posed as a childish fantasy, this fantasmatic space is, it seems, also seductive, even redeeming. And the poem's experience of having basked in it paints the bebopper's world as a viable and legitimate mode of future expression. The degree to which bebop has pervaded the voice of the poem can be seen in the way "Flatted Fifth"'s final stanza, in typical bebop fashion, reiterates its opening one, but signifies upon it. The simple replacement of "beards" with "berets" in the closing stanza's first line represents an abandonment of the earlier association of youthfulness with naiveté. Yet as always, the key is the details: "berets," as its line's closing word, inserts a trochee into its line's last beat. The effect is to either modify or refuse – depending on how one reads it – the strict 4/4 rhythm into which the opening stanza so observantly fits. "Berets" do, it seems, enact real difference. This most telling signal of the poem's acceptance of bebop as a viable mode of voice is the last stanza's restoring these bebop syllables to a position of non-semantic signifying. Italicized and separated from the narrative, these syllables now literally open up spaces in the narrative, rather than being fully absorbed by it, as they were in the opening couplet. Untraceable and unreadable (or readable as unreadable), "*ool ya koo*" becomes more magic incantation than enabler of narrative; whether or not poetic sounds like it can change the world, they can certainly change our descriptive relationship to it.

"Jam Session," finally, speaks to the futural orientation *Montage* sees in bebop, and the ensuing potentials of the poetic musicality it enables.

Letting midnight  
out on bail

*pop-a-da*  
having been  
detained in jail  
*oop-pop-a-da*  
for sprinkling salt  
on a dreamer's tail  
*pop-a-da*

On the level of pure content, the poem describes how late-night jam sessions transform midnight (the beginning of morning) from the moment where dreams are brought down to earth to the moment of pure possibility articulated at the end of “Flatted Fifths.” Phenomenologically evoking a conversation, perhaps in a jazz club, through which snippets of the music being played occasionally surface, the poem thereby poses the newly-freed midnight as the time for exploration of new provisional sounds and identities, those indicated but never described by the italicized lines winding in and out of the subject-less clause that provides the context for their appearance.

The strange rhythmic progression of these bebop syllables relative to that of the non-italicized couplets, however, builds on the end of “Flatted Fifths,” pinpointing a conceptual limit of the relation *Montage* builds between its ostensibly musical syllables and its traditional lyric modes of poetizing. While the non-italicized lines in this poem realize a consistency of narration, grammar and form – three easy couplets, three easy rhymes, three verbs with the same ending – “Jam Session”’s bebop lines appear without narrative preparation, add and subtract an opening syllable, and rhyme only with themselves (other than, perhaps, with “salt”), all without ever suggesting a reason for doing so. Whether they are meant to interrupt the poem’s straightforward lines (as the bebop syllables in “Dream Boogie” do, for example), comment on those lines, expose or deny something about those lines, is never made clear. Is the poem asking be read as an organic whole, or as a parallel set of experiences? We don’t know; the poem suggests answers to none of these questions. Yet it is not that the bebop lines proceed in a random or capricious manner. Oblique as they are, their expansion and contraction clearly conforms to a logic. To what exactly this logic might be, the poem gives no hint.

Yet the opacity realized by this absence of hermeneutic assistance is, at end, the exact sort of opacity *Montage*’s incorporation of bebop is meant to realize. Posed alongside, but clearly not absorbed by the narrative voice of the poem, lacking a clear musical reference, these syllables communicate their essential inability to communicate as well as any in the sequence. In this they fold the opacity of Parker’s music back onto itself: if Parker’s music posed sound as opaque to the degree that it is untranslatable or uncooptable as anything other than sound, Hughes’s incorporation of these sounds reinforces this opacity by insisting on its own material non-referentiality. Posed as citational, there is literally no meaning they cite, at least semantically. Symbolically, these lines do employ poetic codes through which they reference the African-American culture from which bebop sounds come. Yet what they can say about that culture – other than that it is non-reducible to any single communicative gesture, or even a single genre – is permanently withdrawn.

To be clear, this logic does not animate every poem in *Montage*, or, arguably, even most of them. Indeed, the sequence contains many individual poems that work in more conventional ways, ways often strongly resistant to the model of non-representative representation I have been trying to lay out here. Nonetheless, the sounds, structures, and, perhaps, the overall architecture

of *Montage* point to bebop as the poetic voice most viable for the future. For bebop, in *Montage*, emerges as the only mode of poetic musicality able to engage the twin problematics of, on one hand, the idea that communicating the African-American experience through poetry can happen in a semantically, linguistically, and even musically transparent way, and on the other, that the musicality of a poem is phenomenologically or materially equivalent to that of extra-poetic music. In refusing the easy accomplishment of both of these, *Montage* lays the groundwork for a new poetics to emerge.

This new poetics could, within *Montage*'s logic, importantly still retain a clearly-identifiable identity as African-American. To this end, *Montage* is able to retain the argument that Black music is the most important and revealing African-American cultural production available. Yet it does so, crucially, without the equivalent conceit that poetic music be phenomenologically reducible to bebop. In this sense *Montage* is, as its introduction suggests, a poem about transition, one that points towards the future without knowing what that future will look or sound like, or what structures of representation will be available to access it. It is, finally, this formal dilemma – what modes of representative, symbolic or graphic structure are available once bebop has permanently rendered musical and communicative transparency impossible? – that *Montage* at once registers and uses to open space for the future.

This new model of poetic imitation came to be quite powerful for those poets trying to explore the structures, sounds and meanings of jazz in a non-reductive way. As it turns out, one of these poets would prove to be Hughes himself. Before I engage this other work, however, I need to trace out the other figure of importance in my accounting of generative models of post-Parker jazz-inspired poetry. This figure is, of course, Charles Olson.

## CHARLES OLSON AND THE MUSICALITY OF FORM

If the choice to employ Hughes as one pillar of my general theory of jazz-inspired poetic musicality may seem sensible, even expected, the choice to use Charles Olson as the other may at first glance appear puzzling. Though hugely influential in post-war American poetry, Olson was not African-American, nor was his work particularly concerned with race, other than perhaps his own Swedish heritage. Almost a full generation older than the other poets and artists associated with Black Mountain College, Olson was not likely to have heard bebop as the definitive generational statement his younger colleagues did. Whether or not Olson was even much of a music fan is itself debatable. One biography has a composer friend, Frank Morris, saying that “music was mysterious to [Olson],” and other extant accounts of Olson's life suggest that Olson spent little actual time either listening to or thinking about music.<sup>19</sup> Even if these claims are slightly exaggerated, it is still easier to imagine Olson's interests running more toward cerebrally-demanding art music than towards a genre always rooted, in part, in the popular.<sup>20</sup>

Despite these caveats, however, there are a number of details that endorse reading Olson as a seminal figure of jazz-inspired poetics. First, whether or not Olson spent much time actually listening to Parker, a great deal of his thought clearly emerged from his ongoing correspondence with Robert Creeley and the other Black Mountain artists for whom Charlie Parker's music was

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<sup>19</sup> (Clark, *Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet's Life* 134)

<sup>20</sup> According to George F. Butterick, it was from the music and writings of composer Pierre Boulez, in fact, that Olson borrowed the notion of “series” he used to organize the Maximus Poems. (Butterick, GF xv)

critically important. The clear influence these other artists had on Olson, as well as the generalized trans-medial aspirations of the Black Mountain project, helps explain Olson's claims, like this one from 1968, that "the whole 'Black Mountain Poet' thing is a lot of bullshit ... Ha ha. Boy, there was no poetic. It was Charlie Parker. Literally, it was Charlie Parker."<sup>21</sup> Second and more decisive, there is the widespread influence Olson's work had on the (mostly African-American) poets of the 50's, 60's and 70's, those who together helped develop the genre we now call "jazz poetry." Amiri Baraka is most prominent here, but not at all unique; other figures include A.B. Spellman, Lorenzo Thomas and Jane Cortez. I will address some of these poets in later chapters, but for now the mere fact that Olson's work proved so fertile for them suggests that Olson's work fundamentally apprehends a number of jazz's most innate mechanisms.<sup>22</sup>

What these poets find so powerful, I believe, are the deeply provocative revisions to which Olson submits the concept of poetic musicality. In so doing, it offers a powerful set of tools for reconceptualizing lyric vis-à-vis Parker's musical revolution, one quite unlike Hughes'. Indeed, if Hughes figures poetry after Parker as the explicit separation of word and sound, of poetry from the music it evokes, Olson takes an approach that is nearly the direct opposite: articulating a poetics that aims to capture the human body as it plays out a fundamentally musical relationship to the world, Olson figures the poem as the *site*, not merely the record, of an authentically improvised musicality. Olson thus moves from figuring lyric as a reading of the extant, citable sounds of bebop, towards seeing poetry as an engaged component of the physical, even ontological processes by which jazz-inspired sound is created in the first place. This is a somewhat unorthodox view of poetic musicality, one in which a poem becomes most properly musical *not* when it phenomenologically resembles music, but when it is realized in the same way music is – by being a product of the music-making faculties of the human body. Accordingly, "jazz" for Olson signifies less a set of sounds or codes identifiable as "jazzy" (and therefore referential) than a particularly musical mode of the body's participation in the world.

While some of this argument is given in Olson's verse, its most explicit – and, arguably, most influential – formulation appears Olson's critical prose, most prominently the essays "Projective Verse" and "Human Universe."<sup>23</sup> Vastly influential in post-war American poetry, both essays function, as manifestos often do, by diagnosing a particular aesthetic stagnancy to which they then suggest an alternative. In "Projective Verse," this opposition is that between the "projective" or "open" verse the essay calls for and the "closed" style with which Olson condemns English poetry of the past few centuries ("In English the poetics became meubles – furniture" Olson writes in the *Maximus Poems*<sup>24</sup>). By "closed" forms here, Olson means poetry written by contemporary poets but in traditional verse forms, forms involving he calls the

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<sup>21</sup> (GF Butterick 71)

<sup>22</sup> Though many of these poets claim Olson as an influence, the historical and formal lineages involved have so far been only minimally explored. To my knowledge, only two books devote significant space to the subject. One is William J. Harris' *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka*, which helps trace out Olson's influence on Baraka. The other is what is up to now the most extensive and detailed critical account of Black experimental poetry in print, Aldon Nielson's *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism*. While Nielson does not engage Olson's work directly, Olson's name nonetheless seems to pop up in the formal back stories of a large percentage of Nielson's poets.

<sup>23</sup> (Olson, "Projective Verse"), (Olson, "Human Universe"). Henceforth "PV" and "HU." Olson's influence among both poets and critics, too, seems more tied to his various essays than to his poetry proper. For a quick discussion of this issue, see Charles Altieri's *Enlarging the Temple*.

<sup>24</sup> (Olson, *The Maximus Poems* 249). Henceforth "MP."

“inherited line, stanza, over-all form” (PV 16).<sup>25</sup> His problem with closed form is two-fold. First, reliance on closed forms encourages a laziness of attention, distracting poets away from what Olson identifies as the fundamental elements of form – syllable and line – and allowing poets to poetize by habit. These two elements, syllable and line, claim tremendous importance for Olson, since it out of these two that all poetry comes. The first, syllable, as the smallest, most self-contained element of form, links “particles of sound” with the “words they compose” (17-18 PV). The second, line, secures the basic arena of the syllable’s deployment, forming what Olson calls “the threshing floor for the dance” (19).

This emphasis on syllable and line as poetic sources then reveals Olson’s deeper ontological problem with closed form. This problem is one of meaning. One of the key beliefs animating Olson’s “system” is that objects and other phenomena in the world possess what one could call an *inherent* meaning, one generated non-relationally, outside of epistemological, economic or ontological kinship with other phenomena in the world: “not a thing’s class ... but the thing itself” (HU 56). While this view may strike those of us accustomed to post-Saussurian analytical frameworks (and those of us used to associating “postmodernism” as a whole with the *loss* of inherent meaning) as somewhat outmoded, it is this belief that implies the rejection of closed form. For if meaning (and, by extension, musicality) are inherent qualities of objects, then the traditionally musical elements of form – “rime and meter” – being essentially qualities of comparison and relationality, suppress rather than cultivate musicality, imposing meaning rather than assisting it.<sup>26</sup> Rather than working inwards from these larger structures, poetry should therefore begin with the syllable, the place where speech “is least careless” (PV 18).

These in themselves are not necessarily new ideas. That syllables enact both semantic and sonic effects is of course a poetic truism, and poets prior to 1950 were certainly working to detach poetic musicality from both rhyme and meter. One might recall here Pound’s call to “compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.”<sup>27</sup> What makes Olson’s particular prescription useful for our discussion, however, is that for him syllable and line are ultimately important because they above all other formal elements represent the points of connection a poem maintains with its bodily, kinetic sources. Linking words to bodies, syllable and line become the primary points at which energy is circulated between world, poet and reader. As he explains: “Let me put it baldly. The two halves are: / the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE / the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE” (19 PV).

As this schema succinctly demonstrates, Olson figures progressive verse as a sort of embodied poetics, one in which the presence and capabilities of the poet’s body, both intellectual and musical, are at all points accessible. Given this bodily approach, it is therefore no surprise that Olson focuses the bulk of attention on the two middle terms here, ear and breath. First, breath: the figuring of breath as genesis and measure of poetic line has a long history, one whose American lineage extends back at least to Whitman. Olson appropriates this tradition on a quite literal level: according to his precepts, the length of each line in a poem should ideally reflect

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<sup>25</sup> The phrase “contemporary poets” here is exclusive of what we now call “modernist” poets, since these writers – Williams, Zukofsky, and especially Pound – in Olson’s account already represent the beginnings of the movement toward open form.

<sup>26</sup> The structure of this argument is similar, in fact, to Marx’s critique of commodity exchange, a critique that itself surfaces occasionally in the *Maximus* sequence. In Marx’s account, the replacement of use-value by exchange-value too substitutes for the inherent value of objects a relational value determined according to a universal standard of exchange. This universal standard then renders all objects potentially equivalent. See *Das Kapital*. “We don’t even own / our labor,” Olson notes, “we do it all / by quantity and / machine” (MP 129).

<sup>27</sup>(Pound 3)



“the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment he writes” (19 PV). Lines should likewise end, regardless of sentence length, at the exact point “where [the poet’s] breathing, shall come to termination” (19 PV). These prescriptions reflect ontological considerations, and his claim that “the beginning and the end is breath” (24 PV) is clearly meant to resonate in poetic, biological and spiritual directions. As both *the* activity that gives and sustains life and the fundamental mode by which a distinctly human sound is made (“breath is man’s special qualification as an animal” (25 PV), he writes), breath makes poetry possible on both localized and general levels.

As this enabling activity, however, breath crucially describes a constant exchange between inner and outer, the taking in of and giving back to the external world. Given Olson’s persistent interest in etymology, it is important to note that this account of breath also forms a literal description of the process of poetic *inspiration* (“in” - in, “spirare” – to breathe). As one of the oldest poetic topoi in existence, inspiration is clearly an instrumental concept for Olson, and Olson’s literalization of the term in turn ties the biological to the historical. This tie works by way of Olson’s re-rooting poetry in the breath, which, in dispensing with abstracted ideas about form, aims at reviving an experience of language lost to the modern age. This experience is one in which language is an active, present, *felt* experience, as opposed to an intellectual concept, an experience of language’s being deeply integrated into human activity: “There may be no more names than there are objects, /” he writes, “There can be no more verbs than there are actions” (40 MP). The goal in reclaiming this ancient topos (“inspiration”) is therefore to have verse again ratify humankind’s fundamental embedded-ness in the world.

Second, ear: just as breath simultaneously marks both the production of sound and an exchange of energy with the world, “ear” for Olson likewise holds a two-fold meaning. On the one hand the ear is the principle site of sonic and semantic acquisition, the place where the syllable registers its musical and etymological capacities. As such the ear is rightly tied to the “HEAD,” and “is so close to the mind . . . that it has the mind’s speed” (18 PV). Yet on the other “ear” metonymically identifies an appropriately receptive “stance toward the reality of a poem itself” (24 PV), whereby the process of listening is, like breath, one of participation in the world. For “listening” also describes the way the world reaches fruition in the ongoing process of observation and internalization through which objects become real and meaningful: “that we are only / as we find out we are” (19), *Maximus* notes. Like breath, this process is both general and local; truly listening to the world means simultaneously attending to objects *and* attending to the particular way those external objects become meaningful by entering one’s being.

This doubled mode of attention gives poetry both particularity and wider relevance, allowing it to express both the world in its fullness and the poet’s unique place in it: “if [a poet] stay inside himself,” Olson argues, “. . . he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share. And by an inverse law his shapes will make their own way” (25 PV). The resulting mode of attention is intuitive, reflective, adroit in responding to the constantly-changing world; the knowing it involves is less one described by the accumulation of facts than a “knowing as a halibut knows its grounds” (23 MP). With this logic in mind, Olson uses the world “objectism” to describe his poetics, arguing that they finally dispense with “the lyrical interference of the ego . . . [that] Western man has interposed” (24 PV) between himself as subject and himself as object.

Deconstruction of Western metaphysics aside, this account of the world as a field of energy out of which the sounded/sounding body comes and to which it contributes helps us begin to understand the deep affinities that turn Olson’s version of poetic musicality into a proto-jazz poetics. Whether or not the new projective verse Olson calls for ends up sounding like jazz, in

one sense the temporality of poetic creation he describes – the self as a mode of sonic response to a dynamic world – turns poetizing into an improvisatory act aspiring to the open-ended temporality of jazz. The more important similarities, however, lie in Olson’s account of breath and ear. For, if I invoke the image of a jazz saxophonist, we might notice that limiting a poetic line to the duration of the breath is the *exact* process by which a saxophone player specifies the length of an improvised phrase. Indeed, for a saxophone player, breath provides both the support for musical phrasing and dynamics *and* the physiological limit of what can be played. In jazz, it seems, breath is also the beginning and the end. This is in fact true in a manner even more extreme than that of Olson’s poetics, since while a poet can take time to study the changing contours of her breath, a saxophone player phrasing in the moment must rely on the shape of the breath exactly as that breath occurs; for this reason (among others) the content of her improvisations, as I earlier noted, will literally always reflect the lineaments of her physiology.<sup>28</sup>

The situation with “ear” is uncannily similar, since an improviser’s identity as a sound *maker* also, as every musician knows, rests on her inhabiting the role of *listener*. This happens in multiple ways: as a member of a collective ensemble, every note or silence an improviser plays ideally speaks or responds to the other musicians on the bandstand, and as such contributes to a group’s collective sound. It is in this sense that having “big ears” is one of the highest compliments a jazz musician can be paid.<sup>29</sup> Yet improvisation also involves the more personal, individual mode of listening that Olson describes. For, as any improviser will tell you, a great majority of the improvisatory process takes place not on one’s instrument, but in one’s head, what Paul Berliner calls “the singing mind.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, while jazz improvisation is only realized as instrumentally-produced sound, in actuality there are *two* primary skills required for successful improvising: being able to *hear* interesting ideas in one’s head and then being able to *play* those ideas on one’s instrument. While successful improvising certainly requires sufficient ability in manipulating one’s instrument, improvisers generally develop this ability not for its own sake, but to be able to play what one hears in one’s head, as one hears it. What makes great improvisers great from this perspective is not only that they can play things nobody else can, but that they can hear melodies and rhythms that nobody else can, that they can hear themselves out of moments of improvisatory suspense in interesting and creative ways.<sup>31</sup>

As abstract prescriptions go, Olson’s calls for an embodied poetry realized through these jazz-inspired modes of attention are obviously quite provocative. But their power is not only abstract. The claim Olson is implicitly pushing against is that in which poetry’s musicality is best understood as the phenomenological or experiential similarity of poetry to music, the idea that poetry is essentially musical because it, like music, develops sounds and rhythms over time. This, too, is an ancient topos. The sedimentation in the word “lyric,” a derivation from “lyre,”

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<sup>28</sup> It is worth noting here that even instrumentalists whose playing does not appear to depend on breath – piano, guitar, bass, vibraphone – are still encouraged to phrase according to what they can sing. One could perhaps even say that the jazz vocabulary is so deeply saxophone-based that the majority of phrases that “make sense” in jazz still reflect, regardless of instrument, the sort of breathing required for saxophone playing.

<sup>29</sup> Duke Ellington is on record as saying, “The most important thing I look for in a musician is whether he knows how to listen” (Monroe 18). Perhaps the apotheosis of this “big ears” approach to collective improvisation was reached by Miles Davis’s mid-60’s quintet, whose music I take up in Chapter 3.

<sup>30</sup> See (Berliner), particularly pp. 180-191 and 208-209.

<sup>31</sup> Hearing Miles Davis’s playing from the numerous phases when he was having lip trouble easily testifies to this fact; even when his technical fluency was wanting, Davis’s trumpet playing was still almost uniformly striking and original. This is the best example I can think of of “staying inside [oneself]” so that “his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share.”

bears this out, suggesting as it does a dimension of lyric that observes purely instrumental precepts. So too does the oft-seen slippage in discussions of lyric between “music” as metaphor for lyric and “music” as literal description, the way, in Susan Stewart’s words, “we speak of such features as counterpoint, harmony, syncopation . . . as if the ways in which sound is measured in music and lyric were analogous.”<sup>32</sup>

Olson’s key correction to this idea is to imply that the majority of formal features generally read as musical – a poem’s setting up and modifying a regular pulse, for example, or the recognizable sonic patterns that rhyme, assonance, and their kin produce – are, crucially, *non-musical*. This is because to Olson, musicality has nothing to do with the regularity of a poem’s sounds and everything to do with the mode of their creation, the degree to which their presence emerges from the sound-producing capacities of the human body itself. As a manifestation of heart and head, breath and ear, form becomes properly musical not when it resembles or sounds like music but when it is the product of a poet’s having adopted a fundamentally musical approach to the world. Olson’s poetics are so powerful because they thereby limn the difference between poetry produced so as to be *experienced* in a musical way and poetry whose mode of *creation* is essentially musical.

Turning to the poetry itself, one might observe how the following lines exploit the idea of the body’s being posed at the junction of the musical, historical and philosophical, and how this confluence renders poetizing as a mode of simultaneous attention and production:

I measure my song,  
measure the sources of my song,  
measure me, measure  
my forces

(MP 48)

An *ars poetica* of sorts, this short stanza gathers together the history enabling it, its lines gesturing towards both Whitman (“I sing myself”) and Protagoras (“man is the measure of all things”). And while its primary trope is anaphora (the repetition of the first word in a succession of phrases), the lines are also careful to bend that pattern to its own ends. The key word, of course, is “measure,” whose first two letters, “me,” subtly extend the reference to the self opened by the initial “I,” and thereby ensure that each line begins with a reference to the self. While “measure” most explicitly glosses here as “appraise,” “test,” or “codify in standard units,” the fact that a “measure” is also a musical term – a “measure” being a length of musical time, a basic unit of notated sound – spins these initial denotations differently.

Specifically, the basic etymological crossing describes poetry as a simultaneous act of attention and production, one in which any evaluation of the self (any “measuring”) is always also a musical gesture, putting-the-self-into-measures. Such measuring thus makes concrete the abstract exchange of forces out of which poetry comes and to which it contributes. Song is, indeed, to these lines the product of one’s locating (discovering, placing) oneself as this node of energetic movement. This process is captured in the rare moment of traditional musicality in Olson’s oeuvre, one that sets “sources” to rhyme with “forces.” Yet, even granted this rare rhyme, it is not the phenomenological resemblance of the product of this appraisal to music that makes that result song. Rather, song results from the fact that attending to (“measuring”) the self is always, inevitably, a making-musical.

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<sup>32</sup> (Stewart 29)

At the same time, however, one can see how the notion of song outlined here interacts with the non-referential theory of poetic musicality Olson is developing. This confrontation registers most emphatically in the visual dimension, which, in Olson's general outline, is given a curious status. These lines are no exception. Visually, it is crucial that the final iteration of the word "measure" lie at the end of the stanza's third line, rather than the beginning of its fourth, as rigorous adherence to anaphora would necessitate (and as someone like Whitman would likely have it). That move is crucial because it validates the poem's having resisted falling into the slavish imitation of pattern, its having incorporated anaphora less an external precept than a tool employed only when necessary. In the words of these lines, this move vouchsafes Olson's having measured out sound, rather than finding sounds to fit into pre-given measures.

From a traditional musical standpoint, however, the effect is to renounce – as virtually all of Olson's poems do – the traditional signposts that render a poem "like music" (let alone "jazzy") in any identifiable way. If one is looking for a deeply melodic lyric experience, Olson's verse is not the place to go. Yet in some ways this is exactly the point: that Olson's is a poetry influenced by jazz (or is even a poetry explicitly musical) is, very consciously, not verifiable by the *referential* workings of its sounds. This is perhaps the key difference distinguishing Olson's from, say, Hughes's reading of bebop. For Hughes, that his poetry is invested in jazz is verified by its explicitly incorporating the sounds of Parker and his contemporaries, or at least the ostensible poetic reproductions of those sounds. The opacity of these sounds, their resistance to hermeneutic capture, is then communicated by a poem's reading those sounds as opaque. For Olson, in contrast, such poetry might be interesting from a sociological or cultural perspective, but would not be authentically musical. For if inheriting Charlie Parker's sounds means reproducing them in a literal manner, then poetry that does so will necessarily be a non-musical comment *on* this music, rather than a poetry that makes (or is) its *own* music.

Herein lies the apparent paradox, however. If reliance on rhyme and meter is the feature that most identifies a poem as being about the world rather than kinetically participating in the world, then what verifies a poem's being authentically musical is its *visual* opacity, its active resistance to such traditionally musical structures. If rhythmic and formal regularity betray a lack of attention to ear and breath, then the only poems that can realize the goal of being "at all points, an energy discharge" (16 PV), are those that maintain unique and irreducible visual appearances.<sup>33</sup> Olson here follows Pound and Williams in calling for each of his poems to realize a new and idiosyncratic visual shape. It is to a degree this passage of sound into visuality, the word made flesh (or print), that the "projective" of "projective verse" is meant to describe. When Nathaniel Mackey thus notes, for example, that "the hermeticism of Olson's work tends to be tempered by a visual intelligibility, a sense of coherence that resides in shape rather than message or paraphrasable statement," he is certainly right.<sup>34</sup> Yet these unique visual identities are ultimately not the point. Like musical scores, there are there not to be appreciated *as* visual

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<sup>33</sup> Thinking systematically, one might object that a poem could observe all of Olson's precepts and still come out in traditional meter, or at least in a regularized rhythm. The question here is ultimately one of breath, and whether "breath" need always be the irregular, non-rhythmic experience that the visually unique shapes of projective poems would pose it as. Historically, breath has certainly been figured far more often as a regularized, rhythmic activity. I deal with this issue briefly, if obliquely, a few pages ahead, but it is also worth noting that this seems to be an interpretation adopted by numerous other Black Mountain poets (Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov, among others), many of whose poetry blends Olsonic visual hermeticism with seemingly less restrictive senses of rhythm.

<sup>34</sup> (Mackey 134)

records in their own right, but as means to produce sound, transmissions of sonic energies from the internal bodily rhythms of the poet to rhythms performed by the reader.

To the degree he is successful here, Olson thus internalizes opacity and resistance to hermeneutic capture as an organic character of poetic form itself. To further explore these ideas, let us examine another short poem, this also from the *Maximus Poems*:

light signals & mass points  
normal mappings of  
inertia & every possible action

of aether and of

change

(MP 516)

On multiple levels – visual, accentual, etymological – this poem foregrounds many of the “open” qualities associated with projective verse. “Light signals” and “mass points” start off the process by generating a space of ambiguous syntax, potentially readable as either adjective-noun or noun-verb phrases. The first word, “light,” which can connote either (or both) visibility or tactility, simultaneously imposes and bridges the gap between modes of sensory reception. “Mass,” following it, inscribes even more insistently the palimpsestic etymology so important to Olson: while semantically, the word balances the “light” preceding it by suggesting heft and stability, “mass” at the same time points to the state, Massachusetts, to which the bulk of the *Maximus* sequence is devoted. This alignment of geography and semantics thus becomes a key to the poem as a whole: as a “mapping” of space, indeed of mass, the buried name “Massachusetts” does provide us a temporary way to make sense of the flux of the world. Yet mappings of this sort will always be limited, since the mass now called “Massachusetts” wasn’t always called this, nor will it always be. (This is true not only in name, but also in the literal geological sense. Though we rarely register them, tectonic shift, erosion and other large-scale planetary processes intimately shape our experience of the world. As Olson notes, many years ago “the land mass [of Gloucester] itself / was depressed from its present level by / at least double the 65 feet” (MP 318). Even 350 years ago, when experienced by its first European settlers, “probably the ocean / ate deeper into the shore” (110)).

While “signals” and “points” are the way we’re given to mapping the aether, then, any such map can only enact temporally local effects, helpful for certain purposes but always bound to change according to developments in politics, geology or language. This condition of being useful yet temporary extends to the words on the page as well: as “signals” literally communicated through the passage of “light,” words too are “normal mappings” of “every possible action.” Spacing and timing buttress this claim: following “every possible action” with a 2-line pause bookends the phrase with the word “inertia” on one side and an actual rhythmic inertia on the other. But neither inertia is ever *really* inert, since both gain their force only through the forward movement of the poem, the progressive temporality that tells us to read the line breaks *as* pauses (“pauses in what?,” to put it differently – the answer to this “what” is the temporal experience I and the poem are trying to name). When an earlier *Maximus* poem argues that “metric then is mapping” (149), this poem expands the idea by demonstrating how the

rhythmic (“metric”) and the evaluative (“metric”) are necessary interwoven within the mappings by which lyric enacts the experience of place-ing (locating, grounding).

The contrast between stability and change, the observation that each category both engenders and provides a way to read the other, is indicated by the proliferation of “and/&”s in the poem, as well as the accumulation of “of”s extending the sequence of related concepts. The poem’s penultimate line, “of aether and of,” pushes this idea to its limit, setting up a number of simultaneous balancing acts. On one hand the large space following the line makes ambiguous whether the final “of” links to the “change” further down the page, if it links to the blankness preceding that “change” (a blankness that visually replicates the “aether” in the line), or if the “of” finally even functions as a preposition at all, instead of a noun, in which case the “and” in the line would be the fulcrum balancing not “aether” and “change” but “aether” and “of.” Considered as a distinct visual and syntactic unit, “of aether and of” is marked most notably by its being bookended by “of”s, ensuring that “aether” itself hearkens both backwards and forwards in time, space and meaning.

Despite this delicate symmetry, however, at end the pun on “aether” (“either”) imposes a breakdown in implied difference between all these carefully balanced terms, immediately rendering all states analogous, or at least indifferent to our particular choices. Indeed, when read in a particularly Gloucester-inspired accent, the pun extends even further, turning “aether and of” into “either end of.”<sup>35</sup> While the poem at end names “change” as its constitutive condition, then, the results of any such change become less important than change itself, since whichever “end” of change we inhabit, the dynamic remains the same. The notion that change is the condition of possibility of lyric mapping does not undo lyric presence, of course. For the very act of poetic naming here, of placing quasi-permanent marks on a page, suggests that change itself is only accessible through the stability of graphic presence. That graphic presence is too ultimately only an indication of its own impermanence makes it as critical an experience as change; the point is not to abandon form so much as employ its graphic stability as a means to register the dynamic state of flux out of which it comes and to which it always refers.

From a purely sonic perspective, the poem is distinguished most by an almost extreme abundance of accent. Rather than express its musicality through an ebb and flow of rhythmic energy, a regularized or swinging rhythm, the poem as sonic artifact proceeds more as a series of chunks of energy broken up by periods of silence which, though named as inertia, are anything but restful. Resolutely committed to avoiding anything resembling traditional song, these insistent blocks of silence lend the poem a puzzling sonic identity, one whose musicality is more assaulting than seductive. Yet this is nonetheless music of an important sort: just as Charlie Parker’s asymmetric phrasing and unexpected accents keep the listener (and the musician trying to play them) from falling into prescribed patterns of sound-making, this poem literally forces the reader’s body into unfamiliar compartments of breath and movement. “Every possible action,” it seems, is not merely an abstract concept. Only by breaking the body out of its habitual modes of hearing and breathing, this poem suggests, is that body made aware of the fact of its breathing, led into actions about which it would otherwise have had little awareness.

It is this latter operation – its producing sound by being performed by readers – that helps trace out another crucial affinity linking Olson’s poetry and Charlie Parker’s music. A quick detour back: in Chapter 1, I described how Parker’s narrative approach helps perform the disarticulation of underlying form. This is not quite Olson’s project; though Olson’s work aims to push against – to disarticulate, too, in its own way – the “closed” form of prescribed meter,

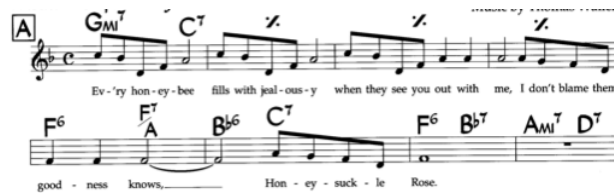
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<sup>35</sup> Thanks to C. D. Blanton for this observation.

projective verse does not (perhaps cannot) make these prior possibilities present *as* undermined in the same way Parker’s music does. But another important consequence of Parker’s rejection of narrative, one clearly resonating with Olson, is that it bears on the specific quality of rhythmic presence each of his compositions realize. In conspicuously eschewing the rhythmic repetition of the song forms they borrow, that is, Parker’s compositions too come to individually and idiosyncratically redistribute the rhythmic energy of their performers.

To illustrate, let us quickly compare another of Parker’s compositions to the tune upon which it signifies, in this case Parker’s “Scrapple from the Apple” and the classic “Honeysuckle Rose,” written by Fats Waller and Andy Razaf.

“A” section of “Honeysuckle Rose”



“A” section of “Scrapple from the Apple”



Even without musical training, one can hopefully see from even the look of “Honeysuckle Rose”’s score how deeply reliant it is on repetition. The whole A section is in a sense a variation upon the phrase with which it begins – four eighth notes followed by a half note. After being repeated three times in a row, the phrase is then shifted two beats ahead in the measure, where it is then played twice. Completely diatonic, the melody so strongly emphasizes beats 1 and 3 that it is very difficult to sing or play the tune without feeling those beats resound in one’s body.

Now look at “Scrapple from the Apple.” Again, even without being able to read music, one can see how much more complicated the tune is than its predecessor. Unlike “Honeysuckle Rose,” the A section of “Scrapple” is through-composed, meaning that *no* phrases repeat. Its phrases are all of different length, and each one starts and stops at different points in the measure. The jagged melodic contour that results ensures that no beat is emphasized repeatedly; indeed, one must internalize “Scrapple”’s melody pretty deeply to be able to hear in it the deep, repeated pulse that “Honeysuckle Rose” so easily summons.

What is interesting, however, is what happens when one sings merely the *rhythmic* content of the melodies, without indicating pitch. (One can do this by singing all notes on the same pitch, or even by tapping the melody out). First, “Honeysuckle Rose”: rhythmically speaking, the tune reveals little that makes it unique. In the absence of pitch, the tune is quite difficult to identify. Now try “Scrapple.” Right away, the opposite is immediately clear. Even without pitch, the rhythmic content of the tune makes it, to listeners familiar with Charlie Parker’s music at least, immediately identifiable. What is even more telling is that this phenomenon is not limited to “Scrapple,” but applies to any number of Parker heads. “Dewey

Square,” “Confirmation,” “Blues for Alice,” “Anthropology”: all work this way. Which is why, for example, a drummer like Art Blakey could record a solo drum-set version of Parker’s “Moose the Mooche” and have it be immediately recognizable as “Mooch.”<sup>36</sup>

My point here is not to indicate yet again that Parker’s music is more rhythmically complex than the music from which it borrows (even if it is). It is rather to show that like Olson’s poetry, the complex and unique hermeneutical power of Parker’s compositions come in part from their functioning not as a set of rhythmically repeated parts, but as aesthetic wholes. And that their final effect is therefore on the reader, who, confronted by a constant rhythmic irregularity, is forced to shape her breathing in new, unexpected ways. Even though this may have been for Parker only a corollary result of his more explicit goals, Olson clearly advances the concept. This is because it allows Olson to literally turn the poem into a site of energy exchange. The process begins (insofar as “begin” is an applicable term, given that the poet’s body is already a product of the world producing it) with the poet attending to the experience of her body’s breathing in the world, which, since the body is always that entity born in the space between attention and production, is also the experience of producing a poem. Bearing this bodily experience, the poem sets off into the wild. The reader receiving it is then like a person who opens someone else’s carefully-packed suitcase and puts on the clothes found inside; to the degree a poem is successful in capturing the bodily experience of its creator, the movements into which it forces its reader literally lend the reader’s body the shape of the poet’s. Insofar as the reader’s body is thereby reorganized (if only temporarily) according to the rhythm of the poem, the complex interplay of breath, sound and visuality we call a poem will have literally brought two bodies into intimate connection.

When Olson issues his famous prescription, “form is never more than an extension of content” (16 PV), this is partially what he has in mind; form is not only interesting and powerful because it mirrors what the poem’s words describe, but because it literally takes content and extends it into the physical, real-world experience of every reader it touches. Form is not an artifact of a physical process; it *is* that process, ongoing and ever-extended.

### **“LISTEN CLOSELY, CAN’T YOU HEAR?”: ON NON-REPRESENTATIVE REPRESENTATION**

If I have taken some pains to articulate Olson’s theories here, it is not only because they read jazz so provocatively, but because they work so well as a compliment to Hughes. For in many ways, Olson’s poetics provide a provisional route out of the scenario which led Hughes to insert a near-permanent wedge between the jazzy sounds a poem could produce and a poem’s desire to actually be a type of music. For Hughes, we’ll remember, the problem with representing bebop music poetically was the music’s outright resistance to hermeneutic capture. Poetically engaging with this hermeneutic structure thereby required lyric to register its bebop musicality precisely by foregrounding the material differences between itself and the sounds it ostensibly replicated. In this manner, Hughes’s poems successfully imitate bebop only to the degree they acknowledge their inability to be bebop. Word and sound – or at least word and extra-poetic sound – thereby remain wholly separate categories, analogous only figuratively, never literally.

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<sup>36</sup> (Blakey)



If one consigns poetic musicality to meaning “poetry that sounds like music,” then Hughes arguably pushes the idea to a conceptual limit, one with dynamic but nonetheless visible contours. In redefining the category, however, Olson provides a means to potentially unlock this apparent material straightjacket and to restore musicality – literal, not figurative musicality – to lyric’s essential constitution. Not content with taking “jazz” as a generic category for which lyric’s best hope is to approach asymptotically, Olson figures lyric as a mode of music making whose genesis lies in the body’s adopting the precise physical and intellectual compartments operative in jazz improvisation, and thereby (ideally, at least) turns poetry into a kind of jazz itself. Lyric in this context becomes trans-medial by its very nature, rather than needing to always foreground its generic difference from music proper; sound and body, word and feel, visuality and meaning all coalesce into a single dynamic point of energy transfer.

As with Hughes, there is a paradox here: to Olson, poetry succeeds at being a type of jazz only to the degree it does not resemble anything one would likely identify as “jazz poetry.” “Musicality,” consequently, acquires a new, quite unconventional meaning, one more akin to “uniqueness” or “inimitability” than, say, “melodic” or “rhythmic.” Yet, conceptually at least, the payoff is sizeable. By generating poetry out of a poet’s improvisatory relationship with the world, lyric in Olson’s account achieves an individual, yet non-representative, communicative presence analogous to that of Parker’s music. The goal is to provide the reader with the experience of bodily presence the poet feels; in this sense there is a communion of experience through form.

But this form of identification or inhabitation is not at all a direct communication of a representative emotional state or racially-saturated perspective on the world. For even as the reader inhabits, briefly, the body of the poet, the *person* whose identity overlaps with this body, phasing in and out of it, remains permanently inaccessible. Or, put differently, the identity of the poet remains as available and containable only as any of us is to ourselves. Which is to say, not at all. If Parker’s music suggested that it could offer no representational communication, Olson’s poetry shares in this impossibility by building into its very constitution Olson’s conviction that a person (an American, actually) is always only a “complex of occasions, / themselves a geometry / of a spatial nature” (MP 185), never available in any one moment or restrictive set of moments. Projective poems are in this sense both intimate and distancing – intimate because they offer a direct experience of the poet as he or she inhabits the world, distancing because the uniqueness of this experience fits no pre-given model of reception.

There is, of course, a potential problem with Olson’s model of poetics, one even potentially damning, even if this notion of personhood, and its relative unavailability, does help us think it through. This is Olson’s handling of race. The argument works as follows: if posing the poetizing body as that set of energies located between perception and production, listening and sound-making, this accusation would run, Olson’s poetics conveniently ignore the fact that bodies always possess socially-resonant exteriors, and that it is by these exteriors that they are often most forcefully recognized. Even more of a problem is the requirement that a poem eschew the representative codes that make it legible as anything other than wholly individualized, and therefore unique. Tied with the view that a person as a “complex of occasions,” such a requirement would then expressly limit a poem from invoking those codes to express its taking part in the tradition of, say, African-American literature.

This is no small issue, especially if “jazz” is to be to any degree a critical reference against which Olson is measured. If I earlier identified “jazz” as a signifier bearing multiple and overlapping meanings – as an improvisatory aesthetic, as a set of sounds, as African-American

cultural production – then in jettisoning the dynamic of representation from his system, Olson might be accused of making it impossible for a poem to register its being located in an African-American tradition in any but the most oblique of ways. Olson would thereby be more than content to appropriate the elements of jazz he finds interesting while ignoring the social, cultural and historical context from which they come, the fact that jazz is, whatever particular shape it takes, largely an African-American aesthetic.

This was, in fact, a criticism explicitly leveled by Amiri Baraka. “The overwhelming line” of “the Creeley-Olson thing,” he noted in an interview, “was always anti-political.”<sup>37</sup> Meaning: “the Creeley-Olson thing” devalued the specifically racial experiences of its practitioners. This perspective unfortunately, seems to be the one Olson himself took. In a 1963 (probably) letter to Baraka, Olson writes, “I am solely persuaded that your position that the Negro solely ought to act as an end and change of what is manifestly no good is in fact any man’s who wishes to have had a life in society which was more legitimate.”<sup>38</sup> Meaning: the Black experience merits no special treatment or aesthetic, given that it can be absorbed into a more general set of problems. Poetry that recognizes “African-American-ness” as a distinct category earned from a unique struggle, therefore, will always involve some degree of falseness.

These are not insignificant complications. And while Olson the person can be justifiably condemned, “Olson” as the name for a body of work can, one hopes, be salvaged. The imperative is therefore to read Olson beyond Olson. To do so, one might productively start with the many other African-American poets who found Olson’s work so helpful, those I brought up in the beginning of the chapter. For many of them, “race,” or even “blackness,” represents a poetic construct emerging slightly differently than Baraka would have it. For Baraka’s criticism to hold, blackness must to some degree persist as a pre-performative category, one then reflectable in aesthetic works (for a useful reading of Baraka’s conviction here, see Kimberly Benston’s *Performing Blackness*).<sup>39</sup> Within a system like Olson’s, however, race could never materialize as an external referent, one to which a poem would be more or less true. The sheer present-ness of Olson’s poetry makes of this notion an impossibility; imagining race as working in this manner would be no different from a poem’s adhering to a pre-given structure, or directly imitating a piece of music.

This is, it must be noted, to a degree the position to which Hughes comes in *Montage*, whereby blackness comes to occupy the space between the symbolic references of its bebop syllables and those syllables’ semantic meaning. While the former allows those lines to partake in the association of blackness with music, the latter ensures that the version of blackness given is one without any fixed essence attached to it. That it, like Parker’s music, comes from the tradition of African-American music, and that it can justifiably be read according to the terms set up by that tradition, Hughes’s poetry makes clear, yet it also ensures that it, like Parker’s music, carves out space for a new aesthetics of blackness, one in which what that term expresses not a pre-given meaning, but the fact that it is always emergent, always newly formed out of the interaction between aesthetic form and the structures of reception – aesthetic, social, historical, perceptual – in which that form operates.

For Olson, this goal is realized through slightly different mechanisms.. In building a permanent opacity of personhood into its aesthetic, projective poetry necessarily turns race into a non-totalizing phenomenon, one that too presents itself as a state of ongoing contestation. In this

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<sup>37</sup> (Benston and Baraka 306)

<sup>38</sup> qtd. in (Harris 89).

<sup>39</sup> (Benston)

sense, race is not something that can be directly felt in projective verse, for the simple reason that a person's racial identity can never be the sum total of her identity; race in Olson's system can represent only one in the "complex of occasions" that generates identity. A product of the individual bodily compartments of the poet, projective poetry necessarily precludes itself from acquiring a traditionally-recognizable racial identity.

Yet – and this point is crucial – if the essential relationship in Olson's poetics is that between a poet and her own mode of physicality, there is nothing in Olson's system that prevents that mode of physical in-the-world-ness from having been shaped, even before birth, by the racially-marked exterior Olson might otherwise be accused of whitewashing. To pose lyric as a reflection of the way the world's shapes become themselves through being apprehended in unique ways by the poet, is, in fact, necessarily to acknowledge history as a crucial category of this process. And while Olson's personal history may not have been deeply impacted by the experience of inhabiting a racially-marked exterior, for other poets, it would be almost impossible to have an experience of one's body that was not somehow indicative of reception that body had received in the social world. If Olson's history is that of Gloucester, Massachusetts, why is the world of another poet – one residing in Harlem, or Washington, D.C., or Oakland, or any ethnically-marked neighborhood – not an equally apposite source of sounds, figures and references? If the poetics of spatiality inevitably lead Olson to quote the journals of Gloucester's founders in his work, there is no reason why the sounds of jazz that a different poet may have been hearing for most of her life need not surface in her poems. This seems to be the reading implicit in the work of the many African-American poets inspired by Olson. It is not that all representative language need be barred from a projective poem; if recognizable racial language or rhythms made their way into a poem, that would be fine, as long as those words or rhythms appeared only as a piece of the fabric that constitutes the individual making the poem. As we have seen, lyric musicality for Olson depends not quite on the resolute avoidance of all representative language – such a goal would be an impossibility – but on those moments of alleged representative language being situated within a larger, idiosyncratic open structures, as moments of the self rather than direct references to the external world. In this Olson would allow for race to be only a part of whatever identity the poem presented. And in so doing it would realize, in part, Parker's wish to not have his music or his race define him. But it would also allow, if indirectly, for a poem to incorporate language carrying the same symbolic function as that occasionally employed by Hughes.

This realization helps understand another potential problem with reading Olson as a reader of Parker. I showed earlier how Olson's poetics demonstrates a number of fundamental affinities with Parker's music. If Parker's uniquely dialectic approach to form simultaneously foregrounds both underlying form and that form's disarticulation, Olson uses the graphic stability of form to open its reader to the unceasing flow of change out of which both (poem and reader) come. Despite these conceptual similarities, however, Charlie Parker's music nonetheless does something that Olson's poetry does not: it swings. Regardless of its reading of form, Parker's music never wavers from its commitment to relaxed, in-the-pocket time feel, and while his improvisations may dramatically raise the harmonic, melodic and narrative stakes by which jazz is properly judged, they never forgo the tradition in which being able to swing is one of the supreme goals of jazz musicianship. And if one is to truly take Projective Verse as a reading of jazz, then Olson's likely claim that to consciously swing in a poem's rhythm would be to still write in a referential manner, instead of a spontaneous one, to sounds a somewhat problematic note.

In this sense, Olson's work would again fail to read jazz properly, since the naïve belief in the possibility of a truly free form ignores the fact that a jazz improvisation always – and this is the case in so-called “free jazz,” too – takes place as a reading of a pre-given form. Put differently, the proper criticism of Olson in this capacity might be that his work does not think as dialectically as it could. That numerous of Olson's successors, Robert Creeley most notably, were able to write projective verse-inspired poems that nonetheless do demonstrate commitments to swing (however construed), does, however, suggest that perhaps the issue is, if one is to take his embodied poetry as a guide, that Olson is simply far less comfortable in his body than Parker is in his.

My aim in reading Olson and Hughes together here is not, it should be noted, to construct an airtight system. For to do so would be to pose a definitive answer to a set of questions centering around the relationship of poetry to music, or poetry to musicality, whose inability to be definitively answered has represented an enduring source of aesthetic creativity. It is rather to identify two reservoirs of potential that, when taken up in various combined configurations, help sharpen these questions in provocative new ways. What are these ways? In Chapter 3, I discuss one musical model laying out a new form of identity. Then in Chapters 4 and 5 I explore the work of some poets – including Langston Hughes circa 1961 – to see how those possibilities are registered.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Evasive Incantations: Miles Davis and the Spell of the Plugged Nickel

If Charlie Parker's critics have been busy "chasing the Bird" since 1945, those following Miles Davis still seem confounded by the legend of Davis's turning his back on his audience. Whether he actually did or not – stories are always apocryphal; as John Szwed points out, "films from the 1950's show him standing fully forward to the microphone, or at most, playing into it with an actor's three-quarter profile"<sup>1</sup> – critical reception has nonetheless acceded to the rule set down by *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*: when the legend becomes fact, print the legend.

Over time, Davis's sidemen, friends and critics and have variously accounted for the gesture, attributing it to Davis's shyness, his anger, his fear, his distrust of the audience, his desire to be closer to the rhythm section, and his absolute focus on the music. Yet looking back from nearly half a century, what impresses is less any of these explanations themselves than perpetual need for explanation the move seems, in retrospect, almost calculated to prompt. Providing so much meaning with so little explanation, Davis's small shift in carriage seduces the ears of critical listeners with the promise, forever held out, of its being the final piece in the puzzle connecting Miles Davis's music to Miles Davis the person. Finally, the gesture proffers, one can subsume Davis's aesthetic intentions to his social or psychological ones. Yet even as they pile up, explanations submitted in fulfillment of this promise inevitably ring incomplete, telling us half, or a quarter, or none of the actual story.

That they do so speaks, of course, to the impossibility of their goal's ever being met. But their mounting numbers do, nonetheless, provide a glimpse of Davis's performative strategy, which, throughout his career, repeatedly set Davis and his music just outside of explanatory reach. A student and collaborator of Charlie Parker's, Davis had clearly inherited Parker's ability to perform musical mastery in a way that absolutely refused hermeneutic co-optation. Yet if Parker's music met this goal by erecting an emotional and hermeneutic blank, Davis's evades hermeneutic capture not by withholding critical information, but by providing too much of it, so saturating the performative space with potential meaning that pinning any piece of it down to a single, critical implication remains a near-impossible task. Despite or throughout its manifold stylistic evolutions, Davis's music eschews outright rejection for the kindling of mystification, a form of absence-in-presence in which one could never be sure who, exactly, was pulling the strings, and what strings they might be pulling.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> (Szwed 190)

<sup>2</sup> A brief history: after playing on Charlie Parker's seminal bebop recordings in the mid-1940's, in 1950 Davis recorded *Birth of the Cool*, a record that almost single-handedly created the genre soon known as "Cool Jazz." With his quintet (and occasional sextet) of the 1950's, Davis helped codify "hard bop," still the language and approach against which straight-ahead jazz is measured. With later records like 1958's *Milestones* and 1959's *Kind of Blue*, Davis introduced the jazz world to modal improvisation, a stripped-down, open-ended approach that came to dominate the jazz of the 1960's and early 1970's. Alongside these developments came the various collaborations with composer Gil Evans – *Davis Ahead*, *Sketches of Spain*, *Porgy and Bess* – that carved out a unique space somewhere between straight-ahead jazz and concert music. Eventually, Davis's constant search for the new, his adamant refusal to spend his career repeating himself, would lead him to abandon acoustic music entirely, as he spent the 1970's and 1980's developing increasingly electrified musics whose focus on texture, density and polyrhythm effectively relinquished (or reinterpreted, depending on viewpoint) many traditional features of the jazz idiom.

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If Chapter 1 aimed to articulate the concept of “voice” inaugurated by Charlie Parker, this one spells out a key moment in that concept’s development. This moment is that of Miles Davis’s famous mid-1960’s group, his “second great quintet.”<sup>3</sup> Featuring Herbie Hancock on piano, Wayne Shorter on saxophone, Ron Carter on bass and Tony Williams on drums, the band – which lasted from 1964 to 1968 – remains widely recognized as one of the pinnacle music-producing entities of the tradition. Merging radical musical vision with an unprecedented facility for (and commitment to) group interaction, the quintet’s music – alluring, frustrating, charming and elusive all at once – seemed to absorb the whole of the tradition preceding it and spit that tradition out in new form. To listeners, the band’s music can be both thrilling and off-putting: thrilling because one feels in it the striving towards a new musical language; off-putting because if one loses track for even a second, it becomes very difficult to find one’s place again, and the music quickly turns from a form-based improvisation into a loosely-structured passage of sound. Not, importantly, that the possibility of experiencing the music in this latter form – as a less-formalized group improvisation – isn’t one both authorized and legitimated within the group’s aesthetic. Indeed, the music’s success is often measured by the degree to which it can detach the structuring influence of underlying form from that form’s sounded presence, leaving that form pervasively present, though unheard in any direct way.

Because it often leaves conspicuously absent the standard markers (and improvisatory markings) of underlying form, the group’s music can wreak havoc with traditional modes of hearing, in which (as I argued in Chapter 1) ascertaining the wider cultural implications of an improvising musician’s aesthetic depends on first determining an improvised solo’s relationship *to* underlying form. Davis’s quintet’s music, in contrast, maximizes the inherent ambiguity of this relationship, often inhabiting multiple guises at the same time. In separating out the constitutive parts of underlying form, then recombining those parts into a set of sounds that may resemble only minimally the underlying form as given, the band often proliferates musical identities, potential ways of being read. To this end, the very performance of notes and rhythms as signifiers can be deeply unsettled by the band’s making persistently unclear what, exactly, those notes and rhythms are signifiers *for*.

Yet while the result may be (and often is) listener confusion, confusion is not necessarily (or not only) the aim. If perplexity ensues, it is not because the group aims to snub its audience, but because at bottom it is busy tinkering with the musical structures linking sound to presence, musical meaning to phenomenal experience, the hearable to the significant, and, ultimately, interpretation to identity. This is evasiveness through openness, an evasiveness that results from the fact that traditional shapes and forms and recognizable structures *may* be what they appear to be, but also may not. Whatever version of “voice” the group poses, then, necessarily adheres in the shifting space vacillating between these two possibilities.

As a mode of black performance, Davis’s group’s aesthetic thereby offers a powerful and generative model for reconceiving the potential relation between sound and African-American identity, if not identity writ large. Yet despite its theoretical fecundity, as well as the widespread consensus on the group’s importance to the tradition, Davis’s quintet has been largely overlooked as a potential model of sound, culture, history or African-American aesthetics. At the time of writing, serious scholarly output on this band is limited to a small number of articles

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<sup>3</sup> The “first great quintet” being Davis’s 1950’s group, which included John Coltrane, Red Garland, Paul Chambers and Philly Joe Jones.

(fewer than ten) and a single book.<sup>4</sup> Why this lacuna? One might compare, by way of contrast, Davis's group's reception to that enjoyed by John Coltrane, the other prodigious jazz innovator of the 1960's.<sup>5</sup> Culturally, Coltrane still, more than forty years after his death, exerts a powerful influence, having inspired musicians to play like him, poets to write about him (with the "Coltrane poem" having earned its own sub-genre<sup>6</sup>), and worshippers to pray to him (in the St. John Coltrane African Orthodox Church in San Francisco, which has held regular services since 1971). Academically, the situation is analogous, with Coltrane's music having been repeatedly mobilized as the lens through which to examine African-American aesthetics, politics, history and performance.<sup>7</sup>

For Davis's group, of course, none of these. Why? A quick comparison between Davis's music and Coltrane's gives some indication. Take, for example, the music of Coltrane's classic quartet, the group featuring Elvin Jones, McCoy Tyner and Jimmy Garrison. Combining, as Gerald Early describes, "artistic innovation with therapeutic, redemptive spirituality" (373), Coltrane's quartet abandons bebop's sly, ironic imposition of distance, making the music's emotional content available to anyone willing to listen. This combination registers most directly in the rhythmic realm: while Coltrane's saxophone playing is as harmonically rich as that of any player before or since, his music nonetheless disposes Trane's advanced harmonies and polyrhythmic phrasing over a deep and persistent rhythmic foundation, a repeated pulse the group is at pains to never abandon, even in improvised excursions that last more than an hour. Explicitly sounded, and, more importantly, easily *felt*, this rhythmic substructure ushers listeners through the music's large-scale movements, guiding them through passages whose harmonic complexity might otherwise pose listeners difficulty. Its persistent forward movement too precipitates the music's larger narrative structures, which generally, as Scott Saul describes, "begin with small motives, then develop them until they explode with complication and intensity" (239).

"Explosion" is the right word here: like a preacher's sermon, Coltrane's "sound of searching" (239) consecrates the music as a sacred space, shepherding its listeners through paroxysms of revelation. And because it upholds the belief in "the spiritual and psychological power of a regenerative, mythic blackness" (Early 377), the music easily harmonizes with many 1960's civil rights aesthetics.

Yet if Coltrane was the preacher, Miles Davis was the Dark Magus, fomenting a sonic alchemy that aimed less to bring listeners into the light than to keep them in the dark. In this

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<sup>4</sup> That book is Jeremy Yudkin's *Miles Davis, Miles Smiles, and the Invention of Post Bop*, which provides some helpful musicological analysis, though the book as a whole is not as interested in elaborating the wider impact or meaning of the group's music. Essays that deal with the quintet's music, though also predominantly musicological in perspective, include Chris Smith's "A Sense of the Possible: Miles Davis and the Semiotics of Improvised Performance," and the three articles I discuss in this chapter, Howard Brofsky's "Miles Davis and 'My Funny Valentine': The Evolution of a Solo," Robert Walser's "Out of notes: Signification, interpretation, and the problem of Miles Davis," and David Morgan's "Superimposition in the Improvisations of Herbie Hancock."

<sup>5</sup> There are of course many musicians who created hugely important jazz in the 1960's; a representative list would likely include Ornette Coleman, Charles Mingus, Cecil Taylor, Stan Getz (with Joao Gilberto), Chick Corea, and others. As far as musics that envision entirely new approaches to musicality go, however, the list is far shorter.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, (Feinstein, "From "Alabama" to a Love Supreme: The Evolution of the John Coltrane Poem"), or (Jones, MDE).

<sup>7</sup> See, for a representative sample, (Benston), (Saul), (Monson, "Oh Freedom: George Russell, John Coltrane, and Modal Jazz"), (Nesbitt), or (Early). In his book *The Future of the Race*, written with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Cornell West notably includes "John Coltrane's saxophone solos" in his list of six "most profound black cultural products" (81).

Davis's group represented Coltrane's diametric opposite. If Coltrane's repeated rhythms and recognizable linearity make his music's spirituality available on a deep, bodied level, Davis's group's music works inordinately hard to resist any semblance of mindless approachability, its shifting rhythms and time-feels allowing for almost no traditionally embodied mode of reception – no foot tapping, no head-bobbing, no casual abandoning oneself to the forward propulsion of the music. To Coltrane's bid for unifying the sonic and the spiritual, Davis and company sever sensible reception from intellectual comprehension. Against Coltrane's simplicity (his group was famous for improvising for hours on a single chord), Davis hammers complexity all the way down, "tampering," as Shorter described, "with something called DNA in music."<sup>8</sup>

The sheer difficulty of the music, then, its penchant for leading listeners into unfamiliar sonic terrains and abandoning them there without a map, no doubt helps account for its restricted cultural resonance. And as the jazz world in the years after Davis disbanded this group came to move away from acoustic, standards-based playing, this group has come to stand as the last major musical moment of the tradition inaugurated by Charlie Parker. Yet if the magnitude of the reception to this group's music has lagged in proportion to its musical and theoretical accomplishments, the music's tendrils have nonetheless extended far. While Davis's group's aesthetic was not the dominant one adopted by the Black Arts and other contemporary African-American aesthetic movements, one can nonetheless easily hear in it, as I will argue in this and the following two chapters, the seeds of the post-modern and post-structuralist aesthetics being developed from the 1970's onwards. With its play of presence and absence, its sly irony, its diffusion of meaning, and its abandonment (or re-realization) of Parker style dialectics in favor of a bid for hermeneutic ambiguity, this music imparts less a set of imitable sounds than a fertile way of thinking *about* sound, one that proves to be a useful tool for exploring those poetic works aiming to rethink from the inside and put in permanent question any stable relation inhering between the sounds of jazz and a recognizable African-American identity.

This chapter, then, will use two key moments of Davis's quintet's output to begin to excavate an intellectual and performative paradigm that, while certainly recognized as a landmark moment in the jazz tradition, has only recently begun to gain traction as a model of race-based aesthetics. I begin with a reading of the group's first album, *E.S.P.*, and then move into an extended look at what I consider the most fruitful (and accomplished) moment of this group's recorded oeuvre, the December 1965 sessions recorded live at the Plugged Nickel club in Chicago.

### **FORM AS INTERPRETATION, INTERPRETATION AS FORM: *E.S.P.*'S TELEPATHIC REDUCTION**

Though recorded only a few months after Davis had assembled the group, *E.S.P.*, the quintet's first record, still thrills with its sense of newness, its feeling of having invested in the tradition precisely by moving that tradition forward. Though clearly a jazz record, *E.S.P.* nonetheless sounds like little else that had come before. And while the description "avant-garde" may ultimately apply to this group, overall *E.S.P.* impresses less as a jettisoning of standard approaches to improvising than a version of these approaches rendered just askew enough to disarm the listener. Individual playing seems familiar yet slightly distanced, the album as a whole curiously sounding both busy and sparse.

This impact in part arises (as was the case with many of Davis's groups) from the unique

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<sup>8</sup> (Mercer 119)



amalgamation of the starkly individual styles of the musicians making up the group.<sup>9</sup> An impressionist to the end, pianist Herbie Hancock remains as liable to release a sequence of complex, suggestive chords as to literally (and strikingly) take his hands off the piano, transforming the rhythm section from a trio into a duo. Saxophonist Wayne Shorter's limber tone and protean time-feel move his lines back and forth from muscular insistence to flitting restraint. Though ever the musical bedrock, Ron Carter's bass is still far more willing than most to abandon standard harmonic or time-keeping gestures for elaborate polyrhythmic excursions. Above all, it is 20-year-old Tony Williams who proves to be Davis's true find. Casting aside the standard "tang tang-a-tang tang-a-tang" ride cymbal pattern for a constantly-shifting polyrhythmic undulation, Williams's drumming is a revelation, a *sui generis* force perpetually impatient to move the music into new, uncharted territories.

*E.S.P.* further distinguishes itself by its programming: unlike nearly every Davis record previous, *E.S.P.* contains no standard tunes; rather, every tune on the record is an original composition penned by a member of the band.<sup>10</sup> And despite the burgeoning approach to group interaction *E.S.P.* presents in nascent form, it is these compositions that are the real gems of the album. By the time of the Plugged Nickel recordings nearly a year later, the inventive techniques introduced in these compositions will have trickled into the band's overall approach, moving from being strategies outlined within particular forms to strategies the band was able to impose on nearly any form. Here, however, the composition themselves better help articulate the band's larger aesthetic.

The album's first tune, for example, "E.S.P." (reprinted at end), reenvisioned the possible ways of relating a tune's melody to its underlying harmony, positing the very legibility of that relationship as being dependent, in part, on the shape of the improvisation that comes to take place over it.<sup>11</sup> Blasting out of the gate with a repeated sequence of fourths played in unison by Shorter and Davis, the tune foregrounds its investment in harmonic ambiguity, since unison voices by definition cannot specify a harmony.<sup>12</sup> As an added benefit, this unison line also signifies a historical break with the arrangement style of hard-bop bands like Art Blakey's (of which Shorter had been a member), for which nearly every tune has trumpet and saxophone playing the melody in harmony.

This open-ended harmony is matched in style by the line's rhythmic content, whose

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<sup>9</sup> As many have observed, Davis's career-long ability to evolve new styles of music almost always seemed to rely as much on his near-preternatural ability to locate and hire the right sidemen for the job as it did Davis's trumpet-playing. While it is not always clear if Davis hired specific sidemen because he had a certain sound in mind, or because he simply believed that the right lineup of musicians would inevitably produce something new, what was clear was that Davis's process of hiring sidemen with strong individual voices, then giving them very little explicit instruction, often lent his bands a collective energy rarely matched by bands playing in similar styles.

<sup>10</sup> "Standards" here indicates the body of songs and song forms over which a large majority of jazz improvisation takes place. Culled from what is now known as the Great American Songbook, standards for the most part comprise tunes written by white, non-jazz musicians, predominantly numbers from musicals. The usual opposition is between "standards" and "originals," though over time the distinction has become far less strict, with many original tunes having come to be played so often that they are now referred to as standards.

<sup>11</sup> Very quickly: "melody" indicates a *linear* sequence of single musical tones, and is often described as the part of a tune to which one would sing along. "Harmony" indicates a sequence of *chords*, which are groups of tones sounded simultaneously. Along with rhythm, melody and harmony are generally considered to be the fundamental building blocks of music.

<sup>12</sup> A "fourth" indicates two notes that are separated by four degrees in a major scale. Building melodies and chords from fourths and fifths, instead of more traditional thirds, creates a characteristically "open" and "modern" sound, one explored by many jazz musicians of the 1960's and early 1970's.

smooth procession of dotted-quarter notes essentially camouflages the fact that they spell out a cross-rhythm relative to the basic pulse of the tune. Yet this smooth cross-rhythm is nonetheless directed to pivot around a number of carefully-placed eighth notes, each of which comes to upset the line's center of rhythmic gravity. In this the line subtly internalizes and updates bebop-style rhythmic imbalance: if bebop phrasing was all about maintaining a constant sense of surprise, "E.S.P." secures this objective not by fragmenting larger structures into individual, unconnected phrases, but by using off-rhythm accents to regularly unsettle larger rhythmic patterns. The effect is less one of overall modularity than systemic instability, of a fundamental structure rendered impermanent by the threat of arbitrary displacement.

Even with these generative features, the most provocative relationship of the tune is that between the notes of its melody and the chord movement proceeding underneath it. The first line of the melody comprises, as noted, a repeated sequence of fourths – here the notes C, G and D. The first chord held underneath them, however, is E7. This combination already institutes a slight rub, since in most contexts, these notes – C, G and D – when played over E7, would read as what are called "altered" notes.<sup>13</sup> Briefly, "altered" notes are notes that are not found in the major scale from which a dominant chord (like E7) comes, and therefore generate far more tension when played over E7 than do the notes that *are* found in this scale. Introduced in the bebop period, but having since become a standard tool in the improviser's kit, altered notes thereby empower improvised lines to pull away from or stretch the basic harmonies of a given tune.

Key to the bebop-inspired use of altered notes, however, is the attendant assumption – the expectation raised by the "altered" sound itself – that the tension they create will inevitably be resolved, and that this melodic resolution (the resolution of the improviser's line) will roughly reiterate the harmonic resolution of the chords moving under it. Within this bebop paradigm, that is, altered sounds work by adding tension to moments *already* specified as tense by the underlying form. The expectation they raise is therefore a narrative one, in that their appearance implies a future moment of stability: their conciliation for having temporarily strayed from the underlying chords is the promise they make of impending reunion.

This is where a tune like "E.S.P." demonstrates its newness. For though the tune employs altered and other extended harmonies all the way through, it does so in a way that divorces those altered harmonies from the expectation that they *resolve* in any conventional fashion. Rather, the tune launches melody and harmony on seemingly unrelated trajectories. While the melody for the most part repeats sequences of notes whose harmonic content changes almost arbitrarily, and which for the length of the tune remains in a key (F-major) specified by few of the tune's chords, the chords beneath mostly move up and down in half-steps. Even on its own, this half-step progression confuses the expectations set up by chord quality: if one is inclined, for example, to hear the opening E7altered as a chord "leaning into" or "anticipating" an A-major (the chord to which E7 would most likely resolve), the "resolution" to Fmaj7 in bar 3 which does occur is disquieting for being so unexpected, as is (though slightly less so) the movement from E7 to Ebmaj7 that occurs four bars later.<sup>14</sup>

While more standard tunes, then, work by placing melody and harmony in a relationship

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<sup>13</sup> To be precise, only C and G are altered here, since D is a basic component (the seventh) of E7. Using these three notes together, then, allows the tune to describe an altered sound relative to the underlying chords while still emphasizing the relationship of fourths in the melody itself.

<sup>14</sup> Technically, the Fmaj7 here should be notated as Fmaj13.

whereby each directly (if inventively, ideally) reinforces the other,<sup>15</sup> there is very little about the melody of this tune that suggests that *these* chords are those that best support it. The converse is also true – on their own, “E.S.P.”’s chords give little rationale for having sponsored this particular melody. Yet this divergence nonetheless seems the point: on a deep level “E.S.P.” seems less about developing yet another creative series of tensions and resolutions than about meditating for an extended period on the nature of tension and chord color itself, exploring the musical implications that arise from keeping melody and harmony at near arms-length. Posing melody as a holding patterns of sorts against which the tune counterpoises various chords, “E.S.P.” in this reading registers as an impressionistic, meandering peregrination through musical space, one that secures certain combinations of sound against the narrative expectations they are traditionally expected to engender. This reading is justified by the fact that for most of the tune the notes of the melody conspicuously avoid iterating the basic components of the chords beneath it, remaining instead almost exclusively in the realm of chord *extensions*, notes whose point is far less often to assist a functional chord movement than to lend color *to* that movement.<sup>16</sup>

Yet this is only one potential identity into which the tune fits; that this is the case is what makes the aesthetic model “E.S.P.” lays out so potentially generative. For even as the tune seems to separate harmony and melody, generating its soundscape out of the evolving juxtaposition of the two, it also expresses an acute awareness that a piece of music that puts chords and notes in sequence together – any piece, any chords and any notes – will necessarily and inevitably produce a series of expectations and fulfillments, a series of tensions and resolutions – a narrative, in short. And that narrative, too, will always and inevitably conform (if obliquely) to traditional harmonic frameworks. Which means that from a different perspective, the tune’s impressionistic presentation is a ruse, a cover for “E.S.P.”’s having merely tweaked, if in inventive fashion, a quite traditional harmonic movement.

It does not take much work to hear the tune this way. The first four bars, for example: while I earlier described the movement from E7altered to Fmaj7 as “disquieting” (it undoubtedly is), merely shifting one’s aural attention a bit gives the progression a different, far more conventional contour. Given that the bulk of “E.S.P.”’s melody comes from the F-major scale, it is relatively easy to hear the bars 3 and 4 as a resolution to F-major. And since E7altered, the first chord in the sequence, also contains the notes crucial for spelling out C7 – E, Bb, and C (and even G and D) – it is not at all difficult to hear the chord *as* C7, the chord *most* primed to resolve to F-major. Indeed, listened to in this manner, the movement in this first four bars easily transforms into a basic and reliable transition from tension (C7) to resolution (F-major), a movement forming one of the most common chord movements in Western music.

The next four bars, bars 5-8, easily submit to a similar hearing. This one involves hearing E7altered in bars 5 and 6 as a “flat-five substitute” for the more conventional Bb7.<sup>17</sup> Given that an explicit flat-five substitution appears later in the tune, this reading is not at all unwarranted. Hearing bars 5 and 6 as Bb7 then does the same thing for bars 5-8 – now hearable as a simple movement from Bb7 to Ebmajor – that hearing E7alt as C7 did for the first four bars

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<sup>15</sup> By “reinforce” here I mean to indicate the way melodies of standard tunes generally consist of notes that come from the tune’s chords, or, conversely, the way the chords of standard tunes generally work to support those tunes’ melodies. This relationship is realized most effectively when melody notes that land on the important beats in the measure are also basic notes of the chord over which they’re being sounded.

<sup>16</sup> The term “chord extension” indicates notes that lie in the “upper ranges” of a chord, generally speaking, a chord’s 9<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 13<sup>th</sup>, and the altered versions of those notes.

<sup>17</sup> See Chapter One for an explanation of flat-five substitutions.

of the tune. In both cases a slight tweak to one's ear transforms a complicated set of chords into a disarmingly simple harmonic sequence, untangling "E.S.P."s first eight bars so they become a simple sequence of V-I's cycling around the circle of fourths. Though I will not spell out all the steps here, once one starts down this path, the rest of the tune easily submits to these more traditional formulas.

The point here is that by posing itself in this doubly-significative way, "E.S.P." thereby embodies a state of potential that can ossify, depending on how one chooses to hear, into two different and traditionally near-opposite types of form – impressionistic play of color on one hand and traditional harmonic sequence on the other. And in so doing, it engenders a musical space oversaturated with potential meaning. One might, in fact, be put in mind of Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous rabbit-duck picture, for which, as with "E.S.P.," minor reorientations in perception are all that is required to shift between the object's various identities (or 'aspects,' as Wittgenstein called them).<sup>18</sup> As Wittgenstein points out, of course, one need distinguish between the "continuous seeing" of an object (i.e. the persistence of the object as self-identical, regardless of what one sees it *as*), and the "dawning" of an aspect," (the seeing the picture *as* a duck or a rabbit).<sup>19</sup> The same distinction applies here, with each mode of hearing's coming to encourage a different understanding of what makes the tune important. On the level of 'continuous seeing,' the major accomplishment of this tune is its having pushed functional harmony to such a point of abstraction that its functional harmonic character becomes identical *to* an impressionistic play of color. Splitting the difference between straight-ahead and free jazz, "E.S.P." inhabits both category, and yet neither; the consequence is a radical expansion of what "functional harmony" comes to mean.

On the level of the dawning of aspect, however, the fact that "E.S.P." exists in a state of *potential* ossification means that the improvisation that takes place over it, the improvisation against which the tune ostensibly stands as unchanging bedrock, comes to necessarily and retroactively determine what "E.S.P."s formal identity was to begin with. For unlike on more traditional tunes, on "E.S.P." an improviser's musical choices come to actually make a difference as to what the underlying form of what the tune is. When approaching this tune, that is, one improviser might simply outline the chords as they pass by, playing without a sense of harmonic linearity. Another might adopt the strategy of the tune's melody, playing harmonically ambiguous notes and letting the tune's chords justify them in different ways. Yet another might play lines that make explicit the threads of functional harmony that link these chords *to* one another.

The key, however, is this: unlike what happens in more conventional improvisatory settings, however, whereby "form" indicates a stable structure, and the improviser's choices relative to that form thereby articulate the wider impact of a given solo, on "E.S.P." these choices move past merely interpreting a given form to unearth that form's emotional or expressive content, to becoming instrumental in clarifying the tune's *compositional* content. When a musician like Charlie Parker improvises a solo that cuts against the narrative prescriptions of a tune like "The Way You Look Tonight," the underlying chords of that tune still explicitly sound out the forward movement that that Parker chooses not to utilize. When an improviser makes certain choices regarding "E.S.P."s chords, however, the pervasive ambiguity of the tune ensures that its chords will support whichever choice the improviser makes, *without* its explicitly

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19 (Wittgenstein 194)

registering the choices *not* made. A decision as to the tune's essential "aspect" (i.e. impressionistic meditation on color vs. functional narrative) is thereby forced, retroactively, so that a given improvisation can make the tune *have been* one of these aspects all along.

This is where "E.S.P."s striking difference from more conventional tunes lies. For while all tunes certainly enable multiple improvisatory choices, on "E.S.P." improvisatory soloing becomes a constitutive component *of* the tune's form. As a consequence, the tune comes to perforate the barrier separating "underlying form" from "interpretation of form." This is a major accomplishment, one that renders traditional modes of reading largely ineffectual. For if an improvisation achieves legibility only in relation to underlying form, what sort of legibility results when the content of that underlying form depends on the content of the improvisation taking place over it? Taken in from a wider perspective, "E.S.P." thereby helps make hazy, and perennially cryptic, whatever notion of "voice" might be read out of the tune.

"E.S.P." is not, in fact, the only tune on the record (*E.S.P.*) that is able to blur the line between form and its interpretation. "Eighty-One," for example, co-written by Davis and bassist Ron Carter, takes a standard 12-bar blues form, but plays with chord quality, turning every single chord in that progression into a "suspended" chord. The move is small but significant, since among chord types, "suspended" chords are the most harmonically ambiguous.<sup>20</sup> While the root movement in "Eighty-One" is therefore a traditional 12-bar blues, this wholesale shift in chord quality strips away the traditional harmonic implications *of* this root movement, since the tune's suspended chords provide little support for the standard harmonic approaches improvisers often take to the blues. As a result, the tune inhabits a space somewhere between blues and non-blues, displacing, like "E.S.P." does, the generic conventions associated with the blues onto the interpretive possibilities of the improviser, whose note choices then become the standard that determines whether the tune actually *is* a blues or not.

Other tunes on the record are equally unorthodox and abstract, often maximizing hermeneutic instability by exploiting the often-ignored potential notes, rhythms and chords hold for being read in multiple ways. Yet this record represents only the group's opening salvo. Indeed, by the time Davis agreed, in December 1965, to have two nights of his band's week-long stay at the Plugged Nickel club in Chicago recorded for release, the band had metabolized the advances announced by *E.S.P.* (the record), able to both expand on their possibilities and implement those advances in more expansive contexts. Altogether seven sets of the band's tenure at the club were recorded; these recordings make up the Plugged Nickel sessions. Although initially meant for wider release, the recordings ended up trickling out in bits and pieces over the next twenty years, and were not released as an entire document until 1995. Nonetheless, the Plugged Nickel recordings have been held up by many musicians as an apogee of group improvisation, one whose impact is still being registered.

## THE PLUGGED NICKEL SESSIONS

Before moving into close analysis of the music played at the Plugged Nickel, however, some words on selection, given the one major objection potentially raised to making these recordings synecdochal for the group as a whole. This is the fact that, though unquestionably a monumental achievement, the Plugged Nickel sessions nonetheless ignore one of this band's most durable legacies: Wayne Shorter's compositions. Shorter's compositions do, after all,

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<sup>20</sup> This is because suspended chords lack a 3<sup>rd</sup>, the chord degree generally containing the greatest amount of harmonic information.

constitute the majority of tunes on the group's studio records, and it is largely on the strength of the compositions penned while in this band that Shorter is counted as one of the most significant jazz composers of the last half-century.<sup>21</sup> As was the case for nearly all live performances in this band's tenure, however, on the Plugged Nickel sessions Davis has his band largely playing standards, most written by non-jazz composers, many of which had been in Davis's book for years.

I am obviously not averse to using Shorter's compositions to illuminate some of this band's larger aesthetic strategies, as the last section demonstrated. Yet for the argument I am trying to develop here, there are two crucial and related reasons why I am choosing nonetheless to focus on the approach to standard tunes the quintet takes on the Plugged Nickel records. The first has to do with situating the group's aesthetic within the jazz tradition as a whole, especially that branch whose genesis lies with Charlie Parker, since, as we'll remember, it was in part Parker's ability to take song forms written by non-jazz composers and undermine their narrative efficacy that lent his music its larger cultural and philosophical import. Almost since the jazz's inception, the language of standards has formed the extra-individual framework into which jazz musicians fit, both the shared background against which individual style emerges and the knowledge required for any musician to make money as a jazz player. Because his group could do so much with those standards, then, using them to create sounds as radical as those being produced by any contemporary free jazz player, the choice to play standards represents Davis's bid to speak for the tradition by advertising, aggressively, the superior musical abilities of his band relative to *both* the straight-ahead and the avant-garde groups of the time.

Yet if part of my interest in Davis's band's approach to standards reflects the immanent historicity of its aesthetic, the other part is aimed at registering the performative and phenomenological impact of that aesthetic. For while the band clearly saw the two – standards and originals – as different, live recordings also show that Shorter's compositions, innovative as they are, often merely crystallized, responded to, or even introduced the larger musical ideas this band honed on the bandstand night after night.<sup>22</sup> And what the band played night after night were standards.

Which means that – and this is the larger claim I am making – on the level of produced sound, the alleged difference between inherited standards and original compositions is repeatedly undone by the fact that the band's readings of standard tunes often forces those standards to generate musical environments identical to those established in Shorter's originals. Though they were not playing Shorter's tunes, that is, one of the quintet's most striking accomplishments was its ability to take standard song forms and stretch those forms so that those forms come to, for example, express the *same* ambiguous relation of melody to harmony seen in "E.S.P.," the same sense of polyrhythmic freedom later heard on "Footprints" (from *Miles Smiles*), or the manifold innovations found in other Shorter tunes. When I earlier described the band as taking up the tradition and spitting it out in almost unrecognizable form, this was in part what I had in mind. For by taking traditional forms, and performing those forms in a way that turns "form" – specific and recognizable song forms, not "form" understood simply in the abstract – into a structure

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<sup>21</sup> Shorter also released a number of records (which too featured his own compositions) under his own name during the years he was playing with Davis, of which the more prominent – *Juju*, *Speak No Evil*, *Adam's Apple* – are also of uniformly spectacular quality.

<sup>22</sup> As Ron Carter later explained, "there's a lot of music we didn't get a chance to fool around with. I wonder what kind of dash and daring we could have found if we'd played 'Nefertiti' for three more weeks, but we never got a chance to do that." qtd. in (Mercer 126). "Nefertiti" is the title tune from the group's 1967 record.

capable of generating a sonic milieu phenomenologically, and even compositionally, indistinguishable from those original tunes posed as radical alternatives *to* standard forms, the band upends an inherited hierarchy, imposing on form an interpretation that deeply scrambles the fundamental identity of that form.

On the sounded level, what this means is that the group often plays traditional song forms without explicitly sounding the features that makes those forms recognizable as such. For the most part, this process generally indicates the band's responding to, or marking, the underlying form in unpredictable ways. Solos often begin and end in the middle of the form, instead of iterating multiples of that form. Moments of tension and release, of increase and decrease of energy, rarely match the section breaks, beginnings, or ends of choruses to which they are usually tied. Harmony and rhythm can seem so elastic as to sound wholly unmotivated by the form as given. As David Morgan, in his article on harmonic superimposition in the work of Herbie Hancock (one of the very few academic attempts to even describe, let alone analyze the phenomenon), writes, "While he generally maintains the integrity of the underlying song form within his solos, Hancock and his section mates disguise these forms to such an extent that the uninitiated may not recognize this relationship but rather experience the improvisation as free form."<sup>23</sup> The resulting instability can leave all but the most advanced listener adrift, unable to tell if what is being played *is* a particular song form or not.

It is not that there are no passages in which the band's playing conforms to more traditional expectations. Indeed, the more experienced one's ears are, the more the sounds the group produces come be heard as direct expressions of the chords and rhythms specified by underlying form. But moments of apparent straightforwardness can also be as dissimulating as they are accessible, with gestures that seem to be direct expressions of that form – moments of rhythmic emphasis that seem to be correspond to an expected moment of climax in the form, for example, or moments in which a given musician's improvised line seems to be directly spelling the chord changes passing by underneath – turning out not to be.

The phenomenological instability of this music clearly suggests that a new understanding of "voice," one that accounts for the actual sounds the group makes, needs be registered. Before engaging some actual musical moments, however, it is worth spelling out the two primary techniques this band employs to achieve this result. The first is what one might call "atomization" or "decomposition" of form; the second has to do with the group's approach to collective improvisation. First, "atomization," which is the name I am giving to the process whereby the band renders form unrecognizable by performatively dissociating components of form often assumed to be mutually implicative. For example, if the chord progression of a given song form lasts for 32 bars, that chord progression necessarily engenders a temporal sequence of events, a prescription that calls for certain events – the form's completion, for example, or the beginning of the bridge – to take place at certain future points in time. Once a tune's initial tempo is counted out, this temporal structure remains stable, regardless of what the contents of the tune's chords may be. Tempo and pulse, too, tend to undergird harmonic movement, with jazz's standard 4-beat drum pattern nicely corroborating chord changes that occur every 4, 8, 16, or even 2 beats. Harmony and melody, in addition, generally work to reinforce each other, as we saw in "E.S.P.."

These descriptions may seem glaringly obvious; this is, indeed, simply how music (or at least Western music) works. Yet what Davis's group shows is that these various components need not necessarily arrive in conjunction, or need not interact in the ways we're given to

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<sup>23</sup> (Morgan 70)

understand them as interacting. What this means is that in playing a given form, the band often explicitly (i.e. identifiably) retains only one of these elements of form, without necessarily sounding the other elements with which that original is often associated. Thus the sequence of chords of a given song form may be played explicitly (meaning that the soloist plays lines that explicitly invoke those chords), but the underlying time feel may be opened or modified so that this string of chords does not appear to adhere to the 4, 8 or 16-beat sequences in which they usually appear. Conversely, the band may retain the temporal structure of a given form, continuing to mark section breaks, while abandoning, or modifying almost beyond recognition, the sequence of chords that temporal structure originally contained. At other times the band may retain the tempo, time-feel, and harmonic sequence of form as given, but bury that form's larger architectural outlines – section breaks, or beginnings and ends of cycles – by phrasing through them.

As a result, “form” comes to indicate less a total structure than the simultaneity of its individual elements. And this atomizing process may be even further complicated by the fact that the element of form a given musician retains may not be the same element another musician retains, even when the two are playing at the same time. One musician may keep a tune's rhythm and time-feel intact while restructuring its harmony, while another may maintain harmony, but submit it to a wholly different rhythmic feel. One musician may build intensity according to the narrative arc set by the underlying chords of a tune, while another may maintain those chords but undermine its narrative arc (this is Charlie Parker's strategy, for example). Polyrhythmic layering may create a situation in which overall narrative is maintained, and section breaks are marked, but they become difficult to register as such, because they come to appear in what sounds like the middles of measures.

This process then induces, in part, a new relation of aural surface to depth, expanding what counts as musical presence. With each musician's sounding a different part of the form as representative of the whole, the formal relationships these parts have to one another is through an organizational structure (form) that is never made aurally present as such. Yet on the level of surface sound (which may at times merely indicate how the music is received by those with, in Morgan's phrase, “uninitiated” ears), these sounded elements come to agglomerate into a new whole, one that may, phenomenologically speaking, bear little resemblance to the form that bore them, even while that form remains pervasively present in it. Sounds then come to signify in (at least) two directions, as readings of underlying form on one hand and as intra-sonic relationships on the other.

If this detachment and recombination of ostensibly interdependent formal elements from one another represents the first major prong of this group's approach to improvisation, the second involves the group's radical expansion of the possibilities afforded by group interaction. A brief review: from its inception one of jazz's most revered features has been the way a given performance owes as much to the improvised interactions between the musicians on the bandstand as it does to each individual musician's response to underlying form. Paul Berliner and Ingrid Monson have both examined with great detail how this interaction works, showing how ideas introduced by any one musician on the bandstand can come to be developed, commented on, modified, contextualized, or even left productively incomplete by the other musicians in a group, and how this interactive process helps shape the sound and meaning of any given performance.<sup>24</sup>

In most jazz settings, then (including free jazz), responses to improvised statements by

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<sup>24</sup> See (Monson, IT) and (Berliner).



soloists are generally expected to meet loose, genre-defined standards of intelligibility. This does not mean that such responses are prescribed, only that in general responses can reasonably be assumed to be retrospectively traceable to the statement to which they respond. (In this jazz improvisation resembles, as many are fond of pointing out, verbal conversation.) One can see this, for example, in Charlie Parker's music. For Parker, musical meaning is primarily an individual phenomenon, generated out of the interaction between the sounds issuing from a player's instrument and the expectations set by the form over which they take place. His innovations, consequently, largely remain applicable to individual playing: while Parker's approaches to harmony, melody, and phrasing indelibly reshaped the idiom, from the perspective of *group* sound, his music remains relatively conservative. Given that Parker's formal strategy required him to foreground both the form over which he was playing and his repudiation of it, that is, a good rhythm section for Parker was one that played the form rather straightforwardly, playing the foil to Parker the virtuoso.<sup>25</sup> While different rhythm sections may provide more or less effective support for Parker's playing, Parker rarely incorporates the statements made by those rhythm sections into his solos.

For Davis's group, in contrast, context – the possibility of a statement's intelligibility being enhanced or undermined by what follows it – permeates nearly every musical sound produced. And it does so in a particular way, one bent on expanding the ambiguity inherent in the inevitable relationship an improvised gesture holds with its future contextualization. While the potential for its being revised or complicated infuses the meaning of improvised sounds in any context, in most jazz this potential for complication is attenuated by the expectation that musical responses will work to reduce the potential ambiguity of a given statement. Here, however, this potential is repeatedly exploited to heighten the overall level of formal ambiguity, to repeatedly make puzzling, rather than clear, the relation statements hold to underlying form. Sometimes this occurs by way of responses that seem counter-intuitive: if in most improvisatory settings an increase in volume by a soloist generally leads the other group members to increase the volume of their playing, here apparent calls by a soloist to raise intensity are often met by the rhythm section's quieting down, or even laying out entirely.<sup>26</sup> If in most jazz settings direct prompting by the soloist is what authorizes the time-feel's becoming more elaborate, with this band rises and falls in polyrhythmic complexity often seem wholly unmatched to what the soloist is playing.

From a harmonic perspective, the effect is most extreme: in most settings, when a soloist plays a phrase that communicates ambiguous harmonic information (i.e. there are multiple ways by which the phrase can be related to underlying form), the "proper" response involves explicitly linking this information to underlying form, reducing the ambiguity of the situation. While members of Davis's group sometimes choose this option, more often the band treats ambiguous musical statements not as interpretations *of* form, but as straightforward statements considered *outside* of any reference to the underlying form, statements to be responded to at face value, without considering their derivation. Or, even more provocatively, the response to ambiguous information is often to do nothing, to let oblique statements pass without comment, wallowing

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<sup>25</sup> By this I am not arguing that Parker's contemporaries played in boring or conventional ways. Like Parker, the other famous musicians of his generation – Bud Powell, Max Roach, Kenny Clarke, Oscar Pettiford, etc. – dramatically expanded the role of their respective instruments. I am arguing, however, that in its mode of response to the improvisations of musicians like Parker, the typical bebop rhythm section still operated (even if realizing this goal was nonetheless an amazingly difficult task) by responding and enhancing the soloist's playing, rather than recontextualizing it.

<sup>26</sup> To "lay out" is to not play.

for as long as possible in a state of hermeneutic haziness.

Not only does this more democratic approach to group interaction expand the political ramifications of the group's aesthetic, then, it also pushes musical meaning into realm where sounds become oversaturated with unresolved hermeneutic implication. If Charlie Parker's music insisted that surface sound need not express a wider hermeneutic depth, this music makes resolutely unclear what counts *as* surface and what as depth: with already ambiguous musical statements made more ambiguous by the responses they come to have appeared to solicit, and with the music dissociating organizational presence from its sounded counterpart, sounds as they emerge come to signify in manifold directions at once, making it difficult to extract an enduring meaning from the music as played. On an individual level, of course, the style of each musician in the group remains distinguishable, as always, as a set of improvisatory tendencies, instrumental timbres, and idiosyncratic vocabulary. When taken as only one aspect of the group's sound, however, the extreme ambiguity musical statements come to acquire makes reducing any of these stylistic elements to a given statement about the world, or a statement of extra-musical identity, nearly impossible.

### MY FUNNY VALENTINE, TAKE 1

To clarify these ideas, I move into the Plugged Nickel sessions themselves. I begin my reading with the group's two performances, one on each night, of the classic Rogers and Hart tune, "My Funny Valentine." An abiding staple of Davis's canon, the song endures in part because of its interpretive adaptability: with relatively basic chord changes, the tune is not difficult to play, yet because these changes lend themselves to either functional or modal interpretations, improvisers often find in it a wide range of interpretive leeway.<sup>27</sup> Among musicologists, both Howard Brofsky and Robert Walser have offered analyses of various Miles Davis performances of the tune, with Brofsky comparing recordings from 1956, 1958 and 1964 to trace some key performative developments of Davis's playing, and Walser close reading the solo from Davis's 1964 performance of the tune with an aim towards squaring the "mistakes" in Davis's trumpet playing with the inarguable mastery of his performance.<sup>28</sup>

While both of these analyses are enormously valuable, it is nonetheless curious that when analyzing the 1964 version of the tune (which features the same rhythm section of Hancock, Carter and Williams) *both* critics either miss or ignore the startling harmonic modification the group makes to the tune's bridge: instead of the standard chord changes (see below), throughout the tune the 1964 group plays the bridge as a pedal point alternating between Eb major and a Dbsus13.<sup>29</sup> Even when examining Davis's solo apart from what the rhythm section plays, this change of harmony is significant, since it suggests a different potential reading of the solo's harmonic import. On a larger scale, this shift also helps articulate two key approaches to the modification of form this group took: blending of modal and standard approaches to changes on

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<sup>27</sup> There is perhaps another reason why "My Funny Valentine" remained in Davis's book for so long. As Howard Brofsky points out, in 1952 a version of the song recorded by Chet Baker, a young, handsome, white trumpeter, one whose relaxed feel and lush tone clearly owed plenty to Miles Davis, became a "'smash hit'." Such an event was surely galling to Davis, who throughout his career remains acutely invested in the role race played in the promotion, reception, and financial repercussions of the aesthetic he had helped create. Given this, Brofsky argues, part of Davis's motivation (if unconscious) for keeping the tune in his book for so long was to, in part, "by sheer artistry [take] the song away from Baker" (24).

<sup>28</sup> (Brofsky), (Walser).

<sup>29</sup> Thanks for this observation go to Phil Markowitz, who pointed it out in his Advanced Musical Theory class.

one hand, and harmonic superimposition on the other.

**Standard chords:**

Standard chords in 4/4 time:

Staff 1: E♭maj7, F-7, G-7, F-7, E♭maj7, F-7

Staff 2: G-7, F-7, E♭, D-7♭5 G7♭9, C-, B-, B♭-, A7

**Davis’s group:**

Davis’s group chords in 4/4 time:

Staff 1: E♭maj7, D♭sus13, E♭maj7, D♭sus13, E♭maj7, D♭sus13

Staff 2: E♭maj7, D♭sus13, E♭, D-7♭5 G7♭9, C-, B-, B♭-, A7

Either way, by 1965, the group seems to have abandoned this particular harmonic modification in favor of the tune’s original chords. Yet this return to the more standard changes seems nonetheless to have promoted a more provocative interpretation of them. First, the version of “My Funny Valentine” from the first night (December 22; Disc 2 of the box set). As is standard, the performance begins with a piano intro, one Hancock keeps relatively simple, at least until the last few bars, where he intentionally highlights an A-natural in the higher register, one clearly meant to jar with the Ab for which he had been preparing us. The unexpected dissonance grates; already, it seems, expectations will be upended. Charged with playing the tune’s melody, Davis begins conventionally, playing the melody’s first phrase straightforwardly. After completing this first phrase, however, Davis lets a full *ten seconds of silence* pass before playing the second. This is not ten seconds in which the rhythm section plays while Davis stands silent; this is ten seconds in which Davis imposes silence on the whole room, forcing everyone – audience and fellow bandmates – to sit in discomfort as they wait for him to continue. Moves like this capture Miles Davis at his most manipulative, and most entrancing: while sparse, open phrasing had always been a characteristic of Davis’s trumpet style, exploits like this one read the subtle beauty of sparseness as a bald assertion of power.

As the solo continues, the efficacious use of silence appears in multiple forms, not only as a means to declare control, but also for disconnecting the music as sounded from the expectations of underlying form. The relevant moment occurs at the beginning of Davis’s second chorus. Now, standard protocol generally has beginnings of choruses (moments when the form has run its full cycle and begins again) functioning something like chapter breaks: providing soloists opportune moments to build intensity and introduce new motives into their solos; these improvisatory acknowledgements of beginnings of choruses then come to reinforce (and situate listeners in) a tune’s underlying architecture. In the last few moments of Davis’s

first chorus, the trumpeter certainly seems to be meeting this goal, as he plays a repeated phrase of the type that usually signals a rhythm section to build beneath it. Responding appropriately, Williams' drumming becomes increasingly active, and Hancock in turn sets down a slowly-rising sequence that halts on a B-natural, a tension note whose presence suggests an ensuing resolution to the tonic chord (C-minor) with which the next chorus begins. Yet after having enabled, even authorized, this marked build-up of tension, when the next chorus actually arrives, Davis meets it by again playing nothing, standing silent for almost four bars, leaving this built-up tension frustratingly unfulfilled. The rhythm section responds similarly, with Williams and Carter maintaining a steady time that betrays no indication of having passed over a noteworthy signpost. For listeners having been prepared for a powerful note from Davis or a crash from Williams' cymbal, the effect is extraordinary disorienting. With so many expected and identifiable signposts suddenly withdrawn, the environment encourages listeners to wonder if the form actually is proceeding as they had been imaging it.

This process, whereby underlying form seems to submit entirely to the band's interpretation of it, reaches a peak at the beginning of the chorus' second "A" section. The moment begins when Tony Williams, seemingly unprompted by anything Davis plays,<sup>30</sup> starts overlaying a double-time Latin rhythm on the basic pulse of the tune. Before this rhythm has time to take hold, however, Williams quickly morphs it into a double-time "3 over 4" pattern (i.e. a drum pattern that proceeds twice as fast as the rest of the band is playing, and additionally organizes its phrases into 3-beat groupings, instead of the 4-beat groupings the time signature calls for):



Now, though quite difficult to both execute and hear, on its own this rhythmic move is not particularly noteworthy; polyrhythm so perfuses the band's aesthetic that interjections like this often come and go. What is noteworthy, however, is the collective response to Williams' suggestion. While bassist Carter largely ignores Williams' double-time pattern, continuing to walk at the steady tempo he has been holding, Davis apparently hears in Williams' rhythm a call to overlay a polyrhythm of his own designation, one that matches neither Carter's nor Williams'. Or so it seems, at least, as he quickly shifts from phrasing in quarter notes to phrasing in quarter-note triplets.<sup>31</sup> Hancock, for his part, supports Davis's move with a short, pithy pattern he

<sup>30</sup> I say "seemingly" here because with this band musical prompts can be extremely subtle; my inability to hear one here may only reflect my own inadequacies as a listener.

<sup>31</sup> By this I mean that while Williams plays the same number of beats per bar that the band had been playing, he organizes his phrases into 3-beat (instead of 4-beat) groupings. Davis, in contrast, starts playing triplets over the 4/4 time, which means that he is hearing the measure (the amount of time it is taking Williams to play 4 beats) as containing only 3 beats.

repeats an seemingly irregular intervals.

Taken collectively, then, what is happening here is that for the course of this segment of Davis's solo, each member of the band is playing a different interpretation of the time signature, yet all are doing so at the same time. Simultaneously realizing four different meters, each derived from the original pulse but sounding wholly distinct from it – imagine each player standing as the last person in a game of “telephone” – the band thereby transforms the tune's underlying rhythm, its basic pulse, from an explicitly played, explicitly felt component of the music to a rhythmic center that is obscured and unsounded, yet nonetheless still exerts an organizing power on the sounds produced. This is a prime example of that I earlier described as “decomposition of form”: with all four band members playing different derivations of the original rhythm, that original rhythm acquires a presence rendered only by implication, a presence that pervades the sounds being produced (and heard), yet is itself realized only in one of them – that of Carter's bass, which in this environment comes to sound less like the bearer of the tune's fundamental pulse than simply another tempo unmoored from any recognizable foundation. And with the music as it is *sounded* betraying little of its organizational fundamentals, the sounded presence of underlying form comes to be usurped by the band's interpretation of it.

Having established form as encompassing these two modes of presence – as organizationally operative and as interpretively realized – the quintet spends much of the Plugged Nickel sessions expanding and contracting the gulf between them. Yet, at times, even the implied stability of form such a gulf implies (in that underlying form remains stable as a potential reference, even if what is heard does not consistently reflect that stability) can be absorbed into the band's interpretive reading of it. On the performance of “Stella by Starlight” from the second night, for example, after playing the tune at a slow tempo for nearly four minutes, Davis moves his solo into double-time, playing twice as fast as he had been playing. But instead of treating this double-time phrasing as a rhythm to be heard *relative* to the stable underlying rhythm of the form, the group here collectively doubles not only the tempo of their *playing*, but the actual pacing of the *tune*, the literal rate at which the chord changes are moving past. That is, rather than hearing Davis's playing as a rhythmic variation sustained by the tune's fundamental architecture, the band changes the fundamental architecture of the tune to accommodate it to Davis's interpretation. Although occurring less frequently than moves like the ones described above, this treatment nonetheless erodes even further the difference between individual interpretation of form and basic form itself. For even the very possibility that it may take place suggests that the difference between form and its interpretation can happen not only on a phenomenological level, but on a compositional one.

This radical expansion of “form” reaches another peak at the end of Davis's solo on “I Fall in Love too Easily,” also from the second night's performance. Lasting for four choruses, the solo is rather standard for Davis – still (hugely) interesting and suspenseful, if not groundbreaking. As the fifth chorus begins, however, Davis plays lines on his trumpet that suggest the harmony of a traditional “tag” – a repeated chord sequence (usually iii-VI-ii-V), generally appended to the end of tunes as a unifying gesture. Normally, one would expect the band to seize upon Davis's (slightly odd) suggestion, playing chords that corroborate what Davis is playing. But while Davis plays *as if* the band were playing iii-VI-ii-V over and over, Ron Carter, the bassist, continues to play the harmony of the tune itself. This goes beyond the band members' simultaneously playing multiple, sometimes conflicting interpretations of an agreed-upon form; for a period of time, Davis and Carter are effectively playing two different *tunes*

(though tunes with overlapping tempos and keys).

While the melodic disconnect between these two decisions jars, the moment nonetheless helps articulate the new understanding of “form” with which this group is working. For here we see underlying form splintered into multiple, incommensurate, possibilities realized at once, possibilities that cohere *only* by virtue of their being sounded at the same time, and at the same tempo. This state of formal multiplication then does more than merely push form into the realm of the implicit; it pushes form into a state of unresolved potential that can accommodate sounds previously understood to be alien to it. Not only does this move force the form of “I Fall in Love too Easily” to have always potentially included what Davis plays over it, it also pushes – for a short time, at least – that form into the same position of compositional ambiguity seen in “E.S.P.” Will Davis’s alternate harmonies and melody be read as a brief outlay from the underlying form of the tune, in which case Davis’s playing will be ultimately assimilated to Carter’s more traditional rendering of the chords? Or – and this is a real possibility, given what we saw with “Stella by Starlight” – will the band move with Davis and abandon “I Fall in Love too Easily” entirely, or remake the form of that tune so thoroughly that it would be no longer recognizable as such? We do not know – both are a possibility, and until one of these options is chosen, the tune remains in a place of hazy, unfinished potential, one in which the determination of what form *is* is displaced onto the interpretive readings of the musicians in the group.

### **SUPERIMPOSITION AND ITS DISCONTENTS: WAYNE SHORTER’S SOLO**

While I have so far focused mostly on rhythmic and structural issues, a turn to Wayne Shorter’s solo on “My Funny Valentine” helps us see how deeply the band’s fluid approach to form subsumes the expanded version of harmony its members were developing. To assist this reading, a quick review of jazz harmony up to this point: as was briefly discussed in Chapter 1, many of the harmonic innovations introduced by the beboppers in the 1940’s (and codified by the hard-boppers in the 1950’s), involved the implementation of chord extension notes and altered tones as melodic material. Improvising in the in the “upper regions” of chords, and learning to hear standard chords – maj7, min7, dominant – as corresponding to scales other than the standard major scale,<sup>32</sup> bebop musicians greatly expanded the harmonic palette, turning notes like 13, #11, #5, and b9 into standard components of the harmonic vocabulary. Yet, as I described earlier, these harmonic advancements were for the most part still generally tied to tension-and-release formulas provided by the tunes themselves: for the beboppers and those who absorbed their vocabulary, the point of these approaches was to enhance the pre-given moments of tension in a tune, and therefore to solidify even more emphatically the entrenched architecture of underlying form.

In the late 1950’s and early 1960’s, improvisers grown tired with these standard approaches began to develop new ones. Some musicians abandoned traditional harmony altogether, creating free jazz.<sup>33</sup> Other improvisers developed new techniques for augmenting the harmonic palette as given. One of the most productive of these was the technique known as

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<sup>32</sup> For example, realizing that the half-whole diminished scale, the altered dominant scale, and the whole-tone scale could all be used as root scales for dominant chords.

<sup>33</sup> This description is, admittedly not wholly accurate, given that numerous “free-jazz” players (like Ornette Coleman and Anthony Braxton) have worked out extensive and detailed, if idiosyncratic, harmonic systems. Nonetheless, the genre is still far more about timbre, energy, dynamics and texture than it is harmony, at least as the latter is understood in most traditional senses.

“harmonic superimposition.” Loosely defined, “harmonic superimposition” indicates an improviser’s playing a melody or chord that introduces a tonal center either not indicated by the form or not being played by the rhythm section. That is, superimposition calls for the improviser to layer a new harmonic structure (which can be a single chord, a chord progression, or longer sequence) *on top of* the existing harmony, and to think according to the rules of this *new* harmony even as the old harmony is being played beneath.<sup>34</sup> The combination of multiple harmonic systems played simultaneously thereby produces color combinations that would be difficult to generate from the logic of the underlying chords alone. The process thereby opens a near-infinite number of new harmonic pathways over any given chord sequence, allowing improvisers to realize ever more precise shadings of consonance and dissonance.

On a more structural level, the technique holds immense power to renegotiate the relationship between underlying architecture and improvised interpretation of it, since one of its potential uses is to detach the harmonic structures of pre-given form from the narrative outline they suggest. For if any harmonic sequence is potentially supplanted by another through superimposition, then moments of narrative tension and resolution put into place by the chord movement of underlying form can be superseded by superimposed harmony that may move from resolution to tension (or tension to tension) at the very moment the form moves in an opposite direction. If I earlier identified Charlie Parker’s contribution to the idiom as separating out two separate approaches to form – expansion of the harmonic and rhythmic palette on one hand, and narrative dismantling on the other – according to their wider effects, harmonic superimposition merges these two approaches, turning harmony itself into a means for recasting form’s narrative movement. If narrative and color are usually construed as opposing elements, harmonic superimposition aligns them, allowing for *narrative* dissolution though *non-narrative* means.

This situation then lends improvised lines a new ambiguity relative to underlying form. For once harmonic superimposition is put into place, it may be not be clear whether the notes and lines an improviser is playing are to be heard as direct embellishments or responses *to* the underlying harmony, or if they are instead part of a new, superimposed harmonic system working in *parallel* to the underlying form. While the effect may be the same (and while musicians using the technique tend not to mark a difference between these two modes of hearing), on a wider level harmonic superimposition allows for further restructuring of underlying form as given. David Morgan, describing Herbie Hancock’s particular use of the technique, characterizes the experience well:

if you are familiar enough with [the underlying form of the tune being played], you will notice that the relationship of Hancock’s improvised lines to the underlying harmony fluctuates. If you are less experienced, you will probably hear the solo as a swinging free improvisation, loosely based in [a single key], with coherence provided by motivic recurrence and development. *Ideally, the solo should be apprehended on both levels*

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<sup>34</sup> As David Liebman describes in his *A Chromatic Approach to Jazz Harmony and Melody*, superimposition “means the placement of one musical element over another to be sounded simultaneously with the original ... in a sense, the improviser is thinking, playing and hearing chord sequences which are not literally being sounded, but only conceptualized in order to provide alternate sources for melodic lines” (14, 16). Liebman’s book is far and away the most thorough study of superimposition (as well as the other major approaches to harmony explored by Hancock, Coltrane, Shorter and other improvisers of the 60’s, 70’s and 80’s) in print. Though the book was written more as a guidebook for instrumentalists, Liebman is nonetheless extremely clear when describing the theory underpinning these techniques. Other than Liebman (a saxophonist who spent almost three years in Davis’s band in the early 1970’s), startlingly few musicologists have studied this phenomenon.

*simultaneously* (italics mine) (78-79).

Let us keep these ideas in mind as I turn to two of Wayne Shorter's solos, the first from the version of "My Funny Valentine" looked at earlier (that from on the first night's performance). As is typical, the solo begins in the middle of the first A section, since Davis, the soloist prior to Shorter, has chosen to conclude his own solo not at the end of the form, but four bars later. Once begun, Shorter's solo [**transcription on page 83**] digs almost immediately into these alternate harmonies, fluidly swimming back and forth from C-minor, the key in which "My Funny Valentine" is written, and B-major, a radically distant key. Already the move divides potential analysis. On one hand these excursions to B-major represent Shorter's having expanded of the potentials of C-minor, his having forced that chord to accommodate a number of sounds not usually associated with it (or, thought differently, as having revealed a number of sounds always authorized by C-minor, but having not discovered as such yet). On the other, they represent Shorter's rejection of C-minor, at least insofar as the harmonic expectations of that chord are usually posed, and therefore his having undermined the prescriptive import of the form that includes that chord. Not, of course, that these readings need be opposed. For more compelling is a third possibility, which is that the power of harmonic superimposition lies in its embracing both of these performative possibilities, bringing to the fore the inherent dialectic whereby rejection of form is always, inevitably, a reinscription of it.

Soon the group adopts Shorter's expansive approach, but on the level of rhythm. Now, throughout the groups' various excursions, the near-constant is Ron Carter on bass, who, laying down the underlying tempo and harmony, embodies the closest thing this music has to a hearable center, one explicitly linking what the other musicians are playing to one another. Here, however, after playing this role for half of Shorter's first chorus, Carter decides, three bars before the bridge and seemingly out of the blue, to stop playing on the beat and, instead, to play on the "and of 1" and the "and of 3." This move would be disorienting enough on its own (especially for listeners, who often rely on Carter to ground them in both the time and the form), but soon Tony Williams heightens the rhythmic instability by playing a different polyrhythmic pattern (below). Soon Herbie Hancock joins Williams in this phrasing, resulting in a situation whereby the fundamental beat of the tune, the "1" of each bar, is near fully obscured, *extremely* hard to hear unless one is paying careful attention:

Even this multi-rhythmic interlude is not to last long, however, for after eight bars spent establishing this pattern, Williams and Carter, again unexpectedly, drop out altogether, turning the quartet into a duo of saxophone and piano. Shorter responds by loosening up the time, Hancock follows him, and the two quickly approach a state of near-full rubato, with no explicit pulse being even intimated, let alone sounded. Already loose, Shorter's phrasing seems to lose all connection to the underlying harmony, proceeding only by a laid-back motivic logic. After nearly 45 seconds, this free-form-ish excursion reaches its peak, two bars before the last A section [**circled in transcription**]. Now, harmonically, the form here specifies a chord progression, Dminor7 to G7, that besides being one of the most common in jazz, is directly poised to resolve to the C-minor that follows (and which opens the last A section of the tune). Given the expansion of jazz harmony I described above, there are any number of notes or sequences Shorter could play here, nearly all of which could be read as assisting this movement. Shorter, however, chooses a different route, instead holding, for almost 6 whole beats, the note F#.

It is of course a truism that there are "no wrong notes in jazz," given that nearly every



note in any given circumstance can be justified in one way or another.<sup>35</sup> Yet in the hierarchy of note choices here, an F# would certainly be dead last. For one, the note clashes with the key notes of both chords in this sequence: D-minor is defined as a minor chord *because* it contains an F-natural, as opposed to an F-sharp, and G7 is likewise defined *as* dominant (and smoothly resolves into C-minor) because it contains both an F-natural and a B-natural. Even to untrained listeners, a natural-7 when played over a dominant chord, like the F# played over a G7 heard here, is perhaps the note most likely to be heard as “wrong.” Here, however, Shorter not only plays this “wrong” note, he *emphasizes* it.

As a single, synecdochal moment, the three seconds for which Shorter holds this F# open up a world of hermeneutic ambiguity. For though there are perhaps any number of ways to understand Shorter’s F# being played here, Shorter’s actual presentation of this note – the way it is played by itself, not as part of a longer, contextualizing string of notes – makes not at all clear whether this F# is meant to *disrupt* the form or to *enhance* it, whether it aims to embellish the underlying chords in a particularly provocative manner, or to flaunt a disregard for whatever prescriptive value those chords would hold. And while the easier path is to read this note as implying a certain muscularity – that Shorter’s playing is confident enough to bend the tune’s harmony to the logic of his solo, rather than the other way around – the note’s real strength registers in its willful abandonment of hermeneutic clarity. That is, its more powerful effect is to enact neither a straightforward disruption or enhancement, but rather to foreground the simultaneous possibility and impossibility of both and the necessary interdependence of these positions. For at end, the group is interested neither in jettisoning form entirely nor neatly conforming to its prescriptions, but in opening up the border space between these two modes of revelation, and in so doing refusing the possibility of the music being reduced to either.

One can, in fact, extend this reading of ambiguity forward, since after Shorter plays his F#, the three members of the rhythm section come in on the downbeat of the last A section, hitting the C-minor chord with which that section begins. The sense of dialectic uncertainty thus expands to include both Shorter’s F# *and* the C-minor that follows. From one perspective C-minor’s having temporally succeeded Shorter’s F# is merely the harmonic residue of a structural juxtaposition, of the band’s having simply decided that, regardless of what Shorter played, it would come back in at the beginning of the next section. Yet the band’s coming back in and continuing with the tune also implies the accommodation of this F# to C-minor to the tune’s underlying form, reducing that sequence to an acceptable, if intrepid, moment of functional harmony.

These choices are not innocuous. For they have compositional implications. In this first reading, the bridge of “My Funny Valentine” has been transformed into a simple set of temporal expectations, one in which harmony matters little, if at all. In the second, what counts *as* functional harmony has been expanded. And with both of these hermeneutic possibilities remaining permanently available, the true effect is to make indelibly opaque the relation a gesture like this holds to underlying form, and therefore to prohibit a definitive reading of what the gesture might *mean*, in a wider sense. As with “E.S.P.,” hermeneutic ambiguity is made structurally constitutive. Yet while the sheer audacity of Shorter’s note solicits the desire to make sense of it, the structural apparatus that note puts in place precludes the possibility of any

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<sup>35</sup> A common piece of instruction for improvisers, in fact, is that “if you play a wrong note, play it again, and it’ll sound like you meant it.” Kenny Barron notes that “One of the tricks is that if you play something that you didn’t really mean to play, play it again. If you repeat it, it sounds like that’s what you meant to play” qtd. in (Berliner 212).

such reading's becoming definitive.

## MY FUNNY VALENTINE, TAKE 2

One more moment, this from Shorter's "My Funny Valentine" solo from the following night's performance. Beginning his solo in the middle of the first A section (since, again, Davis has extended his solo past the end of the previous chorus, then stopped abruptly, having given little indication that his solo was winding down in the first place), Shorter starts off with some relatively "inside" phrasing. A few bars before the second A section arrives, Ron Carter starts phrasing in 3, moving from plucking a note on every beat to plucking one every beat-and-a-half. This, too, is a standard bass players' move, one often used to anticipate the arrival of a new section. Here, however, the band treats this gesture not as a signal to build tension for the next section, but as a signal to launch into further polyrhythmic exploration (a reading that ultimately, and ironically, leads to the group's burying the very section marker that seemingly prompted Carter's initial gesture). Thus Hancock picks up the idea, borrowing Carter's rhythm, but plays it by alternating two main chord voicings back and forth, phrasing the "3" rhythm in "2," layering another rhythm that abstracts away from the basic pulse of the tune. Soon Williams, too, takes up the mantle, picking up the "3" feel, but placing it differently in the measure, complicating the sounded pulse even more. Shorter follows by loosening up his time feel, letting these multiple rhythms course beneath him.

What happens next is dramatic and revealing (as well as breathtaking). After the group has sufficiently obfuscated the primary rhythm of the tune, the individual members disperse their rhythms even further, slowly dissolving the sounded pulse (if not the implicit pulse – at this point we are not sure) away entirely. Williams quiets down, then picks up his sticks entirely. Carter and Hancock insert more and more space into their accompaniment of Shorter, and the three eventually settle into a long rubato passage in which, as in the earlier version of the tune, no explicit tempo is marked. Interestingly, if one is closely tracking the form (i.e. counting time under what Shorter, Hancock and Carter are playing, even though none plays time or indicates that the chord changes are progressing at the same rate they had been), it is clear that Shorter's playing does continue to reference the underlying chords, although if one just listens, without intentionally maintaining a pulse in one's head, it becomes quite difficult to tell that he is doing so. For the rest of the bridge and the last A section of the tune, reference to the underlying form becomes very loose, if present at all. With Shorter alternating quotes from the tune's melody with strikingly non-diatonic phrases, Hancock purposefully withholding commentary, and Carter responding to Shorter with equally oblique melodies, this whole section generally sounds, if one brackets off the preceding 5 minutes of music, less like an organized group improvising over a standard tune than three musicians randomly picking up instruments and playing.

The astonishing event occurs when the next chorus begins, however. And when it does, it shows that my having tracked the form *as if* the underlying tempo had been proceeding normally was, in fact, a fully appropriate response, despite the lengths to which the players went to make that tempo implicit. For just as they did on the previous night's version of "My Funny Valentine," as the new chorus begins, Williams, Carter, Hancock and Shorter *all* come back in the right place, on the proper chord and, even more incredibly, with the *same tempo* they had abandoned nearly two minutes earlier. That is, after each musician had spent the previous few minutes either playing without an explicit sense of tempo or laying out entirely, the top of the form arrives at the *exact moment* it would have come in had they been keeping steady time the

whole time, even if timed by a stopwatch. From a sheer musical standpoint, this is an astounding accomplishment, one more difficult, and also different in kind, from the polyrhythmic, or even the harmonic, layering that had gone on earlier. Regardless of how difficult moments like those may have been to execute, they still involve the explicit sounding of *a* pulse or harmonic sequence, even if that sounded pulse or harmony is only a derivation of the underlying pulse or harmony of the tune, one that makes the underlying pulse or harmony available only to those willing to count or hear backwards to it.

This, in contrast, represents expanding the very idea of “form” so that the concept comes to accommodate, even authorize, long passages that sound like the improvisatory *opposite* of form. And by “form” here one means not “form” in the abstract – not “form” to which the idea of “formlessness” is always tied – but “form” as the actual, notatable, form of a tune like “My Funny Valentine.” It is simultaneously an inhabitation of the earlier-mentioned dialectic – whereby apparent disregard for the changes is always a reinforcement of them – and also an fulfillment of that dialectic rendering both terms, “form” and “formlessness,” equally unsuited to the task of describing the music. For once “form” has come to explicitly authorize what sounds exactly like its opposite, once the extended, out-of-time, harmonically open passage heard here is revealed to be bound within the logic of “My Funny Valentine,” the music reveals itself as having pushed a number of structuring oppositions upon which improvised music generally relies to become meaningful – form and formlessness, of course, but also presence and absence, adherence to form and repudiation of it, even, arguably, the sensible and the intelligible – to a place where each one explicitly (i.e. on the level of explicit sound, not just in theory) reveals itself as its opposite. If this music shows us that form’s recognizability *as* form depends on its achieving a certain prescribed degree of hearability in a given improvised reading of it, passages like this teach us that the very notion of the “hearable” here can be pushed almost wholly into the realm of the non-aural. As a result, maintaining the distinction separating any of these terms from its other becomes a task made impossible at worst, unnecessary at best.

It is on this level, then, that the band’s music comes to enact its larger meanings. On one hand, these redefinitions – if not undoings – of fundamental terms like “form” and “presence” extend and recast the notion of mastery developed almost twenty-five years earlier by Charlie Parker. If Parker’s music emphatically insisted that the form of any given tune need not prescribe the narrative shape of his improvisations, and therefore that the hermeneutic presence of those improvisations could not be reduced to the expectations set by underlying form, this group’s music demonstrates that underlying form, or at least the expectations associated with underlying form, need prescribe almost *nothing* about the ensuing improvisation. The version of mastery revealed here thereby takes two forms. The first lies in the band’s advertising, by way of its ability to enact improvisatory moments like the ones above, its sheer virtuosity, the degree of musical inventiveness and artistry it possesses relative to the tradition as a whole. The resulting ethos may leave listeners stupefied, but not necessarily disoriented.

The second and more important, however, lies in the phenomenological impact this virtuosity produces. For if Charlie Parker’s version of musical and hermeneutical mastery ensured that listeners could hear both the prescriptions of underlying form and Parker’s rejection of them, this music pushes “form” so far that it becomes the same thing as its rejection. Which means that even as it keeps both terms – form and interpretation of form – in place, the music makes it near-impossible to determine which if these one is listening to at any given moment. Constantly shifting, burying and exposing form in unexpected ways and a unexpected times, the music swallows its listeners in a sea of potential implication, where things may or may not be as

they seem and the music withholds the key that would allow us to know the difference. It is not only that the music, like every aesthetic object (or even any object, period) can be interpreted in multiple ways, depending on context. It is that the music is often, quite literally, two (or more) very different things at exactly the same time. Rather than a fixed entity eliciting a programmatic response, “form” becomes – or is highlighted as always being – a dynamic set of shifting relationships, modes of performance that necessarily preclude any stable reading from taking shape. As such, this music is less interested in denying the authority of the hermeneutic codes linking sound to interpretation than playing with the structures, practices and expectations by which such codes not only gain authority, but become operant in the first place.

It is, finally, this process of ambiguation, of utilizing form to produce a music in which the relative presence of form becomes a structurally ambiguous phenomenon, that marks the new and important reading of “voice” I have been trying to articulate. As the brief discussion of mastery above tried to show, this is clearly music that, like Parker’s, detaches musical sound from the hermeneutic codes that would otherwise associate improvisatory adherence to form with the revelation of inner states, emotions, or larger perspectives on the world.<sup>36</sup> In keeping malleable, hidden, even gnomic the relationship of their music’s sounded presence to its animating structure, Davis and company ensure that there is nothing about form here that could predict in any way the shape of the music to be played over it. Yet if Parker’s expression of mastery works by a clear negational logic, Davis’s group’s music undermines the prescriptive power of form by withholding from the listener a hermeneutic that can properly delineate what exactly counts as “form” and what counts as “response to form.” By making resolutely unclear where the point of any musical statement, individual or collective, is to enhance form, undermine it, distort it, negate it or be reduced to it, the music repeatedly undermines whatever standard we would use to evaluate its performative logic.

What emerges, therefore, is a version of representation that is evasive precisely by being so present. Group interaction certainly contributes to this result: on an individual level, techniques like harmonic superimposition and rhythmic layering, certainly can make unclear to what, exactly, the sounds coming out of a musician’s instrument refer. But even when such a reference does seem clear, the fact that the rest of the group may respond in a way that retroactively reconceives the meaning of that statement poses even apparently straightforward statements as unstable from the beginning. Given that from the beginning, the problematic ascription of personal identity to an improviser requires projecting sound backwards to a source then identified through the psychological qualities of its products, this band makes clear just how much that operation relies on a form of interaction that leans towards resolving musical ambiguity, rather than heightening it. Not that this cultivation of ambiguity need not be realized every time for it to be effective. The potential that it *may* occur, that any musical statement may be recontextualized, and therefore be made to retroactively *have provided* a different meaning than was present initially, is enough to suggest that any easy association between statement and meaning will be neither adequate nor sufficient. Indeed, it is perhaps the way that this music is able to absorb nearly the entirety of the tradition preceding it and subject it to the possibility of its meaning something different that helps explain why Hancock, Shorter and Carter liked to refer to the music they were making as “Anti-Music.”<sup>37</sup>

And this, at end, ties back into the version of character, of blackness, that Davis

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<sup>36</sup> Again, I am here employing a version of Houston Baker Jr.’s “deformation of mastery” argument, from his *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*.

<sup>37</sup>(Mercer 109)

performed throughout his entire career. Whatever the personal motivations of the other members of the band, for nearly Davis's entire career, any band he led could be guaranteed to do two things: confound musical expectations in an exceedingly sophisticated way, and offer its music as a comment on the way blackness is constituted in improvised musical sound. And if this music posed blackness as a shape-shifting, amorphous phenomenon, one potentially but never quite readable, it participates in a form of evasion that was a hallmark of Davis's career-long aesthetic, the hollowing out of surface performance he had been developing for more than twenty years. That Davis is front and center, that his trumpet playing organizes the band as well as any other set of sounds do, that it is Davis's band first and foremost, is never in question. Yet what this means about Davis the person, the music will not say.

In this sense Davis, the character, himself functions much like form does in this music – simultaneously present and absent, a center expressing itself most directly in withdrawal. This is not a meek withdrawal, but a forceful one, one whose power comes from its doling out small bits of stabilizing information at will, and apparently at Davis's whim. If Charlie Parker's music has him saying, "you don't know me," Davis's says, "you can't catch me." And in this sense whether or not Davis actually turned his back on his audience isn't so important. For even when front and center, faced forward and playing into the microphone, Davis's music already renders Davis the person ungraspable.

It was then this general move – to focus not only on musical statement itself, but on the enabling ground of a musical statement's becoming-intelligible – that became the Davis-inspired method adopted by musicians and poets who followed. The issue becomes not "how does one represent what explicitly eschews representation?," but instead, "how does one represent what one is not even sure is being *presented*?" This is a tricky issue, since by definition poets that absorb this model cannot do so imitatively, insofar as the latter term indicates the presentation of a set of sounds that recreate an identifiable body of sound. Rather, what this band leaves is a method of working, a new way of rendering presence, insofar as that term helps tie sound to meaning. The new play between form and non-form (or the explicit inclusion of the latter into the former), the extreme distance placed between organizing structure and sounded reference to it, the dissolving of the difference between form and its interpretation, and, finally, the ultimate willingness to let the meaning of one's statement be determined from without: it is these ways of thinking that became the conceptual themes of sorts in the work of the poets of the following two chapters.

Fast Swing

E.S.P.

Wayne Shorter  
(As played by Miles Davis)

$\text{♩} = 268$

**A**

First system of musical notation (measures 1-4). Treble clef, key signature of two flats, 4/4 time. Chords: E7(alt.), FMA7.

Second system of musical notation (measures 5-8). Treble clef, key signature of two flats, 4/4 time. Chords: E7(alt.), EbMA7(#11).

Third system of musical notation (measures 9-12). Treble clef, key signature of two flats, 4/4 time. Chords: D7, (Eb7) EbMA7(#11), E7, FMA7 EbMA7. Includes "pn. tacet" instruction.

First ending of musical notation (measures 13-16). Treble clef, key signature of two flats, 4/4 time. Chords: Dmi9, G7, Gmi7, (Gb7) Gbma9. Includes "pn. tacet" instruction.

Second ending of musical notation (measures 17-20). Treble clef, key signature of two flats, 4/4 time. Chords: Db9(#11), Gmi7, Dbmi7 Gb7, FMA7. Includes "pn. tacet" instruction.

Bass walks in 2 for head, 4 for solos. "pn. tacet" sections are observed during the head only.

# Wayne's Solo (A2 and B) on "My Funny Valentine"

starts at 8:24

The image shows a musical score for a solo in 4/4 time, starting at 8:24. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The score consists of ten staves of music. The first staff begins with a C chord and a C-maj7 chord. The second staff has C-7 and C-6 chords. The third staff has A-flat major and F-7 chords. The fourth staff has A-flat-6 and B-flat-7 chords. The fifth staff has E-flat, F-7, G-7, and F-7 chords. The sixth staff has E-flat, F-7, and G-7 chords. The seventh staff has F-7 chords. The eighth staff has E-flat-7, G-7, C-7, and B-flat-7 chords. The ninth staff has A-flat, D-7(b9), G-7(b9), and C-7 chords. The tenth staff has a C chord and a 9:21 time signature. A red oval highlights the D-7(b9) and G-7(b9) chords in the ninth staff.

Wayne Shorter's Solo, "My Funny Valentine," First Night's Performance

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **An Illusive Game to Bag: Langston Hughes's *Ask Your Mama* and Robert Creeley's *Words***

In Chapter Two, I traced the responses of two poets to a new conceptual landscape. These poets were Langston Hughes and Charles Olson, and the terrain of this new landscape ("soundscape" might be the better term) was that put in place by the sounds coming out of Charlie Parker's horn. Together, Hughes and Olson helped outline a new model of what I called "non-representative representation," which indicated the ways that each helped understand jazz's potentials for poetry as lying not only in poetry's capacity for phenomenologically imitating the sounds of jazz, but for thinking through the conceptual implications of those sounds. The result was a poetry for which the relations between words, sounds, and bodies acquired a new and powerful valence.

In some ways, this chapter essays a similar goal as the earlier one. This chapter, too, follows one whose argument emerged from a reading of actual musical moments. And the two poets this chapter takes up – Langston Hughes and Robert Creeley – obviously retain an intimate connection to the poets of the earlier chapter. Hughes is still Hughes, and the past half century has seen only Olson surpass Creeley as the representative figure of the "Black Mountain School" of poetics.

In so doing, this chapter pairs Hughes and Creeley according to their ability to articulate a version of poetics that responds to the conceptual provocations of their musical contemporaries. There are a number of key divergences, however. First, the historical trajectory in this chapter necessarily differs from the one traced out earlier, which saw Hughes and Olson responding to a specific musical moment. This necessity reflects simple historical realities. Although this chapter appears after the chapter on Davis, the works I examine here – Hughes's 1961 poem *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* and Creeley's *Words*, which collects poems written between 1961 and 1965 – were both composed before Davis had even assembled his mid-60's quintet. Thus, while this chapter's readings do employ the conceptual vocabulary gleaned from Davis's music, my aim in doing so is less to delimit a linear history than to bring into focus the conceptual problem all three were working on, and in turn to describe an aesthetic trajectory that emerges from the aggregate.

This aesthetic trajectory takes up the terms introduced in the last chapter and sees them being applied to a medium – poetry – with its own set of material and conceptual concerns. At bottom, however, this chapter sees both Hughes and Creeley helping answer the question left to artists by the music of Davis's mid-60's quintet: "How does one represent what one is not even sure is being *presented*?" In thinking through this question, both Hughes and Creeley come to pose a deep hermeneutic instability, if not a constitutive unknowability, at the heart of their projects. For both, the problem lies in the poetic medium: *Ask Your Mama* and *Words* both see the division between poetry's semantic and phenomenological (or musical) capabilities, if not the inherent limitations of language itself, engendering a situation that radically strains poetry's ability to communicate ideas, feelings or experiences in a straightforward manner. The issue is therefore either capturing or creating a stable notion of identity without falling prey to the philosophical or political pitfalls of seeing language, poetry or music as straightforwardly or predictably communicative. And despite the differing attitudes about their subjects, in both one



sees traditional modes of aesthetic communication dismantled, dissolved into parts without either poet's providing a hermeneutic strategy for pulling those parts together in a coherent way.

The key for both, however – and one of the elements linking the two – is that both situate music at the heart of these projects. And its philosophical, political and aesthetic resonances of these projects become particularly acute when that music is jazz, since using jazz to engage these questions inevitably tints them with the issue of race. That jazz has often been *the* figure for African American identity, that is, necessarily lends both poetries a wider import when each offers a new way of thinking about what and how jazz might mean. *Ask Your Mama*, especially, registers this condition, given that a large majority of ways we think about jazz's meaning for poetics have come from Hughes's earlier work. Yet on this issue Hughes's poem is not necessarily sanguine. In the ten years separating *Ask Your Mama* from *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, the concept has clearly undergone some expansion: while *Montage* limited its version of "African-American-ness" to a localized, temporally-specific voice of 1950's Harlem, in *Ask Your Mama* it has transformed into a dispersed, trans-national web of experiences, a simultaneity unlocatable to a single place or point in time.

The shift from a national to a diasporic concept of ethnic or cultural identity is a major one, and has become a major object of theorization in the past twenty years or so. Yet the move also saddles *Ask Your Mama* with a number of difficult problems. The biggest of these plays out as a struggle to come up with a way to name, capture, or express a version of African American-ness that will tie together the hugely divergent range of people and experiences that constitute the African diaspora. On a formal level, this goal leads *Ask Your Mama* to develop a number of experimental techniques rarely seen in Hughes's poetry. The result is, clearly, a strikingly new mode of poetic musicality, as well as a new mode of poetic representation. Yet while I (and a number of poets who followed) find these new developments both provocative and productive, *Ask Your Mama* itself portrays them as having emerged from, and arguably capturing, only a repeated sense of failure. For Hughes, the music that counts – the music that can somehow capture or produce an experience that unifies subjects dispersed across space and time – becomes music *Ask Your Mama*'s readers cannot ever hear. And while the poem itself offers (at least) two different kinds of music, both remain permanently hobbled, communicatively incomplete.

Creeley's project, in contrast, is a much more individualistic one, and his response to the conditions described above is less to jettison the hope of capturing an effective version of identity than to modify the idea of identity so that it corresponds to the material conditions in which poetry works, and to chart the philosophical, affective, and embodied implications that result. This more individualistic approach is, arguably, a consequence of Creeley's having chosen to employ jazz-inspired strategies without taking up the problem of race. But even so, it participates in the story I am telling here by stemming at bottom from Creeley's deep hesitancy about the potential of poetic language to communicate anything concrete. Not only is language inherently unable to directly communicate an experience external to it, this inability to do so takes place at the exact same time that language actively produces phenomenological experiences in the sonic and visual register, experiences that *themselves* lie outside the field of language's communicable powers. Creeley's poems are therefore geared towards foregrounding at all points the presence of language, not only as they contribute to what a poem says but as they help shape the very act of saying. To do so, Creeley employs the techniques for which his work has become famous – extreme enjambment, short, clipped lines, unspecific language, relentless self-questioning.

It is this last item – its relentless self-questioning – that allows Creeley to engender the

same sort of hermeneutic equivocation we heard in Davis's mid-60's music. For these doubled aspects of language tend to leave Creeley's poems wondering about their own ontological status relative to the world outside of them. On one hand, the broken, clipped rhythms of Creeley's poetry point their readers to the phenomenological aspects of saying, which are, it is worth noting, exactly the aspects of saying that saying cannot say. On the other, they play out as an unceasing self-interrogation. And this self-interrogation comes ultimately to undermine the poem's ability to contextualize its own voice. And this fact – that the very degree to which a poem is ostensibly about an experience in the world external to the poem is always threatened by the possibility of its being a solipsistic machination of the psyche – makes the authorial status of whatever "I" is given or implied by a poem constitutively untraceable. Whatever version of the "I" his poetry produces, that is, is always simultaneously a product of language and the impetus to it; located in the chasm between these positions, his poems come to withdraw their referential force at the very moment of that force's articulation.

While one might be correct in loosely grouping Hughes and Creeley under the banner "jazz poets," then (there is even a joke that goes "Langston Hughes and Robert Creeley walk into an elevator ... must be a jazz poem!"), "jazz" itself comes to mean starkly different things to each. For Hughes, "jazz" is both figure and technique, a set of recognizable sounds bearing an extensive social history and a larger approach to aesthetic form. These two aspects are not necessarily rendered separately: in the poem, "jazz" works both as the primary symbol for African-American aesthetics and, crucially, the social history of its having served as this symbol. That Hughes's earlier poetry has figured largely in this history is not lost on this poem; in some ways *Ask Your Mama* sees Hughes reckoning with the history of ways his work has turned to jazz as figure and as technique. Again, the assessment is not always encouraging; this poem is more ambivalent than almost any in Hughes's career about poetry's capacity to capture or recreate the power of Black music, and, even more alarmingly, the capacity of Black music itself to effect actual, meaningful change for those who identify with it. Indeed, lurking behind *Ask Your Mama*'s creative use of music is a worry that such an identification may at end leave listeners with the simulacrum of freedom rather than legitimate social advance.

In Creeley's case, music is less a figure than a strategic approach to rhythm and sound, one that yields otherwise unavailable insights about the relation of poetic form to the phenomenal world. Like Hughes in *Ask Your Mama*, Creeley is interested in the inherent limitations of poetic language, especially as they produce a readable or unreadable version of the self. Given this, the fact that identity is (arguably) unstable provides less a call for either celebration or dismay than an opportunity to minutely catalog and examine the affective states the act of poetizing inevitably engenders, and do to so without necessarily committing to any of them. What is interesting about jazz for Creeley, then, particularly bebop, is what I claimed about Charlie Parker in Chapter 1: that in refusing the expectations of form (especially, for Creeley, from a rhythmic standpoint), bebop phrasing lends the sounds a musician produces a hermeneutic opacity, an unignorable materiality that resists linguistic or interpretive paraphrase. At end, jazz becomes less a figure or concept for Creeley than a specific means to an end, a way to foreground the implications of a poem's *that-ness*.

What both these experiences – Hughes's and Creeley's – share with the music of Miles Davis in his mid-60's group is the performance of unknowability, of hermeneutic undecidability, and the ensuing resistance to projecting a clearly readable self. Both thereby work to undermine any investment in concreteness, whether that be concreteness of voice or concreteness of image. In *Ask Your Mama*, typeface, visual structure and semantic compression (among other

techniques) are used to put ostensibly straightforward phrases in hermeneutically ambiguous contexts. For Creeley, rhythmic and visual restraint work to undercut the positive force of any given statement. Despite these differences, however, what Creeley and Hughes share is a willingness to produce poetry out of a hesitancy about the powers of poetic representation. Pace Miles Davis, for example, whose obscuring of identity leaves no doubt as to who is holding the strings, *Ask Your Mama* and *Words* both project a deep sense of self-doubt, moving representational ambiguity from a performative effect to a generative condition. If the question I posed at the end of my last chapter (on Miles Davis) was “how does one represent what one is not even sure is being *presented*?,” both Hughes and Creeley take up a similar problematic, putting at stake the relationship between the reality implied by the poem and the reality created by the poem. And despite the differing attitudes about their subjects, in both one sees traditional modes of aesthetic communication dismantled, dissolved into parts without either poet’s providing a hermeneutic strategy for pulling those parts together in a coherent way.

One last comment: as was the case with Hughes and Olson, the historical record betrays little personal connection between Hughes and Creeley. There is, indeed, little indication that either thought about or even read the other. While this situation is not so surprising in Hughes’s case, given that by 1961 he was giving little attention to poets contemporary to him, it is slightly surprising that Creeley did not seek Hughes out, given Creeley’s avowed and extensive interest in jazz. One can perhaps speculate, and to this degree, the limits on racial interaction do seem to have been operative. It is perhaps worth noting, for example, that nearly all of Creeley’s musical collaborations were made with white musicians. Of course, in spite of this limited interaction with the Black musicians creating the music, to his credit Creeley does avoid the hugely problematic approach to jazz taken by many of his white contemporaries, whereby the music becomes an almost mystical unleashing of a will-to-creativity held down by a repressive civilization. One fortunate by-product of Creeley’s near-pathological hesitancy, in fact, is a reading of jazz that sees the music as a thoughtful, introspective, practiced craft, rather than a raw cry from the jungle, or a space of pure freedom outside of civilization’s mores. This nuanced view sets Creeley apart from many of his generation, even if his interactions with musicians proved more traditional.

As conceptual foundations for an experimental aesthetics, then, we have Davis, Hughes, and Creeley. As always, the proof lies in the readings themselves; I begin with Hughes.

### **MUSICALITY MINUS MUSIC: *ASK YOUR MAMA* AND THE SOUNDS OF THE UNHEARABLE**

Let us start with the title. *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz*. Challenging and confrontational, the imperative condenses meaning to rival even Freud’s most difficult dream analyses. “Ask Your Mama”: the barb opens up what Scott Saul calls a “devastating dialogue of insult,”<sup>1</sup> ensnaring its audience in a poem-long session of “the dozens,” the ritualized vernacular game. The phrase sets the stakes high, summoning the dozens’ most potent object of insult, and betraying more than a hint of sexual conquest (“ask your mother where she was last night”). Sexual innuendos extend throughout, especially when we remember the apocryphal story in

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<sup>1</sup> (Saul 7)

which “jazz” originates as a synonym for “jizz.”<sup>2</sup> Yet this opening effrontery is also overblown, over-impudent; as a psychic strategy, its provocation seems simultaneously contrived to conceal its more tempering insinuations. Chief among these is the fact that “ask your mama” also summons the familial politics of slavery, whereby the condition of the slave followed the condition of the mother. In this the phrase spits back, spitefully, the long-time, painful, non-answer given to African Americans asking the central question of identity: Who Am I? As the poem’s final mood notes, “THE TELL ME OF THE MAMA / IS THE ANSWER TO THE CHILD.”<sup>3</sup>

Just as telling is the “12 Moods for Jazz.” As critics have observed, “12” links “the dozens” to the 12-bar blues, conjoining two vernacular traditions, one associated with artifice and the other with authenticity.<sup>4</sup> The suggestion casts a long shadow over much of Hughes’s earlier career. The bitter hint is that the apparent “authenticity” of the blues – the “authenticity” for which much of Hughes’s oeuvre has been praised – is at end simply another performance, even a joke. Twelve is also the number of notes in a musical octave, further indicating the poem’s marshaling of musical resources.

Let us continue. Why “moods”? Even at close examination, the poem’s twelve sections do not seem to be organized around discrete emotional states. For “mood,” the OED also lists “a set of forms of verb in an inflected language.” Observe the imperative of the poem’s title: the modality of verbs – the shifting of language itself – will be crucial here. The word also describes, more archaically, “in late medieval music: the ratio of the duration of a large to a long, or a long to a breve, in the rhythm of a piece.”<sup>5</sup> “Mood” is a synonym for musical “mode,” a scale based on a single chord degree; it also appears frequently as a descriptor of classical music. The preposition “for” complicates things even more, confusing the intended relationship between the words and the music. Are the “moods” there “for jazz” in the sense of enabling or augmenting the jazz in the poem, becoming the accompaniment to their own (musical) accompaniment? Is the poem a set of “moods for jazz” in the sense of “sonata for piano,” turning “jazz” into the poem’s figurative instrument? Or is it the opposite: does “for” suggest that the “12 moods” are offered in honor of jazz, a paean presented in thanks to the music inspiring it?

Finally, there is the way the closing phrase evocatively echoes Whitman, “Moods for Jazz” as Hughes’s “Leaves of Grass.” Hughes’s interest in Whitman is of course long-standing. A quarter-century earlier, Hughes doubled down on Whitman’s “I Hear America Singing” with his own, “I, Too, Sing America,” echoing the earlier poet’s sentiment that “America” remains a song worth singing while simultaneously stretching its listeners’ ears to hear voices ignored by Whitman’s. Here we see a similar borrowing, with “Moods for Jazz” replicating not only the syntax of “Leaves of Grass” (indeterminate plural, ambiguous preposition, terminal noun), but its sound, too, with “jazz” rhyming with “grass.” On a thematic level, *Ask Your Mama* certainly engages the familiar Whitmanian problem of articulating, on the level of form, a conceptual relationship that links the individual with the collective. As before, Hughes’s adoption of this problem sees him tightening his range, abandoning Whitman’s “America” to focus more directly

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<sup>2</sup> See (Merriam).

<sup>3</sup> (Hughes, “Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz” 524)

<sup>4</sup> As both Scott Saul and Larry Scanlon point out, Hughes used the one piece of extant sociological literature on the dozens – social psychologist John Dollard’s 1939 study “The Dozens: The Dialectic of Insult” – as a point of departure for the poem.

<sup>5</sup> (Online, *Mood*, N.2)

on the nation's African American constituents. Yet *Ask Your Mama*'s particular development of this idea also sees the poem dramatically enlarging Whitman's geographical scope, reaching beyond national boundaries to recast "African-American" as an international and diasporic category instead of a native one.

Begun in 1960 in response to the riots at that year's Newport Jazz Festival, and published in 1961, *Ask Your Mama* remains what Larry Scanlon calls "Hughes's last major poem," Arnold Rampersad "the most ambitious single poem of [Hughes'] life," and Eric Sundquist "Hughes at his most 'revolutionary.'"<sup>6</sup> Formally, the poem is as difficult as any Hughes wrote. As my brief unpacking of the title shows, the poem deploys a dizzying drama of semantic compression. Overloading words and phrases with meanings and implications, *Ask Your Mama* allows connotations to inhabit states of permanent contradiction and irresolvable tension. The poem as a whole integrates dozens of names of people and places, American and international, without spelling out what all have in common. Songs and languages appear and disappear, jostling for position. The end of the poem offers a list of twelve "Liner notes for the poetically unhep," clearly meant, in the double gesture of parody and homage, to signify on Eliot's "The Waste Land." *Ask Your Mama* is, in this sense, a landmark of African-American experimentalism: with its doubled columns, deep compression of reference, strange typeface, visual symbols, complicated sense of time, and new approach to poetic musicality, the poem literally precludes being taken in in a linear, straightforward manner. The overall experience is far more one of fragmentation, separation, and ambivalence than it is of consistency or coalition. Günter Lenz explains: "as with the wide range of musical idioms used and reappropriated in *Ask Your Mama*, Hughes does not attempt to create or evoke an all-inclusive "blend" or synthesis."<sup>7</sup> Anticipating, perhaps, the American avant-garde poetries that would follow, the poem radically substitutes difference for the expected sameness, "[refusing]," in Saul's words, "the exceptional, lyrical 'I' in favor of a more floating voice" (136).

In this, one can see in *Ask Your Mama* the culmination of a career-long trajectory, one that sees Hughes moving from an investment in direct, all-inclusive representation to a mode of poetizing that explodes the very possibility of that sort of representation. The opening moment of this evolution might be Hughes's first major poem, 1921's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." In that poem, the plain initial article ("*The Negro*") and easily-assumed speakerly "I" implicitly accord the poem the authority to identify and name an emblematic, pervading essence that links people across time and space. Hughes's Marxist turns in the 1930's and 1940's saw him moving to speak for the proletariat mass, though Hughes's version of this proletariat clearly incorporated a racial tint absent much Marxist thought of the period (this absence being so effectively demonstrated in the "Brotherhood" section of Ellison's *Invisible Man*). Even *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, while refusing the easy transparency of voice often imputed to black music, nonetheless proceeds by convening a sequence of stand-alone poems that sustain voices generally attributable to single, identifiable speakers.

*Ask Your Mama*, in contrast, breaks this model, actively disallowing the possibilities of singular representation, and offering a clear affront to those used to hearing Hughes as the authentic voice of the unmediated vernacular. As I discuss in what follows, the focal point of this reconception of the powers of representation is *Ask Your Mama*'s engagement with music on levels both formal and thematic. The key ambivalence adheres in the poem's pervasive worries

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<sup>6</sup> (Scanlon), (Rampersad), (Sundquist). For a reading of *Ask Your Mama* that contextualizes the poem as a response to Newport, see Scott Saul's *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties*.

<sup>7</sup> (Lenz)

about representing music as *the* synecdochal figure for African American culture. This worry takes multiple forms, and engages both implications of the previous sentence: *Ask Your Mama* worries about figuring *music* as the synecdochal figure for African American culture, and worries about *figuring* music as this synecdochal figure. Formally, this ambivalence works itself out in the *Ask Your Mama*'s use of poetic language. As noted above, the poem's semantic compression is so dramatic that implications of individual words and phrases often come to undermine one another. Connotations clash; innuendos tangle. This strategy proves simultaneously propitious and cynical. Propitious because it grants words the power to work on multiple levels and in multiple ways, enacting, linguistically speaking, the strategy of hermeneutic proliferation heard in the music of Miles Davis's mid-60's quintet. Cynical, however, because it leaves words constantly threatening to undercut themselves, and therefore untrustworthy. While words are all it is made of (or almost all it is made of – non-linguistic symbols do occasionally appear), words offer both limited representative capabilities and the permanent threat of self-subversion. That this is the case represents a source of persistent trepidation, frustration, and, towards the end, fatigue.

Yet even as the poem's most explicit emotions are frustration and bitterness, the new formal ground it breaks also offers a host of tantalizing possibilities for rethinking poetic musicality. Most directly, in coping with the worries articulated above – that investing in music as redemptive experience leaves African Americans with the simulacrum of freedom rather than legitimate social advance, and that the simple attempt to imitate music poetically pushes music into a representative economy that maintains stereotypes even as it purports to dissolve them – *Ask Your Mama* comes to develop a version of musicality in which the poem's descriptions of music come to generate the same effects as the music it describes. Yet by doing so, however, the poem renders music itself – or at least music as a set of sounds – irrelevant. This is, in a sense, musicality sans music, a musicality that works only as long as it can permanently distance itself from music. Only by keeping its music unheard, that is, can *Ask Your Mama* continue to grant music the power to unify the disparate formal and thematic fragments that make up the poem. In my previous chapter, I argued that the music of Miles Davis's mid-60's quintet poses the question, "How does one represent what one is not even sure is being *presented*?" In what follows, I will use *Ask Your Mama* to formulate one version of an answer.

### MUSIC MINUS LANGUAGE MINUS MUSIC

To the poem: taking up twelve sections (a move that again twines "the dozens" to the 12-bar blues), *Ask Your Mama* for most of its length proceeds as two simultaneous columns of text. On the left lie its more traditionally "poetic" lines, rendered throughout in ALL CAPS. On the right stretches a script of musical directions, rendered in italics, and (arguably) cued to accompany these "poetic" lines. Here is an example, from the second mood, "RIDE, RED, RIDE":

I WANT TO SEE MY MOTHER MOTHER	<i>Maracas</i>
WHEN THE ROLL IS CALLED UP YONDER	<i>continue</i>
IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES	<i>rhythms</i>
<i>TELL ME HOW LONG –</i>	<i>of</i>
<i>MUST I WAIT?</i>	<i>"When</i>
<i>CAN I GET IT NOW?</i>	<i>the</i>

ÇA IRA! ÇA IRA!  
 OR MUST I HESITATE?  
 IRA! BOY, IRA!

IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES  
 TU ABUELA, ¿DÓNDE ESTÁ?  
 LOST IN CASTRO'S BEARD?  
 TU ABUELA, ¿DÓNDE ESTÁ?  
 BLOWN SKY HIGH BY MOUNT PELÉE?  
 ¿DÓNDE ESTÁ? ¿DÓNDE ESTÁ?  
 WAS SHE FLEEING WITH LUMUMBA?  
 (GRANDPA'S GRANDMA'S GRANNY  
 ALWAYS TOOK THE OTHER SIDE.)  
 A LITTLE RUM WITH SUGAR.  
 AY, MORENA, ¿DÓNDE ESTÁ?  
 GRANADINE GRANADA OR  
 DE SANGRE ES LA GOTA?

*Saints*  
*Go*  
*Marching*  
*In”*  
*until*  
*the*  
*piano supplies*  
*a softly*  
*lyrical*  
*calypso*  
*joined now*  
*by the*  
*flute*  
*that ends*  
*in a high*  
*discordant*  
*cry.*

There are multiple observations to be made about this structure. The first and most notable is that it poses a relationship of poetry to music wholly new in Hughes's career. For, pace the huge bulk of Hughes's previous poems, the "poetic" lines here make no claims to spell out a music that resembles jazz, or indeed any recognizable form of black music. As Jean Wagner, one of *Ask Your Mama's* earliest critics noted, "the poems in it no longer strive through their own means alone to reproduce the jazz orchestration."<sup>8</sup> Their link to African American music proper comes by way of description, not performance; what makes them musical in a recognizably African American idiom is only the fact of their inhabiting the same page as the poem's musical cues.

In this, *Ask Your Mama* seems to have internalized and extended the lessons introduced in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. In that sequence, we'll remember, poetic musicality takes shape as the *inability* of a piece of writing to actually be music. The "deferral" in *Montage's* title captured the failure of its poems to *be* unmediated jazz performances, and consequently the impossibility of word and sound's being the same thing. In *Ask Your Mama*, the position is even more extreme. For here, even the *hope* of achieving this goal has been discarded. Instead, the simple presence of a musical script on the page makes these poetic lines reliant for their musicality on external intervention. From this perspective, the poem thus keeps music and poetry separate, rendering them simultaneously but dividing their duties.

The second observation to be made here is that the poem's having unburdened its poetic lines from the need to sonically imitate black music seems to have enabled a *visual* freedom also rarely seen in Hughes's work up to this point (Hughes's 1931 "Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria" being a notable exception).<sup>9</sup> Even briefly examining the poem, in fact, identifies *Ask Your Mama's* visuals as its most distinctive feature. The fact that the poem's "poetic" column appears ALL CAPS, for example; the poem's many indentations and offset print; most

<sup>8</sup>(Wagner, J 464).

<sup>9</sup> For a reading that engages specifically with the visual aspects of both Hughes's Waldorf-Astoria poem and *Montage*, see Lesley Wheeler's *Voicing American Poetry*.

strikingly, the moment in which a left-justified listed of black entertainers is matched with enough “\$\$\$\$,” and then “¢” symbols, to create a right-justified block of text (one whose musical accompaniment is marked “TACIT,” meaning no music): all these suggest that, in Meta Jones’ words, the poem’s typography “makes the lyric sing and shout on the page, shaping sound as a *visible* medium.”<sup>10</sup> In so doing the poem redefines what “for jazz” might mean, suggesting that the music may inhabit sensuous modes beyond the aural.

In time, poets would come to see these visual developments as offering a new template for African American experimentalism. Yet, from the poem’s perspective, the effects are not all sanguine. Instead, for much of the poem, what these visuals convey is a feeling of communicative impotence. Notice, for example, the paradoxical effect of the pervasive capitalization in the left-hand column. As a textual move, capitalizations are most often used for emphasis, indicating a raised voice, scream or yell. This certainly seems to be a legitimate justification here, given the catalogue of frustrations the poem outlines. Indeed, textually one might read this capitalization as the poem’s offering a constant shout. Yet, as we see, the persistence with which *Ask Your Mama* pursues this goal paradoxically reduces its potential efficacy. While shouting often works to attract attention, that is, *constant* shouting tends to inure its audience to its intended force. While the need to SHOUT is thus splashed across every page of the poem, that it is so ultimately renders the move *less* expressive. This is not just a conceptual assertion; it is a visual one, as Jones observes: “the lack of variation in the block lettering flattens the visual and hieroglyphic resonance of the words in the field of the page” (60). Because block lettering is justified on both top and bottom, that is, it evinces less visual variation than normal type, and therefore provides fewer opportunities for emphasis. The poem thus bumps up against a seemingly insurmountable obstacle: to not express frustration is to not be taken seriously, or to risk being ignored, yet to express frustration directly and constantly, as is warranted by the world the poem outlines, is to undermine whatever persuasive force that expression would engender. This is a situation where, as the mood “ODE TO DINAH” argues, “EVEN WHEN YOU’RE WINNING / THERE’S NO WAY NOT TO LOSE.”<sup>11</sup>

The third observation to make about the poem’s dual-columned structure is that while it may purport, at least from a semantic perspective, to hold the poem’s music separate from its poetry, in actuality the poem undermines this difference as much as it sustains it. By this I mean the following: while *Ask Your Mama*’s “poetic” lines make no attempt to replicate jazz in any phenomenological capacity, they do very clearly carve out their own music. And while *Ask Your Mama* superficially sets its right-hand column as the “musical” one, the fact that the left-hand column necessarily produces this regular and identifiable music that the poem as a whole presents less as a dialogue between word and music, then a dialogue between two *versions* of music.

One can see this by examining the actual shape of the music rendered by the left-hand column. Specifically, for the large majority of the poem its lines spell out a steady, repetitive four-beat rhythm. Unlike the blend of styles and the implied historical development of the music

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<sup>10</sup> (Jones, *The Muse is Music: Jazz Poetry From the Harlem Renaissance to the Spoken Word* 40)

<sup>11</sup> Other readers have offered different explanations for the capitalization. Jennifer Kilgore reads it as suggesting transmission by telegraph. Though she does not push on this analysis, the theme of betrayal by mass communication is clearly an important one to the poem. Jean Wagner uses the capital letters to link Hughes to his contemporaries: “just as E. E. Cummings and Kenneth Rexroth had chosen to use only lower case, here Langston Hughes prints everything in capitals” (461). I find this reading slightly less compelling, since the extreme parody of *Ask Your Mama* seems far more targeted at T.S. Eliot, Vachel Lindsay, and the other pre-war modernists than it does Hughes’s early-60’s contemporaries.



on the right, this “poetic” column evinces a near-uniform rhythmic regularity that persists through all twelve moods. See, for example, *Ask Your Mama*’s opening lines:

IN THE  
IN THE QUARTER  
IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROS  
WHERE THE DOORS ARE DOORS OF PAPER  
DUST OF DINGY ATOMS  
BLOWS A SCRATCHY SOUND.  
AMORPHOUS JACK-O’-LANTERNS CAPER  
AND THE WIND WON’T WAIT FOR MIDNIGHT  
FOR FUN TO BLOW DOORS DOWN

BY THE RIVER AND THE RAILROAD  
WITH FLUID FAR-OFF GOING  
BOUNDARIES BIND UNBINDING  
A WHIRL OF WHISTLES BLOWING  
NO TRAINS OR STEAMBOATS GOING –  
YET LEONTYNE’S UNPACKING

Scott Saul and Larry Scanlon have both examined the linguistic connotations of these stanzas; to my knowledge, however, no critic has yet examined their music. So: while the “opening stutter” (the repetition of “IN THE”), in Saul’s words, “models an uncertain approach” (137), *musically* it also functions as a repeated anacrusis, or pick-up note, generating anticipation and momentum for the steady, pulsating rhythm that is to follow. Heard *as* music, in fact, the anacrusis foregrounded in these opening lines work throughout to set up contrast between *Ask Your Mama*’s poetic lines’ *musical* rhythm and their *grammatical* one. Grammatically, we might observe, the lines above are marked by their extreme lack of enjambment. And this repeated end-stopping works render lines distinct from one another; each line above, for example, tends to develop its own image, one not shared by the surrounding lines. As a result, the poem’s lineation comes to work additively, accruing discrete individual units of image and idea to portray a larger whole.

Rhythmically, however, the same lines tend to generate a steady four beats, with the final beat of each musical grouping being filled in by the first syllable or two from the line *following*. Put differently, the first strong stress of most lines above coincides with the line’s third syllable: “QUAR-,” “DOORS,” “JACK,” “WIND,” and “RI-” are all examples. There are variations, of course: some lines begin with a stressed syllable (“DUST,” “BLOWS,” “BOUND-”), and others compress the two anacrusis syllables into one (“FOR,” “WITH,” “A”). Yet the point is that heard musically, the poem’s rhythmic structures tend to group themselves *across* lines, overcoming the independence implied by the lines’ syntactical structure. While the pervasive end-stopping grants lines a seeming independence from one another, this rhythm ties each line to the one before it and after. Here is a rendering of the same lines as above, but with musical bar lines placed in (what I hear as) the appropriate position:

IN THE  
IN THE QUARTER

IN THE | QUARTER OF THE NEGROS  
 WHERE THE | DOORS ARE DOORS OF PAPER |  
 | DUST OF DINGY ATOMS |  
 | BLOWS A SCRATCHY SOUND.  
 AMORPHOUS | JACK-O'-LANTERNS CAPER  
 AND THE | WIND WON'T WAIT FOR MIDNIGHT  
 FOR | FUN TO BLOW DOORS DOWN  
  
 BY THE | RIVER AND THE RAILROAD  
 WITH | FLUID FAR-OFF GOING |  
 | BOUNDARIES BIND UNBINDING  
 A | WHIRL OF WHISTLES BLOWING  
 NO | TRAINS OR STEAMBOATS GOING –  
 YET | LEONTYNE'S UNPACKING |

For those able to read music, to my ear this rhythm aligns extraordinarily well with the following, the first riff of Benny Goodman and Charlie Christian's 1939 tune "Seven Come Eleven":



I use this particular musical comparison not to suggest that Hughes had Goodman and Christian in mind while composing (doubtful!), but more to demonstrate how *poetic* music, as opposed to music *described* poetically (as in the right-hand column) works in this poem. While one can perhaps imagine the sounds described in the right-hand column, those sounds that are actually *in* the left-hand column tend to reorganize the grammar of their lines, submitting all to a smooth, ongoing, consistent pulse. Beating at regular intervals, this rhythmic structure persistently lulls the body into repetitive movement.

From the perspective of the poem as a whole, this is significant. For while most of the poem seems marked by fragmentation – of its columns, of “poetry” and “music,” of time and place, of individuals and figures who seem to have little to do with one another – this steady rhythm ensures that there *is* a phenomenological link that ties them all together. While the poem is resolutely committed to conceiving “African American” as a diasporic category, one incorporating people across the globe, from different historical periods, and with different ethnic backgrounds, one of the conceptual problems it repeatedly encounters is that of articulating what, exactly, justifies including all of them in the poem. Examining the music of these “poetic” lines,

then, offers “rhythm” as a possible answer. Though it is split into twelve sections, addresses different moments in time and space, and even seems to take different approaches to history, the consistency of this rhythm ensures that, phenomenologically, the poem can offer the possibility of a cross-temporal and cross-spatial unification.

The trade-off here, which is one that *Ask Your Mama* will employ to its benefit later, is that while this poetic rhythm enables an the experience of *conceptual* unity, because the poem has relieved the lines from which it comes from the requirement that they perform a music that is identifiably “black,” this unifying rhythm cannot be presented as that of “black music.” While the history of African American music is effectively sounded out in the poem’s right-hand column, which moves from “*distant / African / drums*” in the first mood to “*Rhythmic / bop, / ever / more / ironic*” in the last one, the repeated four-beat rhythm of *Ask Your Mama*’s “poetic” lines is too general to evoke a recognizable African American musical tradition. As a result, African American music proper remains an accessory to this unifying poetic rhythm.

And this split between the integrating music of the poetic lines and the recognizably “black” music of the right-hand column thereby problematizes the means by which one might read music as *Ask Your Mama*’s unifying gesture. For what links the poems disparate references to one another is the poem’s music, not jazz, or blues, or “*distant / African / drums.*” Put differently, the music that forges this link is not identified *as* music; in contrast, the music from the right-hand column, that which actually describes an extended cultural history, becomes only a piece the poem needs to coordinate with its others. While the former links the varied moments of the African diaspora, it can only do so through a music that cannot call attention to its own musicality. While the latter can chronicle an aesthetic narrative, it cannot let us actually *hear* it.

The result is therefore, on the surface at least, a doubled experience of advance and retreat, of formal innovation and emotional frustration. Yet the poem comes to exploit the idea of music unheard to generate a set of conceptual resources that, while arguably deriving from a position of frustration, nonetheless comes to grant significant power in achieving its aims. To explore this idea with more specificity, I turn to two particular moods, mood #4, “ODE TO DINAH,” and mood #8, “IS IT TRUE?.”

## MAKING A SPANGLE

One of the poem’s longest moods, “ODE TO DINAH” encapsulates many of *Ask Your Mama*’s main themes. The semantic compression evinced by the poem’s title is on full display here, with the opening lines of the mood enacting a complicated play on the word “snow”: “IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES / WHERE TO SNOW NOW ACCLIMATED / SHADOWS SHOW UP SHARPER.”

Historically, the acclimation named here describes the after-effects of the Great Migration – the movement of millions of African Americans north in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As the second half of this mood reminds us, this large-scale shift retraces an older path: that of the Underground Railroad. Yet if this earlier journey marked a “LINE WHOSE ROUTE WAS FREEDOM,” its contemporary version has produced more complicated results. On one hand, “the quarter of the Negroes” now identifies an area less geographically restricted than at any point in history. But the movement to cold Northern climes has also heightened both the difference and the tension between black residents and their white neighbors. “[Showing] up sharper,” black inhabitants now attain a sort of hyper-visibility. (“Sharper” also suggests the cultural “hipness” of Black culture, in the sense of “sharp suits,” and offers a subtle dig at White

Americans who become “hip” by appropriating Black culture.) Their presence further crystallizes the resistance to their presence among the communities to which they have moved; the blanket of “snow” (or “whiteness”) surrounding these black residents is cold both climatologically *and* emotionally.

Yet “snow” bears other meanings. On one hand it functions as a synonym for “static,” the random mix of white and black spots on the TV that indicate a signal’s not coming through. On the other it connotes “mislead” or “deceive.” Lines 7 and 8 pick up both of these implications: “SINCE IT’S SNOWING ON THE TV / THIS LAST QUARTER OF THE CENTENNIAL.” The “snowing” TV – the fact that it doesn’t work – exemplifies the lack of direction these migrating blacks receive. But even when the picture on the TV *is* clear, it nonetheless “FAILS TO GET PEARL BAILEY,” suggesting both that black culture doesn’t reach that far north (“get” as “receive”), and that when it does, it is inevitably (or intentionally) misunderstood (“get” as “understand”). The TV thus “[SNOWS]” by misleading its viewers, covering them in a field of whiteness.

That “SHADOWS” are “ACCLIMATED” to this scenario is thus both encouraging and tragic, since it suggests a sad acceptance of their fate. This problem also plays out in the economic realm, as we see in the equally complicated play on the word “quarter.” A crucial word to the poem, “quarter” ties together numerous of *Ask Your Mama*’s themes, linking places of residence to money and economic exchange, as well as implying “quarter notes,” a standard duration of musical time.<sup>12</sup> Thus in the place where the “SHADOWS SHOW UP SHARPER,” “THE ONE COIN IN THE METER / KEEPS THE GAS ON.” Quarters (the coin) are therefore the only means by which the black northern-dweller gains a modicum of relief from the bitter cold (thereby maintaining the inhabitability of the “quarter,” meaning “place”). But this quarter in the meter is also the aforementioned “LAST QUARTER OF CENTENNIAL,” “centennial” marking the 100-year anniversary of emancipation. The picture is unpromising: the historical fulfillment of emancipation has become a mere token, the single hope blacks have against being smothered by snow (in the word’s multiple senses).

As we can see, the poem’s linguistic condensation helps project a vision of contemporary black life marked by loss of community and estrangement from roots. What makes this situation particularly bleak is that even black music – which for Hughes has long represented the cultural recouping of these losses – may itself be no longer able to exert the restorative power imputed to it. We see this in the second part of the mood, which reverses the earlier movement north, traveling from Buffalo back to Harlem. The difference between the two places is certainly stark. In Harlem, unlike Buffalo, “DARK SHADOWS BECOME DARKER BY A SHADE”: African Americans feel more in touch with their culture, and enjoy a small amount of emotional security (“shade” suggests a curtain’s being drawn, and thus a measure of privacy). Contra the “shadows” who stick out in the “snow,” here “*WHITE SHADOWS PASS*” (my italics), trying to fit in where they are not the norm.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Scanlon is particularly insightful on this issue. As he argues, the word “*Quarter* came in to Middle English from Latin, via Old French. Its subsequent profusion of meaning illustrates the power of vernacularization” through which Hughes “defiantly proposes the African- American tradition as a central node of an international vernacular” (53).

<sup>13</sup> One might also hear echoes here of Claude McKay’s “Harlem Shadows,” which condemns the “stern harsh world” for forcing little girls in Harlem to prostitute themselves.

Yet the fact that “SHADOWS” and “SHADE” share the same root and describe a very similar phenomenon also suggests that “SHADOWS ... SHADE” names less a real transformation than the *appearance* of transformation, one that hides what at end is a mere repetition of the same. While allowing for a sense of commonality, the retreat into “darkness” functionally maintains the status quo. It does so by fundamentally misleading its participants, directing them to invest their energies in aesthetic solutions that cover over some more troubling economic problems. Thus “quarters” here become “SILVER SHADOWS,” which, in an image inverting the earlier description of coins falling into gas meters, are here inserted into “FAT JUKEBOXES.”

The sounds these jukeboxes produce? Dinah Washington. And, as befits a mood titled “ODE TO DINAH,” Washington’s voice here does enable a communal experience of listening that fortifies a sense of shared African-American experience. Earlier in the mood, in fact, it was “A DISC BY DINAH” that the denizens of Buffalo turn to as a source of comfort. In Harlem Washington’s voice produces a similar effect. Yet *Ask Your Mama* deeply undermines the sense of possibility Washington’s music offers by posing the listening experience as an economic experience:

AS EACH QUARTER CLINKS  
INTO A MILLION POOLS OF QUARTERS  
TO BE CARTED OFF BY BRINK’S  
THE SHADES OF DINAH’S SINGING  
MAKE A SPANGLE OF QUARTERS RINGING.  
TO KEEP FAR-OFF CANARIES  
IN SILVER CAGES SINGING,

Notice the order of events here: before we hear Washington sing, the poem gives us the “clinking” of quarters that, though summoning Washington’s voice, at end feed only the coffers of the company to which Brink’s carries them. Regardless of the degree to which Washington’s music engenders a shared experience of listening, it is these companies that financially profit from the music. And their ability to do so, this section implies, grants *them* ultimate control over the Negro “quarters” (in both senses of the word).

These lines further play out this experience whereby the reinforcement of community insidiously works to preserve economic inequalities. We see this in the second half of the quote above, where “THE SHADES OF DINAH’S SINGING” – both the audible “blackness” in her voice and the subtlety with which she wields her instrument – “MAKE A SPANGLE OUT OF QUARTERS RINGING.” This last line works on multiple levels. First, it extends the poem’s standard 4-beat rhythm, adding a beat to render one of the poem’s few pentameter lines. The suggestion is that Washington’s singing exceeds the representative capacity of the poem, the extra beat pushing us to imagine new modes of representation unavailable in the poem. More directly, “spangle” conjures “The Star-Spangled Banner.” This implication is profound, at least to a degree: in these lines, Dinah Washington’s voice takes the various meanings of “quarters ringing” – both the sound of quarters dropping into a jukebox and the image of African American people collectively singing – and forges them as an anthem, unifying its members under a collective tradition. While this sense of collectivity may appear merely ornamental to the outsider (“ornamental” being the other meaning of “spangle”), it nonetheless feels and sounds real to those participating in it.

The lines that follow, however, “TO KEEP FAR-OFF CANARIES / IN SILVER CAGES SINGING,” undercut much of this implied optimism. That “SINGING” in the second line rhymes with “QUARTERS RINGING” emphasizes the degree to which the act of singing, liberating as it seems, still fails to liberate the “canaries” from their “silver cages” – silver being another slang term for “coins.” Even as Dinah Washington’s voice brings its listeners together, that is, this shared experience of community fails to gain African Americans any measure of economic freedom. And it is economic realities, these lines suggest, that more directly restrict the African American “quarters.” The reference in these lines, of course, is to Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s 1899 poem “Sympathy,” most famous for the line “I know why the caged bird sings.” Dunbar’s poem is a lament for those who misapprehend the voices of Black Americans, hearing joy when pain is the expressed emotion. “The caged bird sings,” Dunbar writes, “not a carol of joy or glee, / But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core, / But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings —.”

That Hughes references Dunbar reinforces the sense of commonality and continuity enabling the very category of “African American literature.” But it also suggests that more than sixty years after Dunbar bemoaned his people’s condition, social conditions remain static – “shadows” becoming simply “shade.” And while Dunbar’s poem aims to educate listeners who hear Black voices as expressing merely “joy or glee,” and therefore grants poetry – an aesthetic object – the power to modify the world, Hughes’s suggests that the assumption that the aesthetic realm offers liberating power may *itself* be the problem. For to invest Black cultural productions with the power to change African American circumstances is, arguably, to misidentify the cause of African American exploitation, and therefore to be complicit with the economic operations that perpetuate captivity. It is to participate in, as I described earlier, the simulacrum of freedom rather than its true expression. And not only do African Americans thereby remain oblivious to the engine of their oppression, they gladly pay to perpetuate it.

This bitter acknowledgement – that singing, or Black music in general, may not be liberating, but is in fact an element of the system that keeps African Americans economically confined – thus provides further justification for *Ask Your Mama*’s ambivalent take on musicality. One might, in fact, read the poem’s insistence that its music not be given by its “poetic” lines, but must instead appear in a separate column, helps keep its poetic lines from falling prey to the illusion that they *can* “sing.” If the belief that singing is liberating is itself a problem, that is, disallowing its lines from doing so helps keep them from building their own “silver cages.”

As I observed above, however, this idea, however attractive conceptually, remains unsustainable, for the simple reason that the “poetic” lines *do* produce their own music. And that they do so helps explain why this moment in the poem – the moment that summons Dinah Washington to our presence – does not allow us to actually hear Washington’s voice. By this I mean that as much as it seems to be called for, the *musical* cues that correspond to this moment of the text (the poem’s right hand column), curiously call for us to hear not Dinah Washington, but rather, the poem’s leitmotif, the “Hesitation Blues,” “*softly / asking / over / and / over / its old / question, / “Tell / me / how / long?”*” Against *this* musical backdrop, the poetic lines play out a set of blues lyrics that presumably reiterate Washington’s jukebox song:

*TELL ME, PRETTY PAPA  
WHAT TIME IS IT NOW?  
PRETTY PAPA, PRETTY PAPA*

*WHAT TIME IS IT NOW?  
DON'T CARE WHAT TIME IT IS  
GONNA LOVE YOU ANYHOW*

As I noted earlier, one consequence of the poem's division into columns is that it sets up a contrast between competing versions of musicality. This division arguably reaches its peak here. The contrast is sharp: on the right an anonymous blues; on the left Dinah Washington; on the right a song meant to be heard; on the left one meant to be read. Yet most notable is the contrast in versions of agency these juxtaposed songs imply. As the leitmotif to the poem, the "Hesitation Blues" suffuses *Ask Your Mama* with a sense of frustration that echoes that explored in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. Asking "How long must I wait? / Can I get it now – / or must I hesitate?," whatever sense of agency its singer might acquire can only be satisfied by an answer – forever delayed – from outside. The song thus engenders an experience of unending deferral, and, therefore, a near-permanent immobility. The lyrics of Washington's song, in contrast, take the opposite approach. *Their* singer refuses to wait; though she asks her "pretty papa" what time it is, at end she doesn't care – her choice is to "love you anyhow." The opening question, "what time is it now?," is thereby rendered unimportant – what time it is does not matter for someone willing to take action whenever they feel like doing so. There *is* no hesitation in this song; it spells out the opposite of deferral.

Yet while this song thereby offers a counter, and perhaps a solution, to the endless paralysis of the "Hesitation Blues," it is also hobbled by the fact that it is not a song we can actually *hear*. If music itself is to give us a solution to the problem of deferral, that is, it is telling that the "music" that enables this solution is given in words, not in sound. The "sound," in contrast – the actual music *in* the poem – keeps its listeners waiting. And while it may effectively reproduce the experience of waiting, it can do little to escape this condition. We are, thus, thrust back into the poem's initial problem: *Ask Your Mama*'s poetic lines register musical power only by *not* being musical; the actual music in the poem, in contrast, engenders a condition of deferral and immobility. The only music the poem can rely on, it seems, is the music it cannot reproduce.

Yet inasmuch as the respective deficiencies of music and poetic language here represent an experience of frustration with the poem's inability to reproduce the music upon which social advance relies, another mood, "IS IT TRUE?," helps explore the representational possibilities of this inability. And faced with this problem – that of being unable to imitate the music it calls for – "IS IT TRUE?" generates a solution that depends on its developing not the music that the reader can hear, but the music it cannot. The result is a new concept of musicality, and a new mode of using music to generate the community "ODE TO DINAH" ultimately undoes through its invocation of economics.

### **AN ILLUSIVE GAME TO BAG**

Put differently, if "ODE TO DINAH" captured the poem's deep ambivalence about music as redemptive experience and redemptive figure, "IS IT TRUE?," *Ask Your Mama*'s eighth mood, extends these ideas into the realm of poetic representation. From the beginning, it seems to take its title seriously, acquiring power precisely by developing an account of black music that depends on the reader's being unable to know what, exactly, is true and what, exactly, isn't. The mood begins by describing how

FROM THE SHADOWS OF THE QUARTER  
SHOUTS ARE WHISPERS CARRYING  
TO THE FARTHEREST CORNERS SOMETIMES  
OF THE NOW KNOWN WORLD.

The prepositional substitution that opens these lines (“from the” as opposed to “in the,” which begins most other iterations of this phrase) as well as the shift in diction, from “the quarter of the negroes” to “the shadows of the quarter,” speaks to this mood’s taking up and commenting on *Ask Your Mama*’s general strategies. It also foregrounds the semantic layering through which “shadows” specifies both the places of the quarters shrouded in darkness and black people themselves. This conjunction between identity and lack of recognition – the idea that “shadows” (as people) remain unseen (in the shadows) – will become particularly important as the mood develops. That “shouts” become “whispers” here is in part explained by the poem’s insistent capitalization, which literally dulls the power of visual shouting; the diminishment of voice that results mirrors the reduction of visibility that occurs when “shadows” (people) are located in “shadows” (darkness).

Yet while the first two lines paint a straightforward, if complicated picture, numerous words in the third line baffle. Why “fartherest” as opposed to “farthest”? And why “sometimes”? Sonically, “fartherest” recreates the hushing sounds of whispers; it additionally betrays the lines’ rhythm by adding an extra syllable, producing one of the poem’s few dactyls. The emphasis on the word’s coined-ness – the fact that “fartherest” is non-standard English – points to the way these whispers carry in unrecognized, localized ways. “Sometimes,” too, indicates the ways that such dissemination is not always recognized as such, a technique we see enacted in the next line, where “NOW” repeats within “KNOWN,” though is relatively hidden in doing so.

But the overall point of these words is to impart a sense of doubt into the proceedings. “Furtherest,” “sometimes,” “the now known world”: all convey a limitation in the poem’s descriptive abilities, or even a limitation in the poem’s ability to account for the existence *of* these “whispers” it describes. There is – perhaps – more to know about them, though it is not at all clear whether *Ask Your Mama* possesses this knowledge and cannot communicate it, or if the poem is conveying its own uncertainty about its belief in these sounds.

The mood continues by describing these whispers as being

UNDECIPHERED AND UNLETTERED  
UNCODIFIED UNPARSED  
IN TONGUES UNANALYZED UNECHOED  
UNTAKEN DOWN ON TAPE –

The proliferation of “UN”s here, of course, highlight the fact that these whispers evade recognized modes of reception; this idea is further emphasized by the poem’s specifying no music to be heard at this moment, its right-hand column calling only for “TACIT,” which means “don’t play,” or, more literally, “silent,” and therefore unworded. Yet these repeated negatives also represent the mood’s big gambit. It is this: if these “whispers” are truly “unechoed,” “uncodified,” and “unlettered,” then the poem would have no way to represent them. Even more: this description functionally *prevents* the poem from sonically reproducing them,



recreating them conceptually, or even describing them accurately. To do any of these things would be to render these sound lettered and echoed, and therefore to negate the non-representable characteristics that lend them their representative power. Pushed to the extreme, the poem cannot even verify their existence. All it can do is maintain that they do, in fact, exist and circulate, “CARRYING” from one location to another.

Yet notice, also, what *Ask Your Mama* gains by describing these sounds in these terms. The word “shadows” is key here, since these sounds need to come from the “shadows,” in both senses of the word: they come from black people, but also from the darkest, most remote regions of the “quarters.” Their source, that is, is obscure, even unlocatable. And insofar as these sounds remain uncaptured and unanalyzed, they sounds offer the tantalizing possibility of pure *authenticity* – a cultural expression that evades the economic apprehension described in “ODE TO DINAH,” avoids the representational problems of poetry, and permanently maintains itself outside of the problems of commodification or contamination. From this perspective, the poem’s *inability* to reproduce these sounds serves as evidence of their existence, since the very possibility of these “whispers” travelling in the manner the poem describes necessarily depends on their evading capture by *any* sort of imitative representation. This idea is well-captured by the assonance between “tongues” and “un” in the lines above. As a literal echo, this assonance serves as evidence that the “tongues” in this line are not the “tongues” it is discussing, that there remains an insurmountable gap separating the *word* “tongues” – which can be echoed – and the sounds that word is meant to describe.

This is, of course, a dangerous game: by posing the existence of these “authentic” sounds, *Ask Your Mama* flirts here with the idea of an “authentic African American expression,” and therefore leans into a notion of racial essentialism the rest of the poem, with its high level of fragmentation, as well as its summoning figures from across the diaspora, seems at very least to complicate considerably, if not reject entirely. Furthermore, while the gesture is dramatic, it is also, perhaps, desperate: when all claims to imitate black music have been abandoned, the one move left is to push for a music whose authenticity depends on its *not* falling into representation.

At the same time, however, by repeatedly insisting on both the existence and the unhearability of these sounds, *Ask Your Mama* does manage to produce their *effect* without producing their presence. As every good post-structuralist knows, of course, the idea of a sign that evades representation is a permanent fiction, necessary for communication to take place but conceptually unsustainable. From this perspective, even the claim to the existence of these “whispers” remains fraught. And even if they did exist, were they truly “unechoed” and “uncodified” in the manner this mood names, they would not even be nameable obliquely, or through their negative, as they are here. Yet *Ask Your Mama*’s overall strategy is less to argue for the existence of these sounds than to substitute the poem’s claim *that* they exist for their phenomenological presence.

The issue, that is, becomes less the actuality of these whispers than the uses of *Ask Your Mama*’s assertions of their existence. By posing the possibility, forever unverifiable, of its having secreted something important, *Ask Your Mama* is able to both work within and avoid the economies of codification and representation that are described so acutely in “ODE TO DINAH.” It does this by a logic of effects, rather than causes: to the degree that readers and listeners *believe* the claim that these unrepresentable experiences represent the authentic experience of African American culture, the poem will have succeeded in creating the very sense of commonality it describes. Whether or not any given reader can hear these specific whispers, that

is the mere experience of shared belief in it them would function as the point of possible community. That the poem cannot ostensibly recreate these “shouts” and “whispers,” then, is what allows it to achieve this goal; were it to succeed, the poem will have created its own foundational myth by soliciting identification, rather than phenomenological proof.

It is this idea, then – that an assertion of authenticity, when tied to a specific mode of address, can achieve the effects of music without having to rely on music itself – that resituates *Ask Your Mama*’s relation to musical representation. At stake is the role of poetic language itself in conveying this idea of musicality. The next few lines help trace this idea out.

NOT EVEN FOLKWAYS CAPTURED  
BY MOE ASCH OR ALAN LOMAX  
NOT YET ON SAFARI.  
WHERE GAME TO BAG’S ILLUSIVE  
AS A SILVER UNICORN

This is a nice slight of hand: the expected, almost cliché word in the fourth line above would be “elusive.” And this homophonic substitution itself is enabled by the lines’ governing metaphor, which poses Asch and Lomax as hunters searching for “game to bag.”<sup>14</sup> This description of the folklorists working to capture the “unechoed” music thus revisits the earlier account of Dinah Washington’s music, but substitutes poetic representation for economics. While economic activities undermined the communal force of Washinton’s voice in the earlier mood, here it is the possibility of being recorded, disseminated, even being named as “folklore” that threatens these sounds with the loss of vitality. (The passage also subtly indicts Asch and Lomax for indulging in a version of primitivism, with music being animalistic “game,” as opposed to cultivated sound.)

Hughes’s use of the homophone “illusive,” however, provides a sly end-run around this problem. For despite these words’ sounding the same, the dictional shift smuggles in a large change of perspective. This is because the word dramatically changes the meaning of the sentence. “Game to bag’s *elusive*”: the clichéd phrase suggests that this ephemeral, ur-music is available, but difficult to capture (even permanently). “Game to bag’s *illusive*”: this phrase offers a much bigger idea, which is that the whole idea that there *is* “game to bag” is an illusion. The story is not that the “game” is present but merely difficult to “bag”; rather, viewing these cultural artifacts *as* “game to bag” – as cultural artifacts, even – is the problem. This is why the next line reads “AS A SILVER UNICORN.” “Silver unicorns” are not elusive; they are impossible creatures. To see them as “game to bag” is to miss the fact that one will never “bag” them; it is to conceptualize them the wrong way.

In some ways this is a hint from *Ask Your Mama* that the sounds it is describing here are *never* actual. For to be on the lookout for a paradigmatic example of this music, as Asch and Lomax were, is to see it is “game to bag” – capturable and real – rather a “silver unicorn,” a fiction that is perhaps useful, but never extant in the real world. In an extraordinarily subtle way, *Ask Your Mama* indicates here that these “shouts” and “whispers” can never materialize as sounded. For to have them do so would be for them to be echo-able, analyze-able, and codify-able. They are, that is, available as sound only in *Ask Your Mama*’s description of them as such. Which is to say, never. Or, never insofar as one expects these sounds to take sonic form, rather

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<sup>14</sup> Moses Asch was the founder of Folkways records; Alan Lomax is the famous field collector of American folk music, and later what would come to be called “world music.”

than remaining in the realm of figure, or rhetoric.

In these lines we thus see the implications of Hughes's having separated word from sound played out in miniature. To see word and sound as the same here – to hear “elusive” in the line – is to reinforce a stereotype that the poem aims to combat. To *read* the poem by separating one's visual encounter with it from one's aural encounter with it, however, provides a different explanation, one in which word comes to substitute *for* sound, but only by being distinct from it.

The end-note that corresponds to “IS IT TRUE?” plays out the same game: “It seems as if everything is annotated one way or another, but the subtler nuances remain to be captured,” it reads. The trick, however, is that “the subtler nuances remain to be captured” because they are fundamentally not something that can be captured; to see them as such is to preserve an unsustainable stereotype. As the note continues, “everybody thinks that Negroes have the *most* fun, but, of course, secretly hopes they do not – although curious to find out if they do.” Now, on one hand, the clear sarcasm in “everybody thinks Negroes have *more* fun” separates the poem's audience from this implied “everybody,” generating a community out of the easy disparaging of an implied enemy. This mode of identification, in fact, is cultivated throughout the poem; the very force of the poem's “ask your mama” lines depends on it, since they encourage the reader to see the “you” as addressed not to herself, but to a different “you.” In this sense, calling *Ask Your Mama* an indictment of the reader is somewhat false, since the “reader” in this interpretation can always be identified as a different “reader,” not oneself.

On the other, it is not as clear that the dynamic posed as ludicrous here is not itself a version of the one Hughes uses. That “everybody thinks Negroes have *more* fun” is a product of the long history of minstrel performance, in which African Americans played up the smiling mask. Whether or not such performers were actually happy thus remained a mystery to its audience, who, though clearly aware of the social circumstances surrounding black performance, could not be quite sure that this performance did not actually bear a degree of truth. Put differently, in this note *Ask Your Mama* invokes the long history of blackness representing the “dark continent,” the perennially unknowable. And it clearly mocks its enduring presence, the fact that people *still* think that “Negroes have more fun.” Yet insofar as the use of music I have been describing depends on *Ask Your Mama*'s keeping that music unheard, it too utilizes the strategy where the assertions about this music (the poem's insistence on describing these sounds as undecipherable) come to stand for the music's phenomenal presence. In this, *Ask Your Mama* reverses the dynamic that poses blackness as the unknowable by itself posing these “shouts” and “whispers” as the unknowable. The difference, however, is that the poem's doing so generates the experience of commonality for the African American community, rather than generating an experience of commonality on the backs of it. In this sense, the description offers an extraordinarily subtle play on the word “game”: while the quote ostensibly critiques the idea of understanding black music posed as “game to bag,” in so doing the poem ends up playing a game with us.

And let us also notice what the posing of this music sans sound allows the poem to conceptually unify: its own catalog of references. As we saw with both “ODE TO DINAH” and with the Asch and Lomax quotes, *Ask Your Mama* sees the prospect of *naming* the shared experience that ties together the various strands of the poem – the musical experience that can “make a spangle,” that is – inherently threatening. For to name it is to cede its authority. Allowing this music to remain unheard, however, formally incorporate the possibility of a shared experience that *cannot* be named as such. Earlier, I argued that from a formal perspective, the

“music” that links the varied names, locations, and languages in the poem can be provided only in *Ask Your Mama*’s “poetic” column, and therefore must arrive in the guise of not being music proper. The idea that *Ask Your Mama*’s most authentic music remains unhearable pushes this idea even further. For it suggests that these “shouts” and “whispers” must necessarily travel (or “carry”) in ways that resist standardization. Which means here that insofar as the poem *can* invoke them, it has to do so by offering a new idea of what “carrying” means. And this version of “carrying” would have to avoid repetition and thematic obviousness, so as to remain unheard, and unimitated. It would, in other words, need to link various experiences without posing themselves as *the* link.

Reading *Ask Your Mama* in this manner thus helps explain the poem’s multiple but simultaneous modes of representation. By separating visual, musical, rhythmic, and organizational experiences from one another, the poem allows for being read on multiple levels, without necessarily providing a single concept that unifies them all. Or, it would provide a single concept, but that concept would necessarily remain unknowable. In this sense, the poem creates a new sense of non-mimetic representation. For these “shouts” and “whispers” clearly cannot register as such. They can, rather, register only as the implied unity that bands the poem’s diverse elements to one another.

What “musicality” comes to mean here, then, is less the experience of listening, or even the phenomenological similarity of *Ask Your Mama* to music, than the ability of the poem to achieve the same effect as the music it describes does. On a conceptual level, *Ask Your Mama*’s “music” is the reference *to* music that enables the same sort of collectivity Dinah Washington’s music produces, but without the economic corollaries attached to it. Insofar as the poem asks its readers to see its fragmented features as enabling a common goal, that is, it will have succeeded in *being* musical, without *sounding* musical.

Now, this is, it must be admitted, a relatively sanguine reading. For the success of this new version of musicality clearly depends on *Ask Your Mama*’s producing an identificatory relationship with its audience, one potentially threatened by the possibility of its readers simply not believing. To accept that there *is* a unifying theme to the poem’s disparate parts, but that this unifying theme cannot be phenomenally recognized *as* unifying may simply be too difficult of a pill to swallow. And the poem offers hints that to have to resort to the position of posing it leaves the poem less energized than pessimistic. Such aesthetic contortions enervate. Even though “IS IT TRUE?” offers this new version of musicality traced out above, then, it nonetheless ends with lines that register only weariness and repetition: “THEY ASKED ME AT THE PTA / IS IT TRUE THAT NEGROES ---- ? / I SAID, ASK YOUR MAMA.” Rather than a sign of provocation, “ask your Mama” here is much more a sign of fatigue. One needn’t even hear the setup to this question (“is it true that Negroes *what?*”); its mere form already betrays a perception that that Negroes are fundamentally different, and fundamentally unknowable.

And the other option is simply that *Ask Your Mama* risks throughout the possibility that its gamble will fall through. While this poem works hard to conceptually articulate a mode of unification that *Ask Your Mama*’s very phenomenal presence seems to betray, it does so in the spirit of a final gesture held out against the potential of its own collapse. When the poem’s penultimate mood, “JAZZTET MUTED,” describes “SMOLDERING SHADOWS / THAT SOMETIMES TURN TO FIRE,” the phrase seems as much to portend the urban riots that would arise in the ensuing years as it does to describe the possibility of the poem’s own immolation.

This, too, is in part the goal: *Ask Your Mama* does promote the idea that only an experimental, non-linear poetics is pliable enough to capture the contradictions, and the deep

feelings of loss, that structure black life in 1961. But insofar as the result puts one over on his readers, affronting them with parody and sarcasm, it does so as a gesture of deep uncertainty, rather than power. The final lines of the poem play out this deep worry about the future. Inverting the poem's opening – "IN / IN THE / IN THE QUARTER / IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGRO" – which adopts a third-person point of voice in order to describe a generalized condition, these lines – "SHOW FARE, MAMA, PLEASE. / SHOW FARE, MAMA ... / SHOW FARE!" – turn the poem's opening expansion upside down, rendering it as a series of dwindling, personified pleas. Literally "[asking] his mama" for something she cannot provide, all this child can do is name the object of his desire, forever unable to obtain it. Sad and desperate, *Ask Your Mama* is undoubtedly, as Saul describes, "a devastating dialogue of insult" (7). As these lines suggest, however, at end the devastation it describes may only be its own.

### **"A TALL SENSE OF ENCLOSURE": ROBERT CREELEY'S *WORDS* AND THE MUSIC OF MERE-NESS**

Slippery and fine-tuned, Robert Creeley's poetry has always seemed to skate the edges of the categories imposed on American poetry.<sup>15</sup> Black Mountain, projectivism, LANGUAGE poetry, jazz poetry, the San Francisco renaissance, confessionalism: Creeley has arguably been as critical for each of these as he has been emblematic of none. While Hughes's legacy remains relatively easy to trace, the Creeley situation more perplexing: though Creeley is by now widely acknowledged as a major figure of American poetics, figuring out what, exactly, he leaves us with has proven a more difficult task.

There are, perhaps, some relatively straightforward explanations for this situation. One might cite, for example, Creeley's longevity (more than fifty years of publishing), extensive output (more than forty books of poetry and prose), and relatively recent death (2005). Yet above all, the most direct answer seems to be that the ostensible simplicity of Creeley's work leaves readers with so many versions of Creeley. In hindsight, we can appreciate Creeley for having pulled off a double-trick unique among his generation, plumbing the subtleties of delicate emotional states while simultaneously, and insistently, putting a magnifying glass to the materiality of his work. Hesitant and restrained, the typical Creeley poem is ruthless in its self-questioning. Almost pathologically compelled to turn over and over again the grounds – linguistic, formal, emotional, conceptual – on which any emotional or interpretive commitment might be made, his poems over and over again seem drawn by gravity to undercut themselves. "What I come to do / is partial, partially kept," announces an early poem (appropriately titled "The Innocence"). Fair enough; poems often withhold as much as they give. Yet even this attempt at qualification comes across as partially realized. Is what is to be secreted here something kept *by* the poem or kept *from* the poem? Is "come to do" a claim about habit or intention? In Creeley's hands, it seems, even partiality remains incomplete.

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<sup>15</sup> Though I do not quote all of them in this chapter, there are a number of readings of Creeley that have assisted my analysis. Charles Altieri remains, arguably, our greatest interpreter of Creeley; his writings about the poet include both stand-alone articles and chapters or sections in his books *Enlarging the Temple*, *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry*, and *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects*. The other major resource on Creeley is the special double issue of *boundary 2* from 1978, edited by William Spanos. Entitled "Robert Creeley: A Gathering," it includes essays by Altieri, Robert Duncan, Sherman Paul, Marjorie Perloff, and others.

Yet this partiality also offers a number of intriguing suggestions about the possibilities of poetic language, particularly as it responds to the aesthetic tradition I am trying to outline. Most specifically, it offers a mode of poetizing in which the fact that a poem is constituted by language leads it to evade whatever communicative coherence it may be ostensibly seeking. Stripping words and images of the contexts – linguistic and conceptual – that would normally make sense of them, Creeley’s work often reduces language to its merest state. Then, having set language loose in this environment, the poetry charts the feelings, thoughts, experiences and sensations that ensue. Indeed, the repeated wonder of Creeley’s work is that its apparent banality of content – the fact that his poems are often not *about* much, at least if that “about” names something external to the poem – engenders a disjunctive, multi-layered web of intention, reference, and meaning. And to the degree Creeley’s poems exhibit a “voice,” they forge that “voice” less as a unified entity or experience than an assemblage of unstable parts, parts that simultaneously comprising the linguistic, the semantic, the affective, and the narrative.

Yet even as these various modalities of poetic utterance tend to undermine one another, what often remains is the fact of their sensuousness, the fact of their being present and available to the senses. And the sensuous form of this remainder is, often, what Creeley’s poems can be said to be “about.” That they are hear-able, that they can be seen: this sensuous “that-ness” is what Creeley’s linguistic experiments often most directly put on display.

In this, this chapter will argue, Creeley’s work often pushes the advances of Miles Davis’s mid-60’s group into the realm of language. As we’ll remember, much of the force of Davis’s music lay in his band’s ability to present sounds that constantly evade whatever contexts would make sense of them. While Charlie Parker’s music expressly detached its surface performance from whatever depth could be read out of it, Davis’s works to make constitutively unclear what counted *as* surface and what *as* depth. What remains are musical gestures that simultaneously signify in multiple, even oppositional directions, and therefore escape being read in any singular or definitive relationship to underlying form. And since the meaning of a solo resides in this relationship to underlying form, Davis’s music ultimately ensures that any easy association between statement and meaning will be neither adequate nor sufficient.

Given this, the question Davis’s band leaves to its aesthetic offspring, I argued, is: “how does one represent what one is not sure is even being *presented*?” As the paragraphs above are meant to indicate, Creeley’s work engages a similar problem, though approaching it in a manner more germane to poetry. Because the contexts into which Creeley’s work put its words, images, and sounds often keep those words, images, and sounds from ossifying, communicatively speaking, his work endows language itself with a form of indeterminacy similar to that which Davis’s group lent to musical statements. What Creeley’s work adds to the situation, however, is the fact that it nearly always proceeds on two levels: on one hand a set of words that act in the world, and on the other a meta-commentary on the way those words act in the world. Their commitment to self-reflection, that is, means that as Creeley’s poems proceed, they also proceed as examinations of this procession. Their “voice” is nearly always that of a poem observing itself as it takes place in the world. This complicates things immensely. For not only are his poems often unclear about who or what is speaking, and upon what grounds that speaking is authorized; that they concurrently meditate *on* the fact that they are unclear in this manner, and take that lack of clarity as one of their subjects, makes whatever they might say constitutively unstable.

Thus while Davis’s music offered evasion of certainty as a response to the potential for being read from the outside, Creeley’s, in contrast, portrays the evasion of certainty as the ever-

present condition of a poem's reading itself. Indeed, if they are certain of anything, it is often that they are uncertain. From the perspective of the concept of "voice" I am trying to articulate in this dissertation, then, Creeley's poetry poses a new dilemma. On one hand it succeeds, rather easily, in frustrating the idea of a voice that exists prior to the poem, one to which the poem's enunciation can retroactively refer. On the other, it frustrates the idea of a voice that emerges out of the poem: insofar as "voice" refers to a perspective on the world, "voice" here is dispersed and disjunctive. Yet what is left is still the poem itself. And it is this "still-ness" – the fact that the poem remains – that forms the real subject of Creeley's work. Regardless of what it says, that is, Creeley's work tends to foreground the fact of its *saying*. And the key is that this *saying* comprises both a semantic and a phenomenological experience. While the semantic content of this saying may be intellectually or affectively self-effacing, this is often in order to foreground its phenomenological presence, the way it works itself out in the visual and sonic realm. What I am interested in is the second of these, sound. Since what this means is that what the banality of content and insistent self-referentiality of Creeley's work often paradoxically aims to foreground the fact of its sonicity. That is, its music.

It is this relationship between the evasion of meaning and the persistence of sound that it is this chapter's aim to address. For it helps situate Creeley as a jazz poet, or at least a poet whose interest in jazz helped develop a unique and later quite influential approach to voice. That Creeley sustained a life-long interest in jazz is, of course, well documented. Creeley's infatuation with Charlie Parker remains a constant of his career, as testified to by many, many interviews. Indeed, as early as 1955, Creeley observed that "line-wise, the most complementary sense I have found is that of musicians like Charlie Parker, and Miles Davis. I am interested in how that is done, how 'time' there is held to a measure peculiarly an evidence (a hand) of the emotion which prompts (drives) the poem in the first place."<sup>16</sup> In the 1950's, Creeley became one of the earliest white poets to give readings with jazz musicians. This interest in musical collaboration was to express itself throughout Creeley's career, which saw Creeley well into the new millennium continuing to produce recordings with musicians, including both Steve Swallow and Steve Lacy.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, as was the case with Creeley's friend and mentor Olson, these biographical connections to the music have rarely translated into critical evaluations of the work itself.<sup>18</sup> While critical evaluations of often enthusiastically report Creeley's interest in the music, far rarer have been accounts that actually pinpointing what about Creeley's poems might suggest "jazz." Like Olson's, Creeley's poems don't sound particularly "jazzy," at least insofar as that term designates the use of identifiable codes that signify "jazz." As was also the case with Olson, Creeley's work rarely mentions race. While Creeley's 1969 serial experiment *Pieces* employs a

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<sup>16</sup> (Creeley, *Preface to All That is Lovely in Men*)

<sup>17</sup> The CD's recorded with Swallow include *So There, Have We Told You All You'd Thought to Know?*, and *The Way Out is Via the Door*. Swallow also made a CD of his own, *Home*, that set Creeley's poems to music, sung by jazz vocalist Sheila Jordan. Lacy, too, set Creeley's work to music, creating the rare but fascinating albums *Futurities* and *Futurities II*. Interestingly, the positions Swallow and Lacy occupy in the jazz world largely mirror Creeley's in the poetic, with the careers of all three having toed the line between the mainstream and the avant-garde.

<sup>18</sup> As far as I am aware, Charles Hartman's *Jazztext* is the only examination of Creeley that directly addresses the "jazziness" of Creeley's work. More typical are descriptions like this one, from Tom Clark: "the imagination of a cool, angular, driving jazz, punctuated with anxious, staccato accents and playing at moderated volume somewhere off in the backdrop, is an important element in the existential *ambiance* of much of Creeley's earliest serious writing" (italics in original) (Clark, *Robert Creeley and the Genius of the American Common Place: Together With the Poet's Own Autobiography* 47). While evocative, such descriptions give us little critical purchase on the poetry itself.

largely spontaneous approach to composition, we have by now learned enough to not confuse simple spontaneity with the sort of improvisation operative in jazz.

This chapter aims to address this gap, reading Creeley as an contributor to the jazz-inspired concept of “voice” I have been tracing out throughout this dissertation. The book it turns to to do this is Creeley’s second major volume, *Words*.<sup>19</sup> There are both historical and conceptual reasons for this choice. Historically, *Words* collects poems Creeley wrote between 1961 and 1966. The volume thus bridges, temporally speaking, the poetic advances of 1961’s *Ask Your Mama* and the musical ones of Miles Davis’s mid-1960’s music, and may be profitably read contemporaneously with both. Conceptually, the emphasis on *Words* reflects that book’s having captured a transitional moment in Creeley’s career, one in which, as Charles Altieri puts it, “Creeley’s general resolution has begun to crumble.”<sup>20</sup> Increasingly dubious of the idea that poetry can communicate the experiences of conceptual or phenomenological stability, yet still committed to the individualized lyric, *Words* spells out a poetics that lies between the more direct confessionalism of Creeley’s first volume *For Love* and the experiments with seriality the poet developed in *Pieces*. This state of transition has its advantages, however, the major one being that *Words* ends up working much like the music of Davis’s group, aiming not so much to forge a radically new idea of “form” as to employ more traditional ideas of form in order to dismantle their traditional effects.

As I have already noted, the persistent vagueness of Creeley’s poetry lends it a great deal of conceptual force. One of the powers of this poetry, however, is that it embeds these abstract ideas in an experience of sound and rhythm that directly engages the body. To see how this works, it is worth examining the ways Creeley takes up and modifies the strategies of his two main influences, Olson and William Carlos Williams.<sup>21</sup> Like Olson, Creeley views poetry as a direct instantiation of the body and its history. Yet unlike Olson, Creeley’s poems see that body as constituted as much by *affect* as by physiology. For Olson, we’ll remember, the guiding principle was always “form is never more than an extension of content.” (That this principle was initially proposed by Creeley lends the situation no small degree of irony.) We’ll also remember that this phrase’s crucial word is “extension,” which renders the terms of poetic ontology essentially *spatial*. For Creeley, in contrast, the more representative phrase comes from *Pieces*: “no forms less / than activity.”<sup>22</sup> This phrase, as we can see, responds both to Olson and to Williams’ famous “no ideas but in things.” On one hand, it assimilates Olson’s emphasis on change and his insistence that the body be seen only in its interaction with the world, but does so without limiting the field of this interaction to the spatial realm. On the other, it updates Williams: while “no ideas but in things” externalizes the world, cleaving the self from things in order to pose poetizing as the potential of their reunification, Creeley binds poetry to the world without maintaining the partitions implied in Williams’ dictum. While “things” have discrete boundaries, “activities” do not; the difference between the two is both a source of power (since it more primally unifies body and world) and, potentially, of confusion (since one can no longer rely on these discrete boundaries to help organize one’s experience).

This idea helps flesh out another key difference between Creeley and Olson. It is this: while Creeley adopts an Olsonic approach to breath, writing lines no longer than a single breath

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<sup>19</sup> (Creeley, “Words”)

<sup>20</sup> (Altieri, “The Unsure Egoist: Robert Creeley and the Theme of Nothingness” 172)

<sup>21</sup> For an insightful reading of Williams’ influence on Creeley, see Lynn Keller’s *Re-making it new: Contemporary American poetry and the modernist tradition*.

<sup>22</sup> (Creeley, “Pieces” 379)



can accommodate, he also largely abandons Olson's emphasis on rhythmic irregularity, in part because his poetry is less comfortable seeing irregularity as hard evidence of having done something new. Despite Olson's considerable influence in having made *activity* a critical component of poetizing, the major difference between Olson and Creeley is that Creeley is far less willing than Olson to confidently assert that *any* aspect of the poetic process – breath, body, idea, mind, feeling – can be counted on to stably ground poetic experience. Given this, Creeley's short lines and frequent breath-breaks work in two capacities. On one hand, they keep ideas, thoughts and images from progressing without examination. By actively preventing words from blithely flowing by (as prose writing often does, say), Creeley's rhythms ensure that one attends not only to *what* those words say, but to the ever-present fact *that* they say.<sup>23</sup> And necessarily bound up in this "that" is the body, an entity whose raw physical experiences (breath, eyes, ears), Creeley's poems remind us, always subtend whatever any given poem might do.

To show how this works, I start with Creeley's well-known poem, "The Pattern":

As soon as  
I speak, I  
speaks. It

wants to  
be free but  
impassive lies

in the direction  
of its  
words. Let

x equal x, x  
also  
equals x. I

speak to  
hear myself  
speak? I

had not thought  
that some-  
thing had such

undone. It  
was an idea  
of mine.

A favorite of critics, this poem has often served as an introduction to some of the larger themes of Creeley's poetry.<sup>24</sup> This is fair: the poem does confirm a popular, abstract, and by now quite

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<sup>23</sup> As Kenneth Cox explains, Creeley's poems "prefer to stop short rather than go wrong" (Cox 243).

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, (Sylvester), (Foster), or (Vernon).

familiar theory of subjectivity. This idea is familiar from multiple sources. While it came to be a crucial component of the Tel Quel arguments of the 1960's, as well as the theories that followed, its crucial early articulator might be the mid-century linguist Emile Benveniste. More specifically, Benveniste showed how the subject could be read as a product of its own discursive construction. As Kaja Silverman explains, the force of Benveniste's work is to "[show] three terms ... to be theoretically inseparable: language, discourse, and subjectivity."<sup>25</sup> In Benveniste's account, the use of "I" in a discursive situation does not so much refer to a previously extant "I," but rather to the discursive context within which this "I" obtains legibility. As he argues: "Then, what does *I* refer to? To something very peculiar which is exclusively linguistic: *I* refers to the act of individual discourse in which it is pronounced, and by this it designates the speaker ... the reality to which it refers is the reality of the discourse."<sup>26</sup>

One can easily see this idea played out in the poem above. "As soon as / I speak, I / speaks": the subject (the "I") is as much effect as source of language. Rather than being the vehicle for communicating the thoughts of a self that exists prior to it, speaking speaks us, retroactively engendering both the idea and the experience of that self. This idea is visually announced in the way the word "speak" is surrounded by "I"s in line 2. This line thus provides a short narrative of the predicament ("I speak I": I speak the thing that is then read as the I who speaks), and significantly poses *speaking* – a temporal, bodied activity – as the experience that cleaves the experience of "I" into speaker and spoken, or, more accurately, the experience that underlines the fact that the "I" is always such divided.

Yet as important as this idea is for Creeley, more important is the fact of its being rendered in and as poetic form, since this mode of developing the idea necessarily engages the "I" as it is experienced in its affective and bodied states. To show this, one might compare this poem's first sentence with the same words unlineated:

As soon as I speak, I speaks.

As soon as  
I speak, I  
speaks.

As even a quick look shows, Creeley's version draws a number of rhythmic, visual, and grammatical subtexts out of the sentence. While the sentence on the left hurls towards its conclusion, turning on the comma that separates two versions of the same phrase ("I speak" / "I speaks"), Creeley's version uses enjambment to institute a sense of suspense, as one (perhaps Creeley) waits to see *what*, exactly, happens "as soon as," or what the "I" does after it speaks. Pace the unlineated version, whose punch comes from the single repetition of "I speak," Creeley's version reveals the *many* versions of difference in sameness that, though buried in the first version, subtly animate it: there are "as"/"as," "I"/"I," and "speak"/"speaks," as well as the structural parallel of lines 1 and 2 (bookended "s" words, primary vowels, three stresses). The difference between these versions is that between provocation and observation: the first sentence makes an argument, while the second uncovers the analogical structures subtending that idea. While the unlineated version tells us that "I speaks," Creeley's version examines the feelings, intellectual and affective, attending with the slow realization *that* "I speaks."

The removal of "speaks" to the final line of the above stanza, then, highlights not only the disappointment of the observation ("that's all that happens?"), but the replacement of the "I"

<sup>25</sup> (Silverman 43)

<sup>26</sup> (Benveniste 226)

(which plays a major role in the climax of the unlineated sentence) with an activity – speaking – sundered from any ascribed agency, or any ascribed speaker. “Speaks,” too, makes the grammar of the sentence difficult to parse (since we want to put a “the” before the second “I”) and, notably, disrupts the otherwise tight iambic trimeter of the sentence. And though the words “soon” / “speak” / “speaks” *visually* portray an insistent march leftwards, making the sentence’s conclusion almost pre-ordained, the fact that “speaks” is hard to get out of the mouth registers the fundamental estrangement of the experience. (This estrangement too registers in the poem’s later line (line 15), “speak? I,” which, narrates the emergence of the “I” from the act of speaking, but uses punctuation to express the way it seems to run counter to common sense.)

Now, the idea that form – enjambment, lineation, rhythm, and viscosity, among others – helps shape our understanding of content is a poetic truism. Yet notice what happens in this poem: form alone here refuses the reduction of an idea to an intellectual abstraction. That is, if the “idea” in this poem is that “I” is as much a product of discourse as it is a linguistic reference of a pre-existing subject, the form of the poem adds in the *body* of this “I” by making the playing out of this idea reliant on the apprehension of rhythm and viscosity. The conceptual (and perhaps experiential) *loss* of a pre-existing “I,” that is, renders itself as the implicit positing of a sensing body, simply by virtue of having been enjambed, since that enjambment makes that loss socially and visually resonant to us.

Yet there is more. For if this poem is as much about the positing of “I” as an effect of discourse as it is the undermining of the abstraction of that notion, it tempers its philosophical force as much through rhythm and viscosity as by hinting that what it may be describing is in fact a different, far more mundane experience than the “loss of the ‘I.’” In this it is subtly reminiscent of Miles Davis’s “E.S.P.,” which posed itself as being two things at once: a meditation on chord color on one hand, a linear harmonic sequence on the other. And just as “E.S.P.” puts both options on display, so does this poem offer a meditation on the dissolution of the “I” and a more direct description of a relatively common experience. If you will indulge me for a paragraph or two, I would like to describe a common experience. It is this: one sits down at one’s desk, blank paper ready. It is time to write. But when words show up on the page, they surprise for one reason or another. Perhaps they feel like the words one had been searching for for days, but couldn’t identify until engaged in the physical process of putting pen to paper. Perhaps one had no idea that he or she even knew those words, or could have imagined putting them together in that specific combination. Or, perhaps, it is the opposite: one sits down with visions of inspiration, but what shows up are the banal words with which one is far too familiar.

The realization often attendant with this experience (I can assume familiarity, I believe) is that perhaps we did not know ourselves as well as we had imagined, of the “I” we see ourselves being looking nothing like the “I” we had felt we were. Now let us return to the poem. As much as it seems to be about the impossibility of narrativizing, it works quite well as a description of this experience. Within this context, in fact, the lines that follow the first stanza, “It // wants to / be free but / impassive lies // in the direction / of its / words,” prove remarkably perceptive, and come to describe two things. First, they describe the way that words themselves can come to limit one’s sense of one’s “I”. Before words come out, after all (the moment when one is sizing up a blank page) the “I” can seem to exist in a state of pure potential, free to say literally anything. Yet actual words, the moment they appear, inevitably close off possibilities, undoing the state of pure potential by implying specific semantic directions. This is one way the “I” is “impassively” led. This also explains why the pronoun here is *not* “I,” but “it.” Though “it” bears “I” within it, the relative vagueness of “it” allows it to stand as a placeholder for the sense

of self that has been lost in this transaction.

Second, “impassive” captures the role of habit in this experience. Again, this is a common experience: while writing is often motivated by the idealized vision of possibility, when actually writing, one often witnesses oneself falling into decades-old patterns. And while these patterns may surface unintentionally, they often show the “I” to be a creature far less original than imagined. Thus the pun on “lies” in line 6, which exposes the multiple levels of deceit that operate here, both the way “It ... lies” by allowing words to stand for it, and the way “It ... lies” by imagining that “It” can somehow exist outside the realm of words.

Indeed, if one is to take these lines as a description of habit intruding into an idealized state of potential, one can hopefully see how “impassivity” – arguably the poem’s dominant emotional register – suggests that what this poem is finally reflecting on is its own *unoriginality*. For if one takes the poem as poem describing Creeley’s experience of discovering himself to be in a position of passivity relative to his writing (“I // speak to / hear myself / speak?”), watching himself fall into the dullness of habit, then there remains a lurking suggestion that this poem may at end not only describe, but *be* such an effect of habit, a falling into words rather than the active development of a new understanding. At end, that is, this meditation may only be a figment of a hyperactive mind, a passing thought (“It / was an idea / of mine”), rather than an argumentative assertion. “I” is, after all, all over the poem, both in both in sounds (“lies,” “myself,” “idea,” “mine”) and in look (“It”). Further hints that the grand statement the beginning has often been taken to be may be simply impassive solipsism come from the way Creeley’s reference to Eliot (“I / had not thought / that some- / thing had such / undone” being a version of Eliot’s, or Dante’s, “I had not thought death had undone so many”) loses nearly all specificity, even sense. While the poem may play with what has become a well-developed philosophical idea, one cannot be sure how much this poem wants to commit to this idea, or how widely its implications can be generalized. Is it argument or solipsism? Without clarifying context, we cannot know.

Now, I am not suggesting that this experience *is* what the poem is describing. But there are enough gestures in it to hint that it is simultaneously striving towards describing the experience of an extant “I” *and* questioning its own ability to describe that experience. And the poem is ultimately about both. In so doing, “The Pattern” registers a linguistic version of Davis’s “E.S.P.,” presenting two opposed readings, neither of which ossifies into the poem’s actual content.

Now, the reading I have been pressing here depends on Creeley’s poems exerting a self-reflective voice whose presence troubles our ability to know whether the poem’s attention lies on its relation to the world outside of it or on the world of the poem itself. And the effect of this layering of voice is to foreground the experience of self-remove that words inevitably create. Another poem, “One Way,” helps trace out this development:

Of the two, one  
faces one. In  
the air there is  
  
no tremor, no  
odor. There is  
a house around them,  
  
of wood, of walls.

The mark is silence.  
Everything hangs.

As he raises  
his hand to  
not strike her, as

again his hand  
is raised, she has  
gone, into another

room. In the room  
left by her, he  
cannot see himself

as in a mirror, as  
a feeling of reflection.  
He thinks he thinks,

of something else.  
All the locked time,  
all the letting go

down into it, as a  
locked room, come to.  
This time not changed,

but the way of feeling  
secured by walls and books,  
a picture hanging down,

a center shifted, dust  
on all he puts his hand on,  
disorder, papers and letter

and accumulations of clothing,  
and bedclothes, and under his  
feet the rug bunches.

Narratively, the story here resembles the sort of thing for which Raymond Carver would become famous a decade or so later: a couple fights; the woman leaves the room under threat of violence; there is a personal realization, though the main character is not quite able to parse out his feelings. The end arrives underwhelmingly, with a mundane event of hazy representative value. One can even break this story up into three acts, roughly divided at lines 9 and 22. Yet what is interesting is the way the poem plays language against raw sensory experience, locating the “I” in the unknowable chasm between the two. The main strategy involves the use of semantic

ambiguity, which comes to infiltrate the very experience of selfhood captured in the poem. The title introduces this ambiguity: does “One Way” suggest one possible way that things can go? Or is it “One Way” as in a one way street, directing its characters to an inescapable endpoint?

The opening stanza introduces the poem’s other main theme, which is the expansion of the self into multiple, often incommensurate modalities. “Of the two, one”: semantically, the line divides a couple into discrete parts. But notice what happens to the *word* “one.” Formally, it starts a causal chain, becoming the seed that sprouts into the poem. Thus “one” in line 1 sets up the rhyme with “in” in line 2. This “in,” however, sets up the rhyme with “is” at the end of line 3. “No” ending line 4 is the inverse of “one”; “is” at the end of line 5 repeats the “is” from line 3. All stem from the “one” in the first line. Even more than this: though “one / faces one” (in lines 1 and 2) ostensibly describes two people facing each other, on a formal level it shows the word “one” encountering only itself, doubled and projected back upon itself. The word’s designation is thereby betrayed by its proliferation; “one” is simultaneously “one” and more than “one,” no longer part of the “two,” but not at all singular.

From the beginning, then, “One Way” foregrounds the way the poem’s capacity for reflection (note the “feeling of reflection” in the seventh stanza) turns the poem into a simultaneous description of an experience from the world outside the poem and a description of that description’s being made in the poem. The risk here, that is, is that the proliferation of viewpoints within the poem (or the demonstration of multiple modalities within an ostensibly singular viewpoint) potentially (and paradoxically) reduces the poem to an endless hall of mirrors, whereby singularities become differences and what appear to be differences become ineffectual iterations of the same. I say “ineffectual” here because the worry is that the loss of distinction between the poem’s being an account of something different from it and the poem’s being an account only of itself dissolves, potentially, whatever opportunity intellectual or affective purchase it might otherwise offer. As Altieri describes (he is discussing a different Creeley poem, though the observation holds as well for this one): “the field of the poem . . . always threatens to show that its energies are only those of a particular self-consciousness reflecting on itself and creating the ground it wishes to find outside itself” (ET, 72). Indeed, this potential inescapability registers in the tight rhymes and short vowel sounds of the first stanza (“air,” “there,” “tremor,” “odor”; “odor,” “no”), which almost suffocate in their repetition.

This worry about the loss of purchase registers most directly in the poem’s third stanza, which offers three end-stopped lines. End-stopping is a rarity for Creeley; in this instance, it seems to suggest a brief loss of the poem’s ability to explore linguistic expressions from the inside (as Creeley’s enjambment more typically does), allowing pauses between sentences to usurp the more typical pauses within sentences. The climax arrives in the ambiguous third line, “Everything hangs.” Narratively, “everything hangs” because the moment is pregnant with irresolution; neither character knows what will happen next. The period at the end of the line and the stanza break that follows enhance this feeling of anticipation. But there is another intimation lurking here: death. When read along with the stillness of the scene (“there is / no tremor”) and its “silence,” “everything hangs” because everything has been hanged.

The threat of death registers in the poem’s multiple doublings, which make unclear whether they indicate meaningful change or simply the empty passing of time. Lines – “no tremor, no” in line 3 and “room. In the room” in line 16 – repeat words, as well as structure. Narratively, he “raises his hand” two times, with the effect being a loss of agency, in which the woman in the story does not leave, but “has gone.” This experience of doubling reaches its climax in the line “he thinks he thinks,” in which multiple interpretative possibilities confront

one another. On one hand, the repetition of the phrase heightens the intensity of his thought (he *really* thinks). Or, in contrast, it suggests the vapidness of the action, the sense that he merely “thinks” and “thinks” without necessarily thinking *about* anything; repetition here marks an empty movement of time. Or, finally, the phrase could be setting the first “he thinks” against the second, the gloss being that this character only *thinks* that he thinks about something else, with the “thinking” being not really thinking and the “something else” being not really something else. Doubling here thus cleaves words from their implied reference, simultaneously making these words signify more than they appear to and less than they appear to.

The poem’s third act – its last five stanzas – sees the poem confronting this interpretive haziness, and the attendant specter of solipsism. After “he thinks he thinks,” he observes “all the locked time ... come to.” “Come to” implies being awoken from a coma, nicely reversing the intimation of death implied by “everything hangs.” Notice, however, what changes: not his experiences of the relationship, not even the suppressed feelings that had been “locked” away, not, that is, any specific feelings, but instead “the *way* of feeling.” Here we thus see the imbrication of sensation and reflection on that sensation whose co-presence enact the poem’s hermeneutic instability. There are feelings, that is, and then there is the way one relates to or experiences those feelings; there is the initial feeling and there is the feeling of this feeling. By making them coeval, however, “the way of feeling” both distinguishes these modes of experience from each other and collapses them into a single phenomenon. For which is it? The “way” he feels, meaning the feelings he holds, or the “way” he feels, meaning the manner in which he relates to those feelings? Both implications are operative here. Yet knowing which implication the poem is referring to – and therefore what the poem’s relation to this “he” is – is made constitutively unknowable. What difference is there between sensation of the world and the self-reflection on that sensation? Can the “he” in the poem encounter the world as such without the intercession of an overactive mind? Because the poem provides no context for us to distinguish the two, the impossibility of knowing here is thus deeply threatening to the self’s standing in the world.

Indeed, that this “way of feeling” was once “secured by walls and books,” as well as “a picture” – “walls,” “books,” and a “picture,” respectively naming the spatial, the textual, and the visual – but is no longer secured in this manner captures the way the world outside the poem threatens being revealed as simply a mental or emotional projection. And the uncertain status of the world outside the poem thus extends indefinitely. Almost as if replaying Descartes’ famous sequence of doubtings, the poem names item after item – “dust,” “papers,” “letter,” “clothing,” “bedclothes” – that remain present *in* the poem, but whose status relative to the world *outside* of the poem is made uncertain. This is because of “a center shifted”: conceptual or affective ground moved somewhere unlocatable, transferred from a recognizable way of feeling to one whose coordinates remains unknown. The wider import of this phrase, however, emerges in what it is unable to name. For the shift of center also implies a shift in circumference. And a circle’s circumference is what marks the boundary that distinguishes inside from outside, endless iterations of the self from the possibility of interaction with the outside world. With the center shifted, however, the poem cannot show where this circumference now resides. What remains is a feeling of “disorder,” of “accumulations” without significance. Even the “one” seems to be lost: “on,” the word that both begins and ends line 32, echoes “one,” but only as an incomplete version of it.

If Descartes’ path out of disorder involved grounding himself in the ego, however, the instability of the ego relative to itself prevents it from being a solution here. Instead, the

conciliatory gesture arrives by way of the senses. For despite the reduction of the world to disorder, at end we see that “Under his / feet the rug bunches.” “Under his feet”: the phrase names not only what he feels, but also, figuratively, the ground that supports him. And that it bunches suggests that there *is* a world that exceeds the endless iterations of the language that otherwise suffuse the poem. We see this most directly in the way “the rug bunches” syntactically echoes “everything hangs,” but reverses that phrase’s import. While “everything hangs” is vague and abstract, “the rug bunches” is focused and specific; while the former poses a hermeneutic problem, one about the meaning of words, the latter directs attention to the body and its sensuous experiences. Regardless of content, the phrase seems to say, the *form* of life – the fact of body’s moving through the world – provides an indication that there is more than words; if words’ semantic meanings pose the loss of a stable self, their sensuous presence vouchsafes the existence of a world in excess of them.

It is, finally, the status of this sensuous presence – the fact of the poem’s interacting with the sensuous capacities of body – that most explicitly situates Creeley’s work within the jazz-inspired lineage I am tracing out. For if Creeley’s poems are able to verify anything, it is not what they say, but that they say. And this saying always takes place as such a sensuous engagement. A music, in part. And “music,” we might say, is both the condition of possibility of Creeley’s poems and their most significant remainder. To elucidate this idea, I turn to a final poem, “A Picture”:

A little  
house with  
small  
windows,

a gentle  
fall of the  
ground to  
a small

stream. The trees  
are both close  
and green, a tall  
sense of enclosure.

There is a sky  
of blue  
and a faint sun  
through clouds.

Like much of Creeley’s work, this poem disarms with its ostensible simplicity. But, also like much of Creeley’s work, this ostensible simplicity hides a remarkably complex layering of sound, structure, and meaning. Sound, for example: the first observation to be made here is that the apparent visual stasis poem paints is belied by the striking narrative it plays out on the level of sound. In the purely sonic realm, in fact, “A Picture” might easily be heard as emulating the narrative structure of a traditional jazz solo. The poem’s four 4-line stanzas, for example, nicely



replicate the structure of many jazz tunes, which are often built on cycles of 16 measures. In this sense, “A Picture” nicely exemplifies Creeley’s avowed interest in the “intensive variation on ‘foursquare’ patterns” he found so captivating in Charlie Parker’s music.<sup>27</sup>

There is more. Notice the poem’s AABB pattern, by which I refer not to its rhyme scheme, but the way it introduces and develops sounds. Sonically speaking, that is, the first stanza sets up a pattern that the second both imitates and adds to. Thus “a little” in stanza 1 mirrors “a gentle” in stanza 2, and “small” in stanza 1 sets up both “fall” and “small” in stanza 2. As the poem progresses, one sees it carefully introducing more and more sounds into its sonic field. The transition from short, clipped lines (which we see in stanzas 1 and 2) to longer, more fluid phrases (which we see in stanzas 3 and 4) is itself typical of traditional jazz solos, which generally see phrases increase in length as the solo progresses. Thus, after the sonic restrictions of the first two stanzas, stanza 3 introduces on two new vowel sounds: the “ee” of “stream” and the “oh” of “both.” It also presents a new sonic motif: a vowel doubled in a single line, then repeated once two lines later (i.e. “stream” and “trees” in line 9 are echoed by “green” in line 11; this pattern is directly replicated by “both” and “close” in line 10 and “enclosure” in line 12). This development gains momentum as the poem progresses. Like a good solo, the poem reaches its sonic climax in the fourth stanza, which nearly explodes with new vowels: “there,” “sky,” “blue,” and “faint” are all sounds we have not yet heard.

In addition to vowel sounds, there is also the matter of rhythm. Overall, the poem is marked by a preponderance of trochees – six in the first eight lines, by my count. This peculiarity performs two functions. First, it imposes similarity on words with different connotative functions (in Jakobson’s words, it “projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination”<sup>28</sup>): simply by virtue of their shared rhythm, “little” in the first line comes to anticipate the “windows,” “gentle,” and even “house with” that follow. Second, these trochees play stress against pulse, inverting the rhythmic expectations of traditional stanza form. This point is persuasively argued by Charles Hartman in his book *Jazztext*. To Hartman, it is Creeley’s extensive use of the trochee, or falling rhythm more generally, that sets him apart as a particularly jazz-inspired poet. This is because falling rhythms are, to Hartman, an effective counter to the expected rhythmic climaxes set by the history of English lyric. “In English verse,” he writes, “iambic and anapestic meters dominate overwhelmingly.” For this reason, “the end of the line” tends to become “the point of maximum emphasis”; for the great majority of poems written in English, even “most free verse,” the “tendency [is] toward climactic organization” (43-4). Creeley’s falling rhythms, in contrast, repeatedly enact a “thrusting emphasis toward the beginning” (44). This reverse of expected emphasis thereby generates an “uncanny force-especially when read aloud” (44). To Hartman, this idiosyncratic use of rhythm justifies placing Creeley’s poetry alongside the music of saxophonist Lee Konitz; both, in Hartman’s analysis, operate by “[displacing] accents to mark out a distinctive shape in time” (44).<sup>29</sup>

In multiple ways, then, the sounds of this poem help pose it as an inheritor of the jazz tradition. And though perhaps less overt than those poems that aim to “sound like jazz,” the method employed here is one of phenomenological resemblance: though its sounds are not coded

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<sup>27</sup> Creeley cites Charlie Parker’s version(s) of “I’ve Got Rhythm” as a prime example. (Creeley, “Notes Apropos ‘Free Verse’” 494)

<sup>28</sup> (Jakobson 71)

<sup>29</sup> Lynn Keller makes a similar observation, noting that Creeley “plays the marked rhythms of speech against the beats enforced by his lineation” (145).

as those that signal “jazz,” their structural organization (the way they introduce and develop vowel sounds) and approach to phrasing (rhythmically playing against expected climaxes) do seem to have internalized an approach to sound that is jazz-inspired.

Yet what is most interesting here is not simply the fact of this jazz-inspired sonic narrative, but that the poem embeds it – almost to the point of being buried – within these specific images. For, to put it bluntly, for the most part the images in “A Picture” come across as extremely banal. Even strikingly so. A house, a stream, a sky, clouds: vague and commonplace, these seem to be calculated almost to evade attention. They actively push towards the vapid, or intentionally evoke cliché; “a sky of blue” seems more at place in a children’s book than a vanguardist poem. Indeed, these images turn “no ideas but in things” on its head: if the presence of “things” is meant to ensure specificity, then the ideas here are so ephemeral as to approach nullity.

Yet if Creeley’s response to Williams is “no forms less / than activity,” one might wonder what, exactly, counts as activity in this poem. For while “A Picture” does proceed by expanding *our* vantage point, moving from house to ground to sky, it is also worth noting that nothing *in* the poem actually does anything. The first verb, one of only two in the poem, does not arrive until the third stanza. It turns out to be “are.” The verb that follows, “is,” offers only a version of the same copula. The one word that might otherwise conjure movement – “fall,” in line 6 – turns out to be a noun. As a whole, the poem eschews nearly all narrative or psychological development, instead being content to describe a moment of absolute, eternal present. Now, one might note that in so doing, “A Picture” does arguably succeed at replaying the flat temporality of visual art. And this temporality of the present does contrast nicely with the linear temporality described by the poem’s sonic development, with the split between expansion on one hand and stasis on the other generating fruitful tension. Yet this quasi-visual temporality is tempered by the poem’s lack of descriptive specificity; if “A Picture” is in fact inspired by an actual picture, it is almost impossible to tell which one.

So what are we to do with these images? How to reconcile their banality with the detailed, well-woven pattern of sound they create? Well, one way to do so might be to read the poem in jazz terms, as a play of sorts on a jazz standard. What counts in a jazz solo, as we’ll remember, is not so much the story told, but the way a player chooses to tell that story. And many famous jazz moments are the result of musicians’ having created strikingly original renditions of superficial pop songs. (The most famous of these would certainly be Coltrane’s version of “My Favorite Things,” but there are many more – Sonny Rollins’ “I’m an Old Cowhand,” Art Tatum’s “Tea for Two,” and Miles Davis’s “Surrey with the Fringe on Top” are all great examples.) Given this, the extreme cliché of image here might be valuable precisely because it causes us to focus *not* on the story being told, but on the sonic and visual components put in place by the specific telling of that story. From this perspective, “A Picture” would rather counter-intuitively be best understood as a sound poem. Or, even more abstractly, understood as working within an oral rather than a written tradition.

The problem with this reading, however, is that it loses a key effect of the poem, taking the apparent banality of this poem’s images as reasons for discarding them, rather than engaging the way those images persist *as* the dissolution of specificity. For vapidness need not be read as uselessness; as I have been at pains to show, the persistently self-reflective nature of Creeley’s poetry ensures that though little in it can be taken as stably communicative, the result is less an absence of communicative power than an oscillation between two possibilities. Put differently, examining the work of these images engenders a situation reminiscent of that seen (heard) in

Miles Davis's "E.S.P.": as much as that tune ostensibly presents itself as a succession of sonic colors, its conceptual power comes from its having recognized and incorporated the fact that putting *any* chords in sequence creates a narrative that engages traditional notions of tension and release, even if that engagement proceeds by way of inversion or reaction. The condition here is much the same: as much as we might want to demote these images in favor of their sounds, that the images are recognizable as such means that they cannot be jettisoned so easily.

Now, I am not arguing that once can remap these images onto a recognizably linear narrative, as one could do with the chords of "E.S.P." Though there are hints of this. As I noted earlier, the poem does detail a movement outwards and upwards, a widening viewpoint that moves from "little" and "small" in the first stanza to "sky" and "through clouds" (which suggests a something beyond the poem) in the fourth. There is also the subtle imbrication of artifice and nature, whereby "house" – a human artifact – comes to be increasingly enveloped by images of the natural world: "ground," "stream," "trees," "sky," "sun.": Though even these descriptions of nature are colored by a clearly human frame: "close" and "tall" are comparatives that, in this context at least, implicitly posit the human as their standard. From this perspective, in fact, nearly every adjective in the poem might be understood as reinforcing the presence of a human presence, despite its being unpopulated by people. For if not human experience, according to what measure is the house "little"? The windows "small"? The sun "faint"?

It is, in fact, this implied framework – the way this poem situates itself within a specifically human mode of being in the world – through which these images come to matter as images. In this the poem takes the strategy of "E.S.P." and raises it by a conceptual turn. "E.S.P."s strategy, we'll remember, was to show how even the apparent evasion of musical narrative can always be flipped into the conceptual framework of the narrative mode itself. Now, "A Pattern" does shows how the apparent evasion of specificity can be a type of specificity. The difference, however, is that the "type of specificity" detailed here turns out to be the undermining of specificity. At end, that is, these images matter not *in spite of* their being clichéd or banal – it is not that they seem trite, but if one looks closely enough one can extract a traditional reading from them – but that their mattering proceeds precisely *by way of* their being clichéd and banal. It is not that their importance results from an implied specificity; it is rather that their force depends on their being able to void themselves *of* meaningful content. Rather than asking us to unpack their multiple layers of signification, these images foreground the fact that they eschew signification.

The argument, that is, is that these images work *as* images by absolving themselves of connotative value. By this I mean that they actively work to repudiate the sort of specificity that would allow them to crystallize as an idea. Yet the twist is that this repudiation of specificity – the way the poem seems to seem to willfully abstract itself away from concreteness, while, importantly, staying within the world *of* image (instead of, say, becoming simply an arrangement of pronouns) – itself summons the history of poetic imagery. To read these images as banal is simultaneously to recognize that banality itself is a historically contingent category. By evoking the banal, "A Pattern" makes poetic imagery hold the opposite of what poetic imagery traditionally holds; if poetic images are supposed to be meaningful, "A Pattern" makes meaning out of meaningless-ness. If I earlier described Creeley's work from this period as working within traditional models of form to dismantle their traditional effects, this is in part what I meant. Just as this poem's falling rhythms upset the rhythmic conventions of English lyric, so the connotative emptiness of its images mobilizes literary history to render that history in negative. Interested neither in crystallizing a concrete image in a form unique to that image (as

in Williams), nor in eschewing reference altogether (as the LANGUAGE poetry Creeley in part inspired would aim to do), this poem blazes a middle path, focusing attention – slightly, almost without our noticing – less on the content these images enable than on the fact that they are there *to* enable this content, but do not do so.

Put still differently, what this poem provides at its most extreme is the *experience* of image without the content that usually accompanies that experience. Much as Creeley's idiosyncratic enjambments emphasize the materiality of language, ensuring we do not fall into an unexamined flow of words, so these images' content-less content arrests the process by which *what* images usually mean comes to paper over the fact *that* they mean. And this "*that*" is what I was referring to above when I described the poem's having explicitly situated itself "within a specifically human mode of being in the world." As with "One Way," which at end grounded itself in the *form* of life that it could not name but only obliquely reference, for the simple reason that language always potentially offers the threat of its own instability, so this poem self-undermining ultimately foregrounds the *that-ness* that enables the poetic experience. The description of this condition appears in lines 11 and 12, and marks the poem's single moment of abstract reflection: "a tall / sense of enclosure."

Floating in the middle of the poem, the phrase is as enigmatic as it is revealing. "Tall" itself plays sound against sense: sonically, it completes the theme set up by "small" and "fall," providing the last instance both of this vowel sound and of the terminal "l"; conceptually, however, it provides the opposite of "small," and a counter to "fall. Riddles continue. From what does this sense of enclosure issue? The "trees"? Their closeness (given that "close" sits inside of "enclosure")? Their being "both" close *and* green (as the assonance between "both" and "close" suggests)? More inscrutably, the phrase names no concrete object or experience, but instead only a "*sense* of enclosure," an unverifiable feeling that need not correspond to the actual existence of an enclosing object. "Sense" bears multiple overtones. While its most direct connotation is "hint" or "intimation," the word also suggests the *senses*. As such, it is not clear whether the experience here is meant to name an embodied, physical resonance or merely a psychological one.

As with "the way of feeling" in the last poem, this move to meta-level description raises the poem's conceptual stakes. For, again, it confuses the ontological status of the poem's description. Is this "sense of enclosure" provided *by* the poem, or is it something realized *in* the poem? There are hints ("senses") of both. A small grove of trees might easily furnish an secure space, their tall-ness encouraging a look upwards towards the "sky." Within the poem, one could, in fact, read the connotatively empty images that surround this phrase as enabling the "sense of enclosure" that shelters this one direct moment of reflection. But, if one follows the reading I was arguing for above, it is arguably the fact of these images' voiding themselves of meaningful content that allows them to provide a "sense of enclosure" – an experience of image without the traditionally attendant content. The connotative emptiness offered by the poem, that is, turns the poem into an expression of *form*, in a fundamental sense: a structure in which meaning and experience happen. And that it is rendered as a "sense" highlights the fact that form, in this capacity, is felt on a physical and conceptual level. The possibility of expressing *only* this form is always an impossibility. As "The Pattern" showed us, once words are introduced, the condition of potential that enabled them is closed off. Yet in evacuating its content of traditional content, "A Picture" foregrounds its essential *formed-ness*.

To this degree, this poem helps trace out Olson's famous dictum that "Limits / are what

any of us / are inside of”<sup>30</sup>; focusing on poetic structuring rather than poetic structure, “A Picture” points us to the process that generates Olson’s “us.” If “One Way” played out a Descartes-inspired disavowal of item after precarious item, this poem reveals what is left: not an atemporal point of indivisible being, but an ongoing experience that implies the existence of both time and the body without being able to absolutely confirm the existence of either.

Part of what makes this poem so complicated, however, is the fact that this move towards a content emptied of content simultaneously takes place as a sonic narrative, one that corresponds to the loose conventions of improvised solos. In some ways, this is as it should be: while an “enclosure” can be a static object, a “sense” always occurs in time, regardless of what one takes “sense” to mean. In this manner, the poem foregrounds the fact of both time and embodiment, showing that even the most resolute anti-narrative – like that of the poem’s images – nonetheless inevitably registers *as* narrative, if only in the sensory realm. And in so doing, it suggests that sound represents a constitutive precondition for poetic experience, but also, crucially, that *music* is what endures through the vagueness of content. Regardless of what a poem is about, *that* it can be about something, even if that something is its own dissolution, registers in the presence of its music.

If I earlier described Creeley’s relation to jazz as occurring primarily on the level of form, it is here where we see this relationship playing out. For, at bottom, poems like this one help us see jazz improvisation neither as a moment of pure and free self-creation, nor as a moment of rigid adherence to form, but rather, when done right, a mode of revealing the fundamental work of form, the fundamental formed-ness of the world. In this sense, what a poem like “A Pattern” teaches us about the music of Miles Davis’s mid-60’s group is that the opacity or hermeneutic uncertainty that group generated out of its sounds can alternatively be heard as the uncovering of the fact *that* the music is made of sound, regardless of what those sounds might come to mean. That the instability of musical connotation that group was able to realize too helps us hear sound not only as a signifying gesture, but as a gesture emptied of signification. Indeed, if both Charlie Parker’s and Miles Davis’s music aimed to introduce a degree of unknowability into the “I” that resulted from their music, Creeley’s work assures us that unknowability lies at the core of this process.

There is, of course, a difference. For Parker, Davis, and the other musicians I have been discussing, the issue was the presentation of an “I,” and their work with form was to undermine the expectations set by that form. Creeley, in contrast, is more interested in observation; his poetry cares less about ensuring that the “I” remains hermeneutically unstable for the reader than observing the way that “I”’s inherent instability necessarily impacts the shape and sounds of his poetry. To this end, Creeley’s musicality is as much as result of his poetry’s thinking about itself as it is a means of self-representation. This is especially true rhythmically: on one level, the stuttering rhythms and hesitant cadences of Creeley’s work emerge as the residue of an observational commitment on his poems’ part, a commitment to observing themselves as they proceed, so as not to get lost in the mindless flow of words. The irony is that this restraint acquires materiality as a productive activity, since it is the impetus that creates a distinct sonic and visual experience for the reader; the drive towards emptiness is here a mode of creation, of *poesy* in the classic sense (*poesy* as making). What is on one level an engagement with form that comes to produce sound emerges on another as an intentionally sonic story.

Yet the “I” that results is equivalently enigmatic. And the fact that the sounds of “A Picture” resemble a jazz improvisation signal that what Creeley takes from jazz are less a set of

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<sup>30</sup> (Olson, *The Maximus Poems* I.17)

sounds than a set of aesthetic tools, tools that bring us closer to the emergence of the poetic “I.” This emergence, Creeley shows us, is hermeneutically unstable at its core. Such an experience leaves the world an essentially mysterious place. As with Davis, the point is not outright rejection. Rather, it is an acknowledgement that the world’s essential formed-ness occurs on the level of “sense,” understood in all its capacities – linguistic, embodied, psychological. And whatever musicality one could read into a Creeley poem at bottom remains the residue of this fact, that of the “I”’s being at once the speaker and the spoken. The sounds and look of a poem, which induce the *feeling* that lets us know we are in the world – these are the only verification available. The tools Creeley gets from jazz, that is, are those that work to obscure the “I” without obliterating it, leaving an “I” present but ever-flickering, ever unsure, a wind knowable only through the ripples it raises on one’s skin.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **Sounds to Break Bodies Apart: Ed Roberson, Harryette Mullen, and a post-jazz jazz poetics**

For those of us interested in race-inflected American poetry, the overlap between “African American poetry” and “experimental poetry” has proven a fecund site of analysis. The conceptual framing of this status has provided no small opportunity for disagreement: while the main theorists of the Black Arts Movement tended to suggest that *any* poetry recognizable as “African American” would by definition be considered “experimental,” especially to an audience conditioned to see poetry as a medium whose historical development has proceeded by excluding certain types of language, others have argued the complete opposite: that the very notion of “experimental poetry” is one thing (if even a viable term) and race another.<sup>1</sup> Within the scope of this dissertation, the distinction becomes even more convoluted: when a particular style of music incorporates “the experimental” as part of its aesthetic, do the racial implications of its aesthetic carry over to the poetry that employs that music as an inspiration? Jazz improvisation, after all, is an aesthetic based in the unfinished, the open, the unresolved. This is its temporal ontology, and what distinguishes the experience of witnessing an improvised performance from that of witnessing the performance of a composed piece.

While the two poets I examine in this chapter, Ed Roberson and Harryette Mullen, are often grouped together under the classification “Black Experimental Poets,” I pair them together not simply because both employ black music in their work, but because both use the specific features of jazz just described – the fact that improvisation takes place *as* an experience of the unfinished, the unresolved, the unfathomable – to develop a poetry devoted to engaging poetic language on the same terms. This is not all that links them, of course. As poets pushing in directions generally considered “experimental,” both Roberson and Mullen write poetry that creates its own forms, generally eschews straightforward narratives, and engages language at its deepest level. Both make use of visual and linguistic disjunction. And in the terms of this dissertation, both poets write poetry that is indebted to black music, but attempt less to channel its sounds directly than to use its conceptual strategies as means to think about the relation between blackness and poetic language. And these conceptual strategies are most often linked to the sense of irresolution that jazz imposes on both its listeners and practitioners.

There are huge differences between the poets, some of which can be attributed to age and generation. Though both are still actively writing and publishing, Roberson’s career began in the late 1960’s, while Mullen’s first book was released in the early 1990’s. One can see and hear this difference in their work: whole Roberson’s poetry demonstrates ties to writers like Olson and Hughes (though he mentions neither as a direct influence, in what follows I try to establish this formal connection), Mullen’s reveals a more recent set of predecessors: the experimental tradition of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E and Oulipo-group poetry. Which is not to say that either can

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<sup>1</sup> Evie Shockley rehearses some of these positions in the introduction to her book *Renegade Poetics*. There she quotes Lorenzo Thomas’ observation that “[t]here was a desperate period in the 1980 when – frustrated by our inability to grasp society’s real prizes (however defined) – we thought that simply being Black was avant-garde ... This was not an entirely bogus position,” as well as Fred Moten’s that “To say that Blackness is intrinsically experimental is not the same thing as to say that Black folks are intrinsically experimental.”

be reduced to these antecedents; if anything, both take the advances of these earlier poetics and submit them to their own aims.

Yet while these differences are pronounced, what ties Mullen and Roberson to one another is the way both employ black music to intervene in what one might call the phenomenology of reading. That jazz is a music for which bodily presence is an integral element is lost on neither poet – neither Roberson nor Mullen writes poetry that merely mimics the sounds of jazz without attending to the mode of those sounds’ production. And both, in different ways, employ this fact of the body’s participation in their poetry. Most directly, each does do by separating out their works’ visual registers from their sonic ones, or the sonic from the semantic. For Roberson, separating these two registers of sensation helps put in place a new hermeneutic of reading and listening, one attuned to the bodily fragmentation experienced by the African American subject as historically constituted. The breaks that such a separation imposes in poetic language then allows the reader access to the state of what he calls “felt inside / unresolving Patterns” out of which meaning comes.<sup>2</sup> These patterns make explicit the absences constitutive of both language and history; “jazz” is the name he gives to the process by which these absences become meaningful.

Mullen, in contrast, takes an approach more similar to that we have seen in the work of musicians like Charlie Parker and Miles Davis. This approach is to use the lineaments of form to render that form either hermeneutically opaque (in the case of Parker) or hermeneutically ambiguous (in the case of Davis’s mid-60’s music). In so doing her work aims less to replicate the sounds of jazz than to replicate the way a jazz musician uses sounds from a tradition to describe a voice of her own. In her case, the separation of visual from sonic registers, and sonic from semantic ones, helps install a permanent undecideability into her work, a permanent state of irresolution that mirrors that experienced in a jazz solo. By using form to engender this always-incomplete time of improvisation, Mullen offers a new take on what reading the black body requires.

From the standpoint of race, then, both poets offer crucial strategies for thinking through the implications of jazz, if not black music writ large. In both cases, “jazz” helps provide the poet with a new hermeneutic for reading the black subject, and therefore for putting the experience of Blackness into poetic form. This is not, importantly, to say that the poetry of each can be somehow reduced to an account of blackness. In Roberson’s poetry, especially, the standard tropes that announce “Black poetry,” at least traditionally speaking – vernacular speech patterns or direct references to musicians or other Black figures, for example – are largely absent. And while Mullen does embed more of this type of language in her poetry, the deformations to which she submits language as a system assume a far more central role than any direct references to “black experience.” In this, both poets insist on upholding a notion of “voice” similar to that we saw at the end of Chapter Two’s discussion of Charles Olson. This is a notion of “voice” that deeply speaks the individual, yet recognizes that the racial dynamics of the world into which the individual is brought play a constitutive role in the development of that voice. From one standpoint, then, what follows is somewhat interested, in that it approaches the work of both Mullen and Roberson with a particular end in mind: to see what a contemporary, experimental jazz poetry, one that has absorbed the lessons of the poets and musicians whose work previous chapters have examined, might look and sound like. Race is crucial to this investigation, as it should be to any discussion of jazz as an aesthetic. Yet to the degree race

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<sup>2</sup> (Roberson, *Atmosphere Conditions* 36)



enters the equation, it does so through the sense of individuality with which each poet imbues her or his work.

So: music, sound, incompleteness, and race. These are the themes with which I examine the work of Roberson and Mullen. I begin with Ed Roberson.

### “PIECES AND ABSENCES”: ED ROBERSON’S MUSIC OF PATTERN

“To the extent that our senses have moment  
meaning is fragment.”

“this is about songs  
about when they happen about  
pieces and absences  
of connection about for no reason”<sup>3</sup>

Repetition. Predictability (relatively speaking). Short length, stability, self-containment. Identifiable beginnings and identifiable ends. Smooth, if creative, movement from resolution to tension, and back again.

If one were charged with listing the salient features of “songs,” the list above might make a good start. By this I am importantly not talking about “song” in its singular form, the “song” that easily slides in for “lyric” in literary critical discussions. No. This is about “songs.” *This* word, plural, refuses the lofty pull into abstraction tempted by its singular form. “Songs,” in contrast, remains convincingly concrete, specifying not even “music” in general, but a sub-genre, one whose elements remain reassuringly consistent. One might, for example, turn to my reading in Chapter One of “The Way You Look Tonight.” From the perspective of “songs,” the tune is a pure gem: it builds and sustains interest, it expands simple motives into layers of complexity, it prods listeners to unexpected places then safely shepherds them back. Compositionally, “The Way You Look Tonight” is near-textbook; judging by its continued popularity, it remains a paradigm of “song.”

Why this going on about songs? Because the word poses such a conceptual problem when it appears in the lines above. These lines come, of course, from the book *Lucid Interval as Integral Music*, written by Ed Roberson. Published to little acclaim in 1984, *Lucid Interval* won the Iowa Poetry Prize when republished as part of the 1994 book *Voices Cast Out To Talk Us In*. As Brent Edwards points out, *Lucid Interval* is a prime example of the “serial poem,” “book-length work composed of discrete individual poems, clearly interrelated but not assembled into a suite or sequence with a discernable narrative arc, epic ambition, or programmatic frame.”<sup>4</sup> This description fits most of Roberson’s eight books, too; as such Roberson’s work offers a primer of sorts on contemporary seriality. There is a difference, of course, between Roberson’s work and the poems generally considered to be early instigators of the form (Williams’ *Spring and All* and Oppen’s *Discrete Series* are two key antecedents, according to Joseph Conte’s *Unending Design*, still the best book on serial poetics in print): Roberson embeds seriality in an identifiably African American context. To Edwards, this feature sets *Lucid Interval*’s predecessor’s as Langston Hughes’s *Montage of a Dream Deferred* and Melvin Tolson’s *Libretto for the Republic of*

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<sup>3</sup> (Roberson, *Voices Cast Out to Talk Us in: Poems* 45,55,53)

<sup>4</sup> (Edwards 622-23)

*Liberia*. While this classification is not wrong, to my mind the more appropriate conceptual forerunners should be (not coincidentally) *Ask Your Mama* and Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems*. Part of what follows will discuss the relation of Roberson's work to both of these poems. For now, however, it is worth noting that like Olson, Roberson sees serial form as a strategy for recapturing a more truthful relationship of poet to the natural world, and that like Hughes, Roberson finds in seriality a means to capture and mobilize the ruptures, voids, and disfluencies that are constitutive of modern African American identity.

There is more: like *Ask Your Mama* and Olson's work, Roberson's poetry asks us to reconsider the nature and impact of poetic musicality. And yet. Despite the ease with which "seriality" seems to predict certain conclusions about musicality in relation to Roberson's work, the quote above – "this is about songs" – throws a rather thick wrench into the proceedings. It does so is because of what "songs" are. Musically speaking, after all, it is not difficult to translate "serial poetics" into a version of "pieces and absences," or "connection ... for no reason." Both phrases, in fact, easily characterize multiple 20<sup>th</sup>-century musics – Schoenberg's 12-tone system, John Cage's chance-based composition, and the minimalism of Terry Riley or Steve Reich all fit the bill (even if only Schoenberg's is "serial" music, strictly speaking). But "pieces and absences" seems remarkably out of tune with our experience of "songs." "Songs" is not the word we use to describe the music of a Schoenberg, or a Cage – for them, the more elevated "compositions" or "pieces." Songs come from a different tradition, one more affiliated with the prosaic, the pedestrian, the popular. As self-contained entities, "songs" seems to belie this description through and through.

What, then are we to do with the apparent contradiction Roberson sets for us? To stretch "songs" to encompass descriptions like "pieces and absences" and "connections ... for no reason" seems difficult, if not impossible. Yet it is what Roberson asks us to do. This is not all, even; the quote raises many more questions. The question about orders of meaning, for example: does "this is about songs" imply that the individual poems in the book *are* songs, or that the book as a whole merely *describes* songs? Or time: does "what happens" happen *because* songs happen, or is "songs" the name we give to an experience that happens on its own? Or location: are we finally to understand "pieces," "absences," and "fragments" as being what lies *between* songs, or are these ideas endemic to songs' internal workings?

Complicated as these questions are, multiple poems from Roberson's oeuvre help us sketch out some answers. This chapter in particular will look closely at *Lucid Interval*, but will also pull poems from 1999's *Atmosphere Conditions* and 2006's *City Eclogue* (which Evie Shockley calls Roberson's "masterwork"<sup>5</sup>). In examining Roberson's work with these questions in mind, I aim to get firmly at Roberson's ideas about musicality and its importance for his work. Most notably, I aim to show how this idea of musicality is one that leads us away from a raw experience of sound to what one might call a hermeneutic of unresolved pattern. This hermeneutic is aimed quite literally at breaking the bodies of his readers apart into multiple sensory experiences. And while sound plays a constitutive role in this hermeneutic, more important is the way musicality describes a process of knitting together the experiences of unfathomable absence that constitutively fragment the Black subject's experience of the world into a series of incommensurate moments and incommensurate corporeal sensations. "Jazz" is the name Roberson gives to the process by which these absences come to acquire meaning; as such, the word addresses both our experience of improvised sound and the African American history out of which such sound comes.

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<sup>5</sup> (Shockley, "On the Nature of Ed Roberson's Poetics" 742)

Given this investment in engaging absence and in splitting experience apart, it is no surprise that *Lucid Interval*'s most direct gesture occurs in its appearance on the page. By this I am referring to the fact that for most of its length, *Lucid Interval* proceeds as two simultaneous voices separated by a black line that breaks the page into top and bottom. The top voice repeats the same 13-line form throughout (this form is developed in the book's opening poem; Roberson calls it "the lena / after my daughter" (5)), while the bottom voice takes many different shapes, and is occasionally absent. [See example below.] Together, the sundering of voices helps register one of *Lucid Interval*'s key conceptions about music, one also evoked in its title. That title, of course – *Lucid Interval for Integral Music* – foregrounds the sense in which the poem wants to be encountered as "music." Though it does complicate this notion by appending the adjective "integral" to the idea. Most directly, "integral" suggests necessity, but it also, curiously, brings mathematics to the table; this latter implication will become important as we explore "musicality" for Roberson persists as a relation or patterning.

More resonant, however, is that this title poses "integral music" as the making "lucid" of "interval." The idea that an interval – a break – can be made lucid, especially through words, is a quasi-deconstructive move, one given further power by the fact that "interval" indicates breaks on two levels: temporal and musical. And these two meanings operate at perpendicular angles to each other. By this I mean that a temporal interval – the time between punctuated events – is an essentially *horizontal* experience, while a musical interval – the distance between two notes – is generally construed as *vertical*. Both of these breaks take representation in the shape of *Lucid Interval*'s poems. Single lines often incorporate multiple blank spaces, and enjambment itself is often a means to push a horizontal flow into the vertical. But the harmonic dimension registers, too: if one reads the top and bottom poems as separate voices, the visual result is strongly reminiscent of a musical chord.

If this separation of voice sounds familiar, it should: it is the same strategy used by Hughes in *Ask Your Mama*. There are multiple justifications for reading *Lucid Interval* as heir to *Ask Your Mama*. Both are concerned with parenthood and natality, and both see African American experience as constitutively fragmented. But the primary site of lineage is the separation of voice into "poetic" and "musical" components, each claiming its own section of the page. For Hughes, that one voice is poetic and the other musical is immediately clear. For Roberson, the implication is less direct, as he explains in an interview:

The upper voice is the poem, and the bottom voice is the one that's "singing over" or singing under in the sense that it's mumbling or that deep humming that you hear in church while the minister is preaching and somebody in the back is what they call "mourning." ... That voice underneath doesn't go with the poem, its got its own thing happening ... I would put the voice that is way over everything, the voice that knows more deeply than anything, at the bottom line.<sup>6</sup>

As with Hughes, the two voices – the "poem" and the "humming" or "mumbling" one – sustain different forms of knowledge. And, as with Hughes, it is the "musical" voice – which is, let us note, here associated with inarticulate, uncontrollable bodily activity, rather than composed, organized sound – that bears a more profound understanding.

Yet, if *Ask Your Mama* stands as a crucial predecessor to *Lucid Interval*'s experimentalism, *Lucid Interval* moves beyond any simple poetry/music dichotomy by

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<sup>6</sup> (Crown 675)

XXIV.

As a boy there were no black boy  
scouts as a man I hadn't learned  
the contexts made any differences  
in the danger

and I was dumb  
at the waters signing away the boulders  
rising as I was used to  
my father's business deals making him lost

in thought—behind his sly manners—  
of us and our love of bicycles.  
we covered that town like latitude  
lines on a map crossing his warnings

like neighborhoods' color lines like him

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This to the bridge music is our art of. period.  
What surrounds or rather ghettoes all immediate point—i.e.

rivers and all that edges  
off into loss— dance bridges,

a stepping over in the mid air that is  
mid music. Dances tabled like water there are clouds

We drown in your dance, fathers,  
not in the cold waters bordering separating

land from land  
where we wept when we remembered

*Lucid Interval as Integral Music*, page 34

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complicating the meaning of both terms. If anything, Roberson's strategy is more insistent than Hughes'; even if rendered distant by typeface, *Ask Your Mama*'s vertical columns still enable the possibility of reading *across* the horizontal gap, thereby layering the poem's musical directives into its "poetic" ones. By rotating this gap 90 degrees and imposing horizontal line between them, however, *Lucid Interval* isolates its upper voice from its lower. But the sense of isolation is also weakened by the fact that the relationship between sounds seen and sounds heard is not really one of content, but of *space*. Indeed, inasmuch as this bottom voice does know, it seems to know not so much by way of the sonic *qua* the sonic as it does the sonic *qua* the visual. Unlike *Ask Your Mama*, neither voice in *Lucid Interval* names an explicit musical gesture.

Given that neither voice mentions music more than the other, there are, in fact, only two features that actually identify the voice below the lines as the “musical” one: the fact that it follows no regular form, and its location on the page.

Given this, Roberson’s quote is enormously helpful in describing the relation between these voices. For, as it specifies, the lines on the bottom are not supposed to be speech, or even song, in the traditional sense. They are, rather, the “mumbling” or the “deep humming.” For justification, one might turn to a moment later in *Lucid Interval* where the poem claims that “the music’s fact is / a glossolalia / sound’s meaning.” (64). This is a bold statement; to claim to explain “sound’s meaning” requires no small degree of confidence. Yet let us note what it does to our experience of the poem. “Glossolalia” means “speaking in tongues”; to describe “sound’s meaning” thusly is to characterize sound, or even music, as a condition in which speech occurs, but *without* semantic content. Not the opposite of speech, but a *type* of it. More specifically, music here becomes speech uttered involuntarily, speech that takes shape as non-semantic syllables, words in shape and form but not in content. And if one observes the truism that poetry always enacts itself on both semantic and sonic levels, one might also note how these quotes (Roberson’s earlier description of *Lucid Interval* and this particular line) rigorously sunder these dimensions from each other. While one, the semantic, is voluntarily entered into and relatively controllable, the other, sound, occurs by way of being taken over and achieves meaning by retaining the form of the semantic but without its content. Not only does this difference literally divide a single voice into separable components (“If anything, I’ve taken my own voice apart,” Roberson has observed<sup>7</sup>), the fact that these components of voice work differently on the body means that they retain the possibility of fragmenting the listener or reader into multiple, incommensurate pieces.

With music as a type of “glossolalia” that “knows more deeply,” musicality for Roberson comes to describe the inner workings of poetic language more than it does either a specific vocabulary or a relationship of given sounds to one another. As was the case with Charles Olson, what is musical about a poem is the temporal and spatial dynamic that governs the body’s interaction with poetic language. For Roberson, one of the names for this exchange “jazz.” As Edwards points out: “it is not for nothing that the last word of the split-page series in *Lucid Interval as Integral Music* is ‘jazz’” (632). Let us follow Edwards’ suggestion and examine the context in which this word appears.

the sound crumbs of the sea  
that the delicate

reason comes down to  
feed on,

from the breaks that are clear of meaning to,  
are brought back up into

the umbilicate ear  
out of the seizures of the organ tides,

out of the breaks.

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<sup>7</sup> (678)

out of the storm, the jazz.

Now, if one is looking for the content traditionally associated with the word “jazz” – vernacular speech, reference to musicians, poetic tropes that advertise “spontaneity” – one will not find it here. Rather, “jazz” in these lines names an interaction between sound and non-sound, between the body and what exceeds it. Sound does occupy a crucial role here: as nurturing material (“the sound crumbs of the sea”) that feeds “the umbilicate ear,” sound is here figured as the vehicle through which non-meaning comes to acquire meaning. This is important from a bodily dimension: according to these lines, *hearing* – not seeing, feeling, or even thinking – is the activity that fosters meaning. Yet let us also notice that sound is important because it comes from a place where meaning is *absent*.

Rather than being a set of sounds, jazz here thus becomes the possibility of sound’s emergence, and sound the residue of “jazz.” We see this in the final three lines, which present a string of signifiers – “break,” “storm,” “jazz” – that together figure jazz as an aleatory whirlwind of unpredictability, one that, because it operates on a different logic than that by which meaning works, remains inaccessible to reason. The key point here is that “music,” or “jazz,” names a mode of relation more than a specifically sonic condition. This relation is of the body to the experience of absence, and it is by virtue of this relationship that the world becomes meaningful to us. Now sound is the key modality here, and in isolating sound as a sensory experience, this account reaches towards the idea that sound can be experienced in the absence of other sensory modalities. From a strict phenomenological perspective (like the one animating Olson’s poetry, say), such an idea is anathema.<sup>8</sup> Yet Roberson clearly does believe that sound and hearing retain a power unavailable to other senses. And his reasons for believing this are intimately connected to his poetry’s views on race. For Roberson, sound should be considered an independent modality because the African American body and voice exist in a state of constitutive fragmentation, having been formed precisely as that which is fundamentally broken into pieces. While this fragmentation reflects history above all else – a history that breaks temporal experience into detached, partitioned moments – it also extends to the experience of the body, leading to a situation in which different sensory experiences produce different types of meaning.

It is for this reason that words as sound, words as “glossolalia,” play such an important role in his poetry. And it is also because sound is so instrumental that sound and music – particularly black sound and black music – remain critical points of attention. The following lines, also from *Lucid Interval*, help flesh out this idea, showing how music, jazz in particular, represents both a testimonial to this history and a potential means to renegotiate one’s relationship to it:

We call it a journey a map

cats put their bodies in and walk away

They tear into pieces The wonder is finer and finer

musicians The black cats

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<sup>8</sup> Witness Heidegger on sound: “What we ‘first’ hear is never sounds or complexes of tones, but the creaking wagon, the motorcycle. One hears the column on the march, the north wind, the woodpecker tapping, the fire crackling. It requires a very artificial and complicated frame of mind to ‘hear’ a ‘pure sound’” (Heidegger 153).

// page break

had given blue feet to police siren such  
that I thought the scream a jazz jade bowl and a step

And I get over  
So severe a moment of border

was that character of black life moment  
to moment

that taking it to the bridge which means that's it/  
to jump was at a twelve-lane standstill

Even our screams cannot move  
Cats put their bodies in and walk away undroppt. (32-33)

I focus on these lines in particular because they explicitly detail the relationship between musicality and blackness as it plays out in Roberson's poetry. From the beginning, the vocabulary of these lines signals to us that "jazz" is the operative music here. This is largely a product of slang: "cats," for example, is a term jazz musicians have long used to describe other musicians. For musicians, a line like "musicians The black cats" presents the same thing, described in different lexicons. Two other phrases, "taking it to the bridge" and "I get over," are also expressions used by musicians. Their doubled meanings are key to the poem's strategy, and I will discuss them shortly.

While specific words help contextualize the poem, however, the larger indications are conceptual. By this I mean that the opening phrase "a map / cats put their bodies in and walk away" offers, in spatial terms, a description that mirrors almost exactly the account of jazz improvisation I have been deploying throughout this dissertation. As I argue in Chapter One, a jazz performance always operates as a reading of pre-given form, with "form" here designating the set of chord changes over which an improvisation takes place. If one conceives this idea in spatial terms, however, the word "map" names the phenomenon as well as "form" does. A set of chord changes *is* a map of musical space, a description of the musical landscape, and, if one desires, the outlines of a path that leads from one point to another. To improvise is to follow a map of this sort, to explore a given musical terrain.

"put their bodies in" conveys even more directly the doubled account of the body in jazz for which I have been arguing. As we may remember, Chapter One also describes the two-sided way that jazz improvisation engages the body. On one hand, a musical improvisation inevitably projects the lineaments of a musician's physiology – the fingers, tongue, mouth, state of bodily relaxation, etc., that collectively produce musical sound. On the other, that jazz is a performative art taking place in the moment means that it inevitably foregrounds the body as a visible entity, with an exterior readable within the coordinates of race. It is partially for this reason that the sound coming from a musician's instrument are often taken to be representative of a racially-inflected perspective on the world. Roberson's phrase, amazingly, captures *both* of these dimensions: to "put their bodies in" a musical map is for the "cats" to both navigate the musical

space with their bodies – to let their explorations play out *as* productions of the body – and to make those bodies visually-recognizable elements of that map.

Now, that Roberson convenes an idea of jazz strikingly similar to the one I have been developing is significant to the argument I am making here. For it helps pose jazz as a potential antidote to the other main idea in these lines. This idea is the description of “that character of black life” as a pervasive “moment of border.” “Moment”’s literally surround “black life” here, appearing above, below, and immediately after it. Enjambment even gives us a small taste of the experience: the stanza break in “So severe a moment of border // was that character of black life moment / to moment” literally imposes a “moment of border” between its first and second lines; by interrupting the phrase “moment / to moment,” the break between the second and the third lines turns each “moment” into its own isolated piece of time. This latter break also plays line against sentence, letting us first hear “black life moment” as a complete phrase, then undermines our sense of stability by showing “moment” to be merely the first word of a phrase completed on the following line.

Why should black life should be so characterized? Other poems help explain, but the basic idea is that the black subject in Roberson’s purview inhabits a history in which significant events remain unwritten, unnamed, ignored, or forgotten, often intentionally so. Addressing what Kathleen Crown calls “the impact of . . . traumatic historical events” (211) remains a constant in Roberson’s work, from *Etai-Eken*’s addressing the murder of Fred Hampton through *City Eclogue*’s descriptions of the Amadou Diallo shooting in 1999 and September 11. While these experiences of racially-motivated violence are certainly traumatic, even scarring, what engenders the fragmented experience of history that constitutes the black subject as living “moment / to moment” is the way they come to occupy our cultural memory. Brent Edwards calls this “the constitutive role of absence and forgetting in the national imaginary” (632), the point being that the story we tell ourselves as a nation is riddled with holes, and these holes make an integrated experience impossible for a portion of the population. To Roberson, these constitutive absences show up most directly in our experience of language. *City Eclogue* explains: though there remains an ever-present “stink // of sense that something’s wrong here,” whatever words one might use to engage this wrong inevitably “hide as understood our denial of such / with exclusive meaning by definition never the us.” Though works produce our shared experience of history, “none of these words / admits us”; black subjects are taught to read words “still in our habits Colored Only” (43).

When words so repress these traumatic experiences, the result is a black subject constituted as one with a history fragmented into individual moments, each of which thereby imposes borders between itself and others. Kathleen Crown is particularly compelling on this point. Mobilizing a framework based in trauma theory, she argues that “stuttering rhythmically, the voice of trauma defies grammar and syntax, disintegrating into feverish fragments of syllable and sound” (212). In her reading, the formal elements of Roberson’s poetry – the gaps in the middle of lines, the spacing on the page, the sundering of voice into upper and lower – all testify to the damage wrought by cultural (non-)incorporation of “racist violence” (211).

One might even extend an analysis like Crown’s to include the very idea of seriality. As modules, in Joseph Conte’s words, whose “[places] are not assigned by an external schema,”<sup>9</sup> Roberson’s poems as a whole seem to structurally replicate this experience of isolated moment. This would be the case regardless of the content of the poems; whether or not the subject matter of any particular poem is something identifiably “black,” the shape of their form would serve as

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<sup>9</sup> (Conte 22)



testimony enough to the history they have absorbed.

While this analysis is certainly right, I would nonetheless move from it by suggesting that the fragmentary nature of Roberson's poetry need not be read solely as a *reactive* phenomenon. Its goal, that is, is to do more than merely reflect the situation out of which they come. For while Roberson's spaces and disjunctions certainly do capture and express the experience of trauma, their ultimate aim, I am arguing, is less to testify than to instruct. And what they instruct is how to *read* differently. Their goal, that is, is essentially hermeneutic, and their aesthetic intervention happens on the level of interpretation. By breaking language apart, allowing us to see the absences that are constitutive of African American poetry but often buried deep within its language, Roberson gives us the tools to read the world itself differently. This is why his work is so insistent that the sonic experience be understood as operating differently from the semantic one: for Roberson, the spaces, breaks, and disjunctions that perfuse poetic language need not be read solely as happening *between* words, lines, stanzas and poems. While they do work this way, for Roberson they also instantiate themselves – constitutively – *within* words, between words in their conceptual identities and in their sonic ones. And to see *these* modalities of poetic language as distinct is to allow the “character of black life” to pervade language at its rawest level, since it remakes language itself into an experience as divided by borders as the history it speaks is. It is to make words “admit us,” and thereby to open up a strategy for reintegrating these disparate moments of experience into a new unity: not a wholeness, exactly, but an as-yet-unnamed overcoming of border.

One might call this hermeneutic an African American one, since it mobilizes the character of black life to reshape the world. One might also note that to the degree that it uses fragmentation to provide access to constitutive absence, it is *essentially* musical, in all the ways described earlier: it takes us over; it involves the form of speech rather than its semantic content; it involves sound and pattern. And, finally, since it traces sound back to its source, it fundamentally partakes in the process Roberson calls “jazz.”

Let us return to the poem prompting this discussion, the one in which “black life” is characterized by a “moment / to moment” existence. Now, the line before “so severe a moment of border” reads “And I get over.” Within the flow of the poem, the line indicates a shift in perspective, a reflective break in the initial narrative. Yet what the nature of this reflection is depends on how one reads the phrase, since the semantic *and* syntactic ambiguities to which Roberson submits it leave open a number of readings. As I noted earlier, the phrase is a slang term favored by musicians, meaning roughly to impress an audience, whether or not one's playing is any good (“That guy can't play, but since he looks good, he always gets over,” or “What a knowledgeable audience – even my Coltrane multiphonics got over!”). More commonly, the phrase means to “swindle.” More salubriously, it suggests the exact opposite: to “get over” a bad experience, to move beyond a trauma or hurt.

Which of these connotations one chooses depends on how one interprets the also-ambiguous syntax of the line. For it is not clear here whether the line marks its own sentence, or whether it takes the phrase that follows (“so severe...”) as its object. If the former, the phrase might be read as commenting on what precedes it in the poem. By describing what “the black cats” do, Roberson would be “getting over” on us – swindling us, or convincing us to believe him, regardless of the actual effects of the poem. If the latter, the phrase produces the fortuitous “And I get over / So severe a moment of border.” Here, the implication is positive, since the phrase suggests that something actually allows Roberson to surmount this constitutive moment of border. And what this something is, in fact, is the “journey,” the “map,” that into which “cats

put their bodies.” The something that is, is jazz, both the sheer fact of the music’s existence and the shared experience of the music’s taking place.

Pushed this way, then, what this poem turns out to be describing is the experience of listening to music. Listening to jazz, in fact. The phrase that endorses this reading appears four lines later; it is “taking it to the bridge.” “Bridge,” of course, is a provocative noun here, since cartographically, bridges work both to *demarcate* borders and to *traverse* them. To “[take] it to the bridge” is thus to simultaneously to push up against the borders separating moment from moment and to cross them. Bridges are also places from which “to jump”; “which means that’s it” certainly carries the implication of ending one’s life. Yet this latter phrase also poses the opposite meaning: to transcend the moment of border. In this, “that’s it” seconds “I get over,” but suggesting an end to the experience of borders. The key here is the way “taking it to the bridge” evokes music, particularly black music, as is immediately apparent to anyone who has listened to James Brown. There are, indeed, few quotes more redolent of black music than this one, which Brown would call this line out to cue his band.

Pulling these various implications together, what “that taking it to the bridge which means that’s it” suggests is that listening to black music in particular offers either the possibility of or the means to negotiate, even overcome, these moments of border. It is not that these borders are erased – because they remain in the poem, they thereby come to persist *as* that which has been gotten over. And because language is part of the problem here, this newly integrated experience remains inarticulable in words. But it does, nonetheless, suggest something beyond this “moment to moment” existence, even, the possibility of actually getting over the fragmentary character of black life. When “cats put their bodies in,” something clearly changes. The poem on the page of *Lucid Interval* following this one, in fact, hammers this implication home even further. “This to the bridge music is our art of. period.”, it writes. Meaning: this music is both the art we have made from the experience of having our history broken up *by* periods (as the sentence is), and the art that allows us access to the breaks engendered by having experience fragmented in this manner. And looking at the end of the poem, one can see that active participation in this production of “jazz” is what is required. “Screams,” after all, “cannot move” – they are ineffectual. “Cats,” on the other hand, by taking part in the improvisatory process, “walk away undroppt.,” remaining unharmed.

So how, then, does one become a “cat”? How does one inhabit “the storm, the jazz”? For if this is the means to “get over” the “severe moment of border,” one might look to Roberson’s poetry to teach us how to do so. I have already suggested that Roberson emphatically separates words in their semantic identities from words as sonic concepts, and thereby asks us to relearn how to hear. To sunder words from themselves in this manner, however, is also the sunder the body into multiple, incommensurate activities, to recognize that, as *Lucid Interval* puts it, “sense becomes the multiple spot / of collision” (65). “The multiple spot”: this impossible idea (if a spot is anything, it is singular) well encapsulates the way Roberson’s poetry asks to see *everything* as multiple, to see literally everything as a reflection of the unpredictable, unfathomable pattern of the storm or the jazz. In *Atmosphere Conditions*, Roberson describes being a child, watching “pigeons wing-singing.”<sup>10</sup> That “singing” is the word used here is significant, since it reinforces Roberson’s view that the production of sound is important because it allows us access to a deeper sense of pattern. This deeper sense is evoked when he notes that is was “satisfying to see the felt      Inside /      unresolving      Patterns” (36). If visual spacing is crucial to Roberson’s poems, here we see why. For the space between “felt”

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<sup>10</sup> (Roberson, *Atmosphere Conditions* 35)



To Keller and Wagstaff, this perspective “ties urban nature to what environmental critics call ‘first nature’” (397). Yet the problem with this perspective, according to this poem at least, is that it reduces lived space to a circumscribable grid. One can see this in the way the “we” mentioned in line two becomes important only to determine an average number of steps. Or how the “hundreds” ending line four comes ultimately to name not only people, but streets. Indeed, the initial ambiguity of this “hundreds” only emphasizes the way individual lives remain tangential to the type of seeing that takes place here.

Yet if this stanza gives us the city as a map, the next shows us what happens when “cats put their bodies in.” While seeing people as “steps” devalues the importance of lived experience, the second stanza shows why sit-ins – “sitting” being the act that literally arrests steps – pose such a powerful alternative.

Others may want more  
to know what steps aside the southern streets required  
to flow at least free to clear,  
to know how those kept out  
set foot inside, sat down, and how  
the mirrors around the lunch counter  
reflected the face  
to face --- the cross-mirrored depth reached  
infinitely back into either ---  
the one pouring the bowl over the head of  
the one sitting in  
at that counter

Beginning with “others,” which contrasts in number the “someone” opening the poem at the same time it invokes the exclusive social divisions rending one group of people from its “others,” this stanza explores the intervention civil rights makes into the perspective witnessed in the opening stanza. “Others may want more,” indeed: this is the claim of those African Americans supposed to be happy with the status granted them. Yet not *how*, exactly, sit-ins work, and what they achieve. Rather than simply asserting a political right, by sitting in “those kept out” literally change the way we understand ourselves as occupying time and space. To “set foot inside,” after all, is to do more than merely to enter a building. It is to set “*feet*” – visible body parts, the opposite of “steps” – inside our field of vision, forcing us to attend to the lives lived by actual, unabstracted bodies.

But the true measure of sit-ins here is the way they change our experience of ontological patterning. For what this stanza (and the rest of the poem) mostly describe is the impact on the field of vision created by the appearance of black faces in the lunch counter “mirrors.” “The cross-mirrored depth reached infinitely back”: the point is not that black subjects here entered the diner, it is that their presence induces a multiplication of self experience by *all* selves in the lunch counter. This reflection-upon-reflection pushes these selves back into a nascent state of fragmentation. Enjambment is crucial here: when the poem notes that the mirrors “reflected the face,” it registers the sheer newness of this appearance, the fact that these particular mirrors have never before reflected faces that looked like these. Yet, as with “moment / to moment” in the earlier poem, the next line, by making the phrase “face / to face,” demonstrates that the shock of seeing a single African American face in the mirror is matched by the realization that the mirror

puts these new faces alongside the faces already in the mirror, forcing a new equivalence on this diversity of faces. And even more subtly and compelling, because this phrase multiplies the word “face,” it shows the mirror as having multiplied individual faces so as to make them no longer singular, but only one of many iterations of themselves.

This latter understanding reflects the true intervention of sit-ins:

this regression this seen stepped  
back into nothing both ways  
From which all those versions of the once felt sovereign  
self locked together in the mirror’s  
march from deep caves of long alike march back

As we can see here, what the experience of “faces” in this mirror engenders is a loss of sense of self, or the dissolution of self into an experience of ungrounded-ness. And this is so critical, I am arguing, precisely because this state of self dissolution, of a chaos of multiplicity and fragmentation, is precisely that described by “the storm,” “the breaks,” “the jazz.” Mirrors, that is, bring all participants back to the point of non-meaning, of “the deep caves of long alike” where the fundamental differences between objects or selves – “difference” being the mark of meaning – are fundamentally absent. And the result is not that the African American is admitted into the white world, but that the white is admitted into that of the African American. Indeed, this fragmentation, as the second stanza quoted above notes, “[reaches] / infinitely back into either.” “Either” is an evocative choice here. The expected word would be “ether,” which would lead the line into cliché. But while “ether” describes a state of nothingness, a dissolution of everything into indistinguishability, “either” works differently. “Back into either” keeps individual parts distinct – the parts retain their individual identities – but levels them out perceptually, so that one cannot tell exactly which part one is looking at. It is not to obliterate perceptual categories, but to render them strange, to retain the perceptual pattern but make it unfathomable.

Later lines in the poem spell this out:

From mirror to window glass to thin air  
between and finally, us with no you nor I  
but being  
-- with all our world -- inside the other;  
but there only in our each part yet having  
no displacement of the other,

“No displacement”: the point is not the total loss of self, but the recognition that “self,” “I,” or any measure by which one might divide people into “others,” is always an experience that comes out of this fragmented, multiplied point of unfathomability. Of constitutive absence, in other words. Vision is made to confront the “multiple point” from the earlier lines in *Lucid Interval*. And this new experience of pattern extends from the visual realm into the temporal:

A here and not-here division of things,  
where the future is in the same  
place as the past, is

maybe one of the African  
masquerades of time like these facing mirrors  
in which time is making faces  
at you from the elemental  
moment,

This is a black phenomenon, in other words. “The future is in the same / place as the past” rings hopefully: the idea is that the mirror’s having extended faces back into the “elemental / moment” that underpins them might help reshape the future. When the poem thus notes that “that reflection sat in demonstration,” it means this is a very literal way: it is actually the “reflection” that performs the work of the sit in. The demonstrators’ stroke of genius, then, is not only to enter the place from which they were excluded, to “put their bodies in the map,” but to do so in a way that mobilized the power of the mirrors to fragment their antagonists’ sense of self so extensively that a new reconciliation *of* these fragmented parts becomes an envisionable possibility. The force of their action, in other words, is to introduce into the situation the hermeneutic I have been describing all along, the same hermeneutic Roberson attempts to inculcate through his poetry.

I opened this chapter with an invocation to “songs,” as opposed to “song” in the abstract, and wondered how we were to reconcile “pieces and absences” with this idea. Hopefully we have a better idea now, but let us still examine the full poem from which those lines come.

                  this is about songs  
about when they happen about  
pieces and absences  
of connection about for no reason

this is about practicing  
any gap any short for the jump  
this is about going about  
years with the live fragment

singing it over  
and over for years learning its meaning  
only as accuracy not an aesthetic  
only as the most

maybe empirically correct song

Edwards calls this poem “perhaps the best description of serial poetics as a practice of the interval that finds its model in music” (632-33), and Crown notes that it “powerfully summarizes the method of this book-length poem” (209). Both these descriptions are true if one hears “songs” here as “lyrics,” and interprets this particular poem as describing the interaction between individual lyrics in the book. But I think there is more here. And this more is the idea that “songs” most directly specifies the breaks between modes of meaning and non-meaning *within* poems. When songs happen, in other words, meaning is multiplied infinitely, divided and fragmented so as to break time up into pieces. And because it fragments meaning without

papering over the absences normally repressed by our cultural memory and the language in which that memory is expressed, this division is also what allows for the possibility of a new reconciliation, a new assemblage of moments that represents a new experience of time and the body.

When this poem says that it is “about practicing,” then, it means two things. On one hand, it suggests that reading poems like Roberson’s is practicing for the future – if the real goal of his work is to teach us to turn its hermeneutic on the world at large, then these poems only ready us for the challenge. On the other, it suggests that songs themselves are an active *practice* – they intervene in our daily routines in the same manner that the sit-ins described in “Sit In What City You’re In” do. Songs are dangerous, because when they happen, they break the world into pieces and absences. Hence the not-so-subtle hint of weaponry and the battlefield lying behind a phrase like “live fragment.”

Yet this phrase “live fragment” also describes the way we should hear songs: as fragments. Not fragments of a larger whole (though they are this, too), but collections of fragments of sensory information, moments and sounds and words that come together in a unity but should more rightly be heard as distinct. As aggregations of fragments, songs contain gaps, and therefore teach us to overcome them. And when the poem describes “learning its meaning / only as accuracy,” it is suggesting that the most powerful songs are those that exceed our ability to contain them. These songs are those for which we can only know a part. In these lines channel W.E.B. Du Bois’ famous description, in the final chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk* (“The Sorrow Songs”), of the transmission of an African melody from slave to slave:

The child sang it to his children and they to their children’s children, and so two hundred years it has travelled down to us and we sing it to our children, knowing as little as our fathers what its words may mean, but knowing well the meaning of its music.<sup>12</sup>

What counts here is the transmission more than the song; over time the melody comes to signify less its original meaning and more its having-been-transmitted. This is literally a song that has survived jumps: jumps in time, in space (across the Atlantic Ocean), language, and meaning. That it has done so is what allows its singers to “practice” for more such “jumps.” That its original unity of voice, melody and words has been broken down and reconstituted is the point. And insofar as songs make things happen, in Roberson’s terms, a song like this is the most “empirically correct song.” In time, perhaps Roberson’s poetry will be the same; for now we can at least learn from it how to hear anew.

### **THE SOUNDS OF COLOR, THE COLOR OF SOUND: HARRYETTE MULLEN AND THE JAZZ DICTIONARY**

Though this dissertation has engaged the work of both poets and musicians, at bottom what has tied the two together has been an enduring notion of what I call “voice.” The term has certainly undergone significant deformation as I have passed it through the work of different aesthetic models. Yet at bottom it has consistently meant to indicate a chiasmus in which one definition of the word – voice as “perspective” or “point of view” – crosses another: “voice” as the literal sounds issuing from a corporeal body. Previous chapters have focused on the

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<sup>12</sup> (Du Bois 207)

aesthetically profitable ends to which musicians and poets have challenged, utilized, or reformulated the conceptual interface afforded by the term. Yet it is perhaps poet Harryette Mullen whose work most points at the viability of this model, if not the very idea of “voice” as generally conceived. Though Mullen is unarguably invested in jazz, both as music and as aesthetic legacy, her poetry repeatedly undermines many of the expectations we have come to rely upon to guide us through our attempts to read jazz or jazz-inflected poetry in historically sanctioned ways.

The challenges Mullen’s poetry poses are in large part a result of its having incorporated a number of seemingly incommensurate poetic traditions into its aesthetic orbit. As a poet who began publishing in the early 1990’s, Mullen is both old enough to have internalized the legacy of Black Arts and other African American aesthetic traditions and young enough to be equally invested in the multiple strains of experimentalism that have slowly but surely inflected American poetry practices of the last thirty years or so. The most prevalent of these is L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, though Mullen’s work also reveals a healthy interest in Oulipo-group experiments. The combination of the two leads Mullen’s work into territory uncharted by American poetry so far, and in so doing asks us to reconsider some well-entrenched conceptual assumptions. The issue, as I read it, is one of voice: though a jazz performance privileges the revelation of individual voice (even if the mode of this revelation is intentionally confounded by the aesthetics of musicians like Charlie Parker and Miles Davis), experimental poetics like L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E and Oulipo both work to trouble deeply the assumed coherence of their poems’ material sources, as well as the intentional relationship between corporeal author and produced artwork. Indeed, the radical detachment of text from author that poetics like these (among others) promulgated has proven so influential that many contemporary literary critics are likely to gaze with suspicion on any poem that textually asserts itself as the literal voice of its flesh-and-blood author, viewing such a claim as naïve at best, reactionary at worst.

For those of us interested in charting the relationship between poetry and race, particularly between poetry and black music, the resulting conundrum offers an interesting point of observation. For to take seriously the idea of voice posed by these experimental poetics is to deeply challenge some assumptions of the more traditional idea of “jazz voice.” In what way, for example, is something we might call “jazz poetry” even possible, for example, within the experimental mode that privileges the playful detachment of poem-as-object from author-as-corporeal-entity? If contemporary experimental poetry has absorbed the post-structuralist lessons by which racial categories reflect not a pre-given materiality but an ongoing reinscription of human corporeality,<sup>13</sup> can its African American branch still do justice to the concrete, lived experiences of its producers? If foregrounding a relation to jazz has been the means by which many African American poems have asserted their identities precisely *as* African American, can jazz itself assimilate these experimentalisms without something essential being renounced?

It is with these questions in mind that I approach Mullen’s work. In particular, I explore a number of poems from her 2002 collection *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, reading them as intimations of what a contemporary, experimental jazz voice might look (or sound) like.<sup>14</sup> In so doing I explore the way Mullen understands her poetry as a form of music, one that has internalized the lessons of jazz in its textual and sonic functioning, rather than explicitly in its choice of content. The result is a voice bearing a new relation to time: unmistakably figured as African American, Mullen’s work achieves this figuration by setting its version of corporeality

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<sup>13</sup> On this point, see Paul Gilroy’s *Against Race* or Fred Moten’s *In the Break*.

<sup>14</sup> (Mullen)



within a space and time saturated with the indeterminate temporality of jazz improvisation. Refusing either the ossification of sound into text or the reduction of text to sound, Mullen's poetry offers a provocative reading of blackness as that which inhabits an unsteady collusion of sensory dimensions, including the sonic, visual, and the temporal.

By this I do not mean to imply that Mullen's poetry's relation to jazz operates strictly on the level of form, in the manner of a Charles Olson, or even an Ed Roberson. If anything, Mullen's poetry remains voracious in its ability to incorporate multiple influences without losing the individual sense of voice that makes it distinctive. Explicit references to jazz do indeed stamp many of *Sleeping's* pages: one finds "saxophone streets and scratchy sidewalks" in its midst, and both "Miles Davis" and "Charlie Parker" make appearances. Mullen's more profound strategies, however, are those that move the book's relation to jazz beyond *mere* reference, those by which *Sleeping* poses many of its poems as literal forms of textual music, music composed with language rather than notes. The poem "Music for Homemade Instruments" is a good example, as its title and subtitle, "improvising with Douglas Ewart," make clear (Douglas Ewart is a musician associated with Chicago's Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM)). From the beginning, music above all else seems this poem's organizing conceit. Its first sentence, "I dug you artless, I dug you out," treats the name "Doug Ewart" as a motif to be developed in multiple registers, both semantic and sonic: while "I dug you artless" homophonically (and in characteristic Mullen fashion) reads as "I Doug Ewart-less," the sentence's second half ("I dug you out") uses the word more conventionally, while simultaneously appealing to "dig"'s history as a piece of beatnik argot.

This play in multiple registers continues as the poem riffs on "Doug Ewart" by submitting the words "dug," "you" and "art" to increasingly inventive combinations, punctuated throughout by phrases suggesting musical instruments ("strumpet strutting," for example, or "faux saxon flukes"). Yet the poem is not only interested in progressive riffing, as the sporadic but repeated appearance of the phrase "Did you re-do?" indicates. Another homophone, this time for "didgeridoo," the question suggests the instrument the real Doug Ewart may have been playing while the poem was being written; Douglas Ewart (the musician) is indeed well known for performing on self-made bamboo instruments. "Didgeridoo"'s repeated homophonic appearance here, however, indicates that the instrument is in an important way not Ewart's but Mullen's. If this poem is a kind of music, that is, then Mullen's response to Ewart's improvising with the sound a didgeridoo makes is to improvise with the sound a "didgeridoo" makes. The poem thus figures words as Mullen's "homemade instruments," in a very literal way – for her a trumpet is a "trumpet," sax and flute are "sax and flute," and "improvising with Douglas Ewart" literally means improvising with "Douglas Ewart."

Reading (hearing) the poem in this way helps us understand Mullen's relationship to jazz as from the beginning being one of stylistic continuity rather than mere retroactive gesturing. Eschewing the sort of jazz poetry described in Chapter Two, that whose aim is to visually reproduce the *sounds* associated with jazz, and therefore remains within a largely imitative model, Mullen's poem offers instruments, in the form of words, that produce their *own* sounds. In developing these sounds over time, Mullen's poetry eschews the orthographic codes identifiable as "jazzy," and instead works to emulate jazz in its form and technical workings. Rather than figuring itself as a visual record or evocation of a jazz performance, "Music" deploys "jazz" as a *way* of developing sounds, and in so doing attempts to actually *be* a jazz performance.

"Zen Acorn" is another of *Sleeping's* more explicitly "jazzy" poems, one that also gestures towards jazz as much in formal strategy as in referential content. Dedicated to Bob

Kaufman, arguably the most significant jazz poet of the 1950's, "Zen Acorn" outwardly resembles "Music for Homemade Instruments" in the way it riffs on its introductory phrase, "a frozen / indian acorn." Yet unlike the loose, unpredictable riffing of the earlier poem, "Zen Acorn" is precise and logical in its development:

**Zen Acorn**  
*for Bob Kaufman*

a frozen  
indian acorn

a frozen  
indiana corn

afro zen  
indian acorn

afro zen  
indiana corn

a zen fro  
in diana corn

frozen fan  
in zero canadian

indian corn for  
arizona nonraidance

a narco dozen  
faze an african

Highly structured formally, this poem's first four couplets enact a semantic probability square of sorts: given that a mere shift of space turns "a frozen" into "afro zen" and "indian acorn" into "indiana corn," the poem works through all four combinatorial possibilities. But this small shift of space produces changes on (at least) three levels: the semantic, the visual and the sonic. Thus "a frozen" thaws into "afro zen," a phrase recalling the politics and spirituality (as well as the hairstyles!) of 60's Black radicalism, and "indian acorn" turns into "indiana corn," at once a hackneyed image of Americana and a condemnation of that image's inherent corny-ness.<sup>15</sup> This rightward shift of visual space also produces sonic effects, changing both the sounds of the "a"s beginning each stanza and the rhythms of the poem's syllables. And it does so without changing the order of any letters – it is merely *space* that is moved here.

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<sup>15</sup> This phrase also echoes, if distantly, the jazz standard "Indiana," over whose chords Charlie Parker wrote his famous "Donna Lee."

The use of space on a page to mark off, distribute and separate words is of course an essential component of written English. Yet the *sonic* implications of this use of space, the fact that linguistic spacing can develop sound and sense over time, is rarely exploited with the specificity Mullen here employs. The implied correspondence here, I believe, is of this poem to a piece of sheet music, given that both—this poem and written music—reveal a remarkably similar performative logic: graphically organizing symbols on a page so that their spatial relationships generate embodied productions of sound.

That “Zen Acorn” can enact these musical effects without reducing itself to nonsense syllables is key to Mullen’s poetics. For now, however, it is important to note that the way this poem uses space—taking a small theme and developing it to produce small but significant sonic effects—is an essentially *musical* gesture. I discussed this idea briefly in Chapter One, where I examined both “The Way You Look Tonight” and Charlie Parker’s response to it. “The Way You Look Tonight,” I argued, is noteworthy in part for the way it takes a small motive and develops it; Charlie Parker’s response frustrates the formal prescriptions of underlying form by resisting this sort of motivic development, offering instead a modular model of phrasing whereby smaller parts could be combined and recombined at will.

Yet while the rejection of this model is a hallmark of Parker’s musical aesthetic, the model is nonetheless the far more dominant one in the jazz idiom. And while I have thus far focused on the undermining of underlying form as a key strategy by which musicians conceived alternate notions of “voice,” other musicians have developed ways to creatively improvise within this model. It is, in fact, arguably *the* strategy by which improvisers are taught to develop solos, and an overwhelming percentage of canonical jazz solos follow its precepts. The technique extends from the music’s beginning to present day – Louis Armstrong’s solo on “Potato Head Blues” is a masterful exemplar of this technique, but so is Miles Davis’s on “So What,” Sonny Rollins’ on “St. Thomas,” and a host of others. Scott Saul, for example, has described how John Coltrane’s early-60’s modal soloing often exhibited “a sense of microprogression, as Coltrane ... [begins] with small motives, then [develops] them until they explode with complication and intensity.”<sup>16</sup>

What is most interesting about Mullen’s poem, however, is not merely that it develops a small theme in space and time, but that this development obliges an interface of the poem’s visual and its aural dimensions. Given this, I would like to suggest a more relevant musical comparison to Mullen’s poetry: the music of Thelonious Monk. Like Mullen, Monk was known as a quirky and playful composer and improviser, an artist associated with the formal innovations of his time (the bebop revolution of the 1940’s), but one whose playing still bore traces of preceding styles (stride piano, most prominently). Offering a clarity of vision that makes his work as easily recognizable as it is inimitable, Monk’s music, like Mullen’s, often proceeds by exploring the dormant yet unexpected implications of a single musical idea; one sees this, for example, in “Mysterioso”’s famous rising sixths, or the way “Brilliant Corners” repeats its theme at twice the tempo of its initial iteration. As a formal point of comparison, I offer a short reading of Monk’s composition “Straight, No Chaser.” Written by Monk sometime in the early 1950’s, “Straight, No Chaser” reimagines the “riff blues” in a manner whose superficial simplicity, like many Monk compositions, belies its quirky intelligence. Put simply, a “riff blues” is a type of “blues head” – a melody written to be played over a traditional 12-bar blues song form. In its most generic and familiar form, a blues head is a simple riff, a short musical figure played three

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<sup>16</sup> (Saul 239)

times with little or no variation. There are literally thousands of such heads circulating through the jazz community, and many more are improvised on the bandstand every night.

Repeating a short theme over a 12-bar blues form, “Straight, No Chaser” sets itself as heir to this riff blues tradition. Yet the tune also fractures this idea by submitting, as “Zen Acorn” does, its initial theme to a highly restricted set of variations. A quick look at “Straight, No Chaser”’s beginning motif (below) shows a simple set of 5 notes spelling out an inverted (and harmonically basic) F-major triad. Somewhat typical of bebop style, the phrase delays harmonic resolution by reaching its harmonic resting point, its concluding A-natural, on an upbeat (below, on the “and of 2”). The result is a mild ambiguation of the tune’s harmony (between F-major and F-minor), giving the tune a predominantly major feel while still allowing it to imply “blues” with its prominent flat-3<sup>rd</sup>. As is typical of Monk’s compositional style, this delayed resolution also introduces a slightly off-kilter rhythmic feel that lasts, since this theme is repeated multiple times, for the length of the head.



What is most relevant about “Straight, No Chaser” for this discussion, however, is the way Monk organizes the repetition of this motif over the piece’s 12-measure form (**printed on page 154**). For over the course of the motif’s being repeated eight times without (and three times with) embellishment, Monk places the theme at least once *on each possible beat* in the measure. In musical terms, that is, the theme begins at least once “on the one,” at least once “on the two,” and so on.<sup>17</sup> Without altering its notes, its shape or its rhythm in any way, that is, Monk ensures that we hear every possible iteration of this motif relative to the time and space of the bar line.<sup>18</sup>

I point out this comparison to suggest not that Mullen is somehow imitating Monk, but rather that Mullen’s poetry exhibits an essentially musical logic. Even if the specifics of Monk’s technique are not exactly the same as Mullen’s (were Monk to put small rests in the middle of his theme the analogy would be almost perfect), if one conceives the poetic line and the musical bar as serving similar organizational principles, then “Zen Acorn”’s rigorous and logical shifting of sonic material within these boundaries demonstrates the same logic as that of Monk’s tune. But it is not only the first half of “Zen Acorn” that suggests a visually composed jazz performance. If we read the poem’s first four couplets as a sort of head to the poem, then the last four enact what follows the head at a jazz session: the improvised solo. Improvisation certainly seems the logic of the poem’s second half, which uses the poem’s opening motif as a launch pad for mixing up syllables, adding sounds and lengthening the poem’s lines. The comparison to Monk here is again apt, as Monk too is famous for replaying in his solos fragments of his tunes’ heads, breaking, embellishing or recombining their melodies in a freewheeling manner. And like Monk’s improvisations, some of which become near-histories of jazz piano, Mullen’s poem constantly evokes the African American tradition out of which it comes. Thus “dozen” in the poem’s last couplet impresses the link between jazz improvisation and African American social custom (“playing the dozens” – one is immediately put in mind of *Ask Your Mama*), the goal of

<sup>17</sup> Thanks to Rory Stuart for directing me to this aspect of the composition.

<sup>18</sup> This analysis, of course, assumes that the theme isn’t shifted onto an off-beat, which would yield a wildly different effect.

the latter being, perhaps, to “faze an African,” “African” standing here as slang for an American black interlocutor.

Of course, calling these poems “improvisations” proper is perhaps a bit of a stretch; even if parts of them *were* actually improvised, the relationship between a poem and its audience is simply not the same as that between a jazz musician and her listeners. The reason is, at its most basic, time: while poetry can inflect itself with jazzy rhythms, moods, themes and sounds, or can be improvised onto the page, poetry’s ontology is such that a poem is rarely apprehended in the same time frame as—in the moment of and at the same speed as—its being created.<sup>19</sup> This is an important distinction, one often elided in analyses that mobilize “improvisation” as a synonym for “playfulness”; it also helps explain why much “jazz poetry” of the sort that merely apes the rhythms and sounds of bebop often fails to excite as poetry proper.<sup>20</sup> It is not so much that poetry’s phenomenality does not itself encompass a deep and multi-layered temporality; that poetry is even described as musical in the first place generally depends on poetry’s phenomenological similarity to music, the fact that many poetic effects—rhythm, rhyme, assonance, alliteration—describe a poem’s establishment and modification of sonic patterns in time. Nor is the difference simply that between the written and the oral. Clearly, when encountering a poem for the first time, one normally does not know what will come next, and can therefore experience a poem as being as surprising as an improvised solo.

Yet being experienced as surprising in this manner is not, strictly speaking, that which turns the *work itself* into an improvisation. For even if a written poem can be encountered as unfolding, surprisingly even, in time, that this encounter contains an element of surprise reflects less the ontological status of the poem than the experience of the reader relative to it. The suspense of an improvised solo, in contrast, results from a solo’s being literally incomplete in the moment it is being heard; the difference here is between encountering what is written-but-yet-to-be-experienced and encountering what is literally yet-to-be-written. While it is no doubt true that every aesthetic object discloses in one way or another the temporal constraints of its creation, in jazz those temporal constraints produce a very specific compositional aesthetic, one in which, as philosopher Lee B. Brown notes, “all attempts at revision too become part of the music.”<sup>21</sup> While a written poem’s compositional process generally involves a multi-layered temporality, in which revision and alteration allow for the retroactive excision or modification of words, sounds or other marks, in a jazz solo every note, sound, or moment of silence in it is both retained in the final product and always potentially subject to revision, recontextualization, or repurposing, depending on what literally *has not been written* yet. Miles Davis explains well: “It’s not the note you play that’s the wrong note, it’s the note you play afterwards that makes it right or wrong.”<sup>22</sup>

That each element in a solo thereby defers to an as-yet-unmade future for its meaning means that every note or silence possesses an ontological indeterminacy distinct from that of a written or printed poem. Because each note, silence or musical gesture in a solo relies for its meaning on what has not yet been played, each such element necessarily remains incomplete, hermeneutically, until the solo is over. Yet once an improvisation is over it is strictly speaking

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<sup>19</sup> This is of course not to ignore the various traditions of poetic improvisation in both the Western and Eastern cultures (the wandering bard, the freestyle rapper, Arabic, Spanish and Chinese improvised poetry).

<sup>20</sup> See Chapter Two for a brief description of standard styles of, and problems with, what we tend to classify as “jazz poetry.”

<sup>21</sup> (Brown 119).

<sup>22</sup> (qtd. in USC Jazz Studies).

no longer an improvisation. One is only improvising, after all, when one does not know what one will say or do next; the very definitional identity of an improvisation depends on the improvisation's maintaining a state of *not being completed*. Since the meaning of each note cannot be fully given until after the improvisation is over, therefore, this meaning necessarily lies *outside of the improvisation itself*. This is the difference between the indeterminacy of a written poem and that of an improvisation: once a poem is printed, all readings of it become versions that as a whole make up the (always incomplete) identity of the poem. Meaning here, even if incomplete, is thereby given intra-poetically, determined within the field of all extant or possible versions of the poem. The meaning of each element in an improvised solo, in contrast, can *never* be given within the space and time of the improvisation itself. Each improvised note inhabits an ontologically incomplete present; the incompleteness of improvisation extends to its very ontological core.

To return to Mullen's poetry, however, one might also wonder if the theoretical sketches I am trying to produce here might pose problems for the comparison I am drawing between Mullen and Monk. While my reading of Monk's tune, that is, may point out the way both it and Mullen's poem distribute motifs in written space to produce sonic effects, the reading also implies an analogical relationship between the musical measure and the poetic line. Given the discussion above, one thereby wonders if such an analysis might be imposing an analytic phenomenology onto Monk's tune that effaces the mode of reception—as *sound*—in which it is far more likely to be received. For while listening to "Straight, No Chaser" as a set of sonic vibrations unfolding in time one would likely notice that a theme is being repeated, and one could perhaps even memorize (as many jazz musicians have) the temporal relationship of these sounds to the tune's underlying beat, it would be highly unlikely that merely listening to the tune in this way would ever lead one to notice that "Straight, No Chaser" distributes its theme in the systematic way I earlier pointed out. This underlying compositional logic, one might argue, is apparent only when the tune is viewed as a static, *written* artifact.

Yet this, in a sense, is exactly the reading for which I am arguing: Monk's tune is the best comparison to Mullen's poem, I believe, because its compositional techniques derive in part *from* its written dimension. That the tune so logically distributes its theme relative to the bar line means that even if Monk were guided solely by his ear when composing (as many jazz composers are), from an analytical perspective the tune nonetheless reveals an essentially *non-sonic* architecture, one based on the representative capacities of written music itself, rather than merely using (as sheet music often does) written musical symbols to record the residue of an essentially aural phenomena. Because the sounds it then generates preserve this tie to the materiality of musical script, Monk's tune too fosters a jazz-inflected relationship between the visual and the aural. My earlier claim that Mullen's poem enacts similar effects without reducing its sonic dimension to nonsense syllables is therefore key here, for it demonstrates how Mullen employs the conventions of written poetry, much as Monk employs the conventions of musical script, to fashion an authentically jazzy experience. Which is to say, rather than attempting to turn a written poem into a record of an aural performance, Mullen works as a musician would, borrowing a way of thinking about sound from the tradition preceding her and shaping this method to the (material) particularities of her own voice.

While I have thus far focused largely on *Sleeping's* more explicitly "jazzy" poems, it is worth noting that the book's underlying musicality—the way its poems aspire not to sound *like* music but to work according to an essentially musical logic—underlies some more expansive

implications. Notice, for example, the way the poem “Resistance is Fertile” quotes the jazz standard “Call Me Irresponsible” (Van Heusen and Cahn):

### Resistance Is Fertile

This system needs your moral fiber like a bowl of X brand flakes. If your kind cannot be assimilated to make spare parts for Borg wars, your resistance challenges the ant farm to adapt. You might think the system’s tone deaf, but our software’s immune. You are the virus that keeps it in tune. We are the tolerant host, which makes you the guest worker colony of *E. Coli*, the chitlins inside the chitlins. Catching hits off our perfect pitch, your contra fit’s a false note passed through the phony caca. We call you irresponsible, say you’re indigestible, and it’s undeniably true it’s tough to swallow you.

.....  
Our constipation requires frequent amendments to feed the tree of liberty. Can you dig it? Can you dig it? Man, you’re digging it with a shovel. When you’re all pooped out, we’re just breaking a second wind.

Quoting another melody, whether from another jazz tune or elsewhere, is common improvisatory technique, one often working as a kind of musicians’ in-joke. The tradition yields plenty of examples: Charlie Parker, for example, was famously fond of quoting the “Woody Woodpecker Theme” in his solos, and Sonny Rollins’ reputation as a humorous improviser is due in large part to his career-long penchant for peppering his solos with unexpected quotes. Productively or playfully dislocating a phrase from its original context, an improvised quote can function in multiple ways, both resignifying a given piece of culture and, as Ingrid Monson notes, establishing and reinforcing the sense of community held by listeners recognizing one another as holding a shared body of knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

Taking the original lyrics “call me irresponsible / yes I’m unreliable / But it’s undeniably true / I’m irresponsibly mad for you,” and rewriting them as “we call you irresponsible, say you’re indigestible, and it’s undeniably true it’s tough to swallow you,” Mullen, too, puts both of these effects—reinscribing a piece of culture and signaling the existence (and creation) of a community of listeners—to work. Given that “Resistance is Fertile” itself metaphorizes the “system” as bodily digestion, one whose output is literally “poop,” this reworked quote perhaps functions as a scrap of the “fertile resistance” identified in the poem’s title. For, if the system (whether politically or linguistically construed) is a type of body, this poem suggests, then it is the very act of linguistic resistance, what Mullen calls “the false note” or “the flawed construction,” that functions as the roughage keeping the system healthy, protecting the “tree of liberty” from constipation.

What gives this poem its particularly political bent, however, is the fact that roughage (today the word would be “fiber”), the “resistance” that is “fertile,” keeps a biological system healthy precisely because of its *indigestibility*. Given this, Mullen’s call for resistance here

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<sup>23</sup> “Any musical detail,” she writes, “could convey a reference ... the key here is a community of interpreters (which includes both performer and audience), for a sonic detail becomes meaningful and actionable only in a context that is at least partially shared” (Monson, IT 127).

could describe an *ars poetica* of sorts, one with large political implications: if language that resists easy assimilation into political or aesthetic discourse is crucial to the health of the system in which it takes place, then the sorts of superficially nonsensical transformations to which Mullen often subjects language would be more essential to the system's functioning than the host of more easily understandable modes of linguistic performance one might encounter in other poems. And to the degree that the result ends up performing its *unreadability*, such poetry achieves something similar to what Charlie Parker accomplished, whereby the hermeneutic opacity of his music refused its reduction to a notion of voice that equated sound with internal, racially-identified perspective. In this sense, a poem like "Resistance is Fertile" calls for the further production of such experimental, non-digestible art.

Yet the deep irony of Mullen's poem is that the system's health is also literally revealed in excrement, in the "caca" it rains on those assigned the role of unassimilability. While resistance may be fertile, that is, to the extent that those who render it so may be the ones left "digging it with a shovel," smooth functioning and the minimizing of "irregularity" might not be the desired goal. And even as Mullen's quote plays out this double-edged intra-textual function, tweaking language to be resistant at the same time it knows that that resistance may only produce more poop, it is also worth noting that in a larger, more extra-textual sense, the quote signals the existence of a certain community of listeners forming the musical tradition out of which Mullen works. Indeed, that the line upon which the poem signifies is even a quote from a jazz standard is more likely to be noted by jazz fans than by fans of experimental poetry.

Understanding the jazz voice Mullen mobilizes as representationally resistant in this way, as hermeneutically opaque yet nonetheless tied to the material "I" from which it issues, goes some way towards broadening the possibilities of jazz voice posed at the beginning of this chapter. Some problems still remain, of course; even thinking about this jazz voice as a potentially written phenomenon opens up the temporal issues discussed earlier. And even if many of Mullen's poems do succeed at becoming actual pieces of music, this expanded notion of voice still does not seem to account for those experimental techniques that rigorously subvert all apparent links between a poem and the body producing it. Mullen's poem "Junk Mail," for example, explicitly uses a method—the Oulipo-inspired "N+7"—that playfully strains many traditional notions of implied authorship, especially as those notions might make the formal elements of a poem readable as racially or historically marked. Briefly, the N+7 method calls for a poet to choose a source text (in "Junk Mail," that text appears to be a thank-you letter of sorts), then to rewrite that text by substituting every noun in it with "the seventh following it in the dictionary."<sup>24</sup> The results are often charming, frequently hilarious,<sup>25</sup> and as modes of disturbing semantic expectation, seem easily to achieve the resistance to absorption called for by "Resistance is Fertile." Yet it is quite difficult to imagine how poems of this sort, which figure their creators as mere "operators," could underpin jazz improvisation's foregrounding of the racially-coded body.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a method more severing of the link between material body and art object, or even between literal and figurative voice, since, in this

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<sup>24</sup> (Mathews and Brotchie 198-99).

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, N+7 versions of Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" ("... When all at once I saw a shroud / A hound, of golden imbeciles"), or Wallace Stevens' "The Snow Man" ("The Soap Mandible"), both, at the time of writing, available at the automatic N+7 generator at <http://www.spub.co.uk/n+7/>.

<sup>26</sup> See Alison James' "Automatism, Arbitrariness, and the Oulipian Author" for an interesting discussion of this effect.



method, two separate people starting with the same source text and using the same dictionary and formula would produce literally identical poems.

This is not, of course, to imply that because a poet like Mullen happens to be African American, that every one of her poems (or even any of them) must be demonstrably “black,” or that that identity must somehow trump all other ambitions. Like many artists, Mullen works with a number of forms, and to saddle all of her poems with the need to perform a version of blackness would clearly be to do a disservice to them.<sup>27</sup> Yet authorial intention here is less the issue than poetry’s potential for capturing or developing a “jazz voice,” with all the complexity that term involves. And if Mullen’s poems truly figure themselves as a type *of* jazz, as I have been arguing that they do, one would still be justified in wanting to explore their capacity to maintain a version of voice across their various technical or formal commitments. To address this question, then—roughly, what would a jazz voice, or, perhaps more naively, a recognizable African American voice, sound or look like in a poem that admits no material source?—I move to Mullen’s remarkable poem “Coo/Slur.” For if the theoretical chasm over which Mullen’s poetry stands is that between the radical poem-as-object and the poem as embodying an identifiable black voice, “Coo/Slur” helps forward a clearly racialized voice that nonetheless resists attribution to any readable source. A piece of music never hearable in its entirety, “Coo/Slur” achieves its own improvisatory time by proliferating surfaces, setting against one another its sound, its look and its sense.

Here is the poem:

### **Coo/Slur**

da red  
yell ow  
bro won t  
an orange you  
bay jaun  
pure people  
blew hue  
a gree gree in  
viol let  
purepeople  
be lack  
why it  
pee ink

At first glance a list of words combining to form names of colors, “Coo/Slur”’s short 13 lines fit the standard Mullen profile: formally inventive, sonically suggestive, syntactically playful. But while these lines do easily form names of colors, the perceptual modes through which they do so vary greatly: while some lines evoke colors through visual juxtaposition (“bro won,” “viol let”), others depend on being read out loud (“why it,” the beginning of “bay jaun” as

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<sup>27</sup> Mullen has indeed described herself as having “never been too concerned with cultivating a singular voice or style” (Dargan 1016). From her perspective, personal history always surfaces in one form or another in artists’ work, as she describes: “I would rather just make it up as I go and figure that whatever I do is a part of my own black and female experience” (Frost and Mullen 416).

“beige”). And for many of the poem’s lines, including its one enjambment—the “tan” split between lines 3 and 4—these modes are mutually incompatible. When read aloud as two separate words, for example, “yell ow” produces a sequence rife with interpretive possibilities (is the line a command to yell “ow”? A definition of “yell”? A story?), none of which is likely to be heard as the word “yellow.” Likewise, when read aloud the poem’s first line, “da red,” produces two separate syllables unlikely to be heard as the “dared” the line visually suggests; reading the line aloud as “dared,” however, obscures the crucial “red” at its core.

To submit the entire poem to any single mode of reading, then, is from the beginning to let some color words materialize while leaving others obscured. The poem thus demands that it be performed aloud while simultaneously precluding that possibility; its relation to color is at once constructive *and* destructive. However one reads the poem—visually, aurally, subvocally, as pure text or as performance script—the poem can never finally cohere into a reified object capable of being fully or properly grasped. It can only inhabit this unstable and permanently unreadable state, saturated by color but never fully reducible to it. Which is to say that if this poem is somehow about color, it is about color as something that must be read out of a text, but is impossible to read in any sufficient way. That the poem proliferates possible and irreconcilable modes of reading is its point. Which is also to say that if jazz allegedly provides a sound whose tie to the body of its producer gives that sound a recognizably visual dimension (making it, at least in a visual sense, “black music”), then this poem offers a text that both embodies and reads what it means to be *colored*. One could by way of explanation here invoke Franz Fanon’s concept of epidermalization, the way skin color is for him quite literally a product of language, “woven . . . out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories” (Fanon 111). In this poem, any color one sees is likewise woven out of small bits of language, both animating and lying implicit in each line.

This is not to say that the words on the page do not lend themselves to other evocative readings. “Be lack,” for example, could indicate a description of the way, in Fanon’s account, blackness is formed by a colonized subject’s lacking his colonizer’s language; it could reference Lacanian psychoanalysis (Mullen has mentioned being influenced by the literary theory she read in graduate school<sup>28</sup>); it could be a set of instructions to an idealized reader. The word “pee” in the poem’s last line, “pee ink,” could be a verb, echoing “Resistance is Fertile” by figuring the poetic process as a form of somatic maintenance; “pee” could also be an adjective, asking us to read the ink used to write the poem as an involuntarily-produced waste product. But to close read in this way, reading any line on its own without maintaining sight (or sound) of the color it implies, is to miss the point: though few colors are explicitly named, “color” itself names the poem’s inescapable condition. Color, one could say, is this poem’s ontological horizon, the limit case to any investigation one might make into it.

But if color for Fanon is a linguistic product, Mullen raises Fanon’s explanation a notch by addressing language as not only a semiotic system but also a sonic and temporal one. For the production of color in “Coo/Slur” is not only a visual process, but an aural one as well: depending for its meaning on being read aloud, the poem produces, depending on one’s perspective, either colored sounds (sounds that imply a producer identified by color) or the sounds of color (the way colors literally sound, in the way that “Doug Ewart” sounds in Mullen’s earlier poem). This two-sided mode of figuring “authentic black sound” as both the sounds coming from people of color and the sounds that have historically accrued an identity tied to the visual realm combine in the tropes of “Black English” evoked in the poem. On one hand textual

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<sup>28</sup> See Griffin, Magee and Gallagher’s interview with Mullen.

attempts to capture sound, on the other historical means of satisfying or influencing readerly expectations, these tropes—“da” for “the,” “bro” for “brother,” even “Coo” for “cool”—position this poem within the long history of literary representations of race.

At the same time that it hearkens back to blackness’ status as this literary formation, however, “Coo/Slur” also alludes to a particular sonic performance of blackness, one also coming from the world of jazz. For while racially-marked literary formations have often worked to conscribe bodies within certain written representations of sound, sounds themselves have often simultaneously worked to refuse, disrupt, and unsettle these conscriptions. As we have seen, that certain sounds may be unable to escape the history that ties them to a specific visual identity need not, as Charlie Parker and Miles Davis both show, make them fully revelatory of that identity. By presenting itself as undeniably colored yet never quite readable as such, then, “Coo/Slur” participates in the tradition of jazz performance whose aim is precisely to foreground the black body as a *non-readable* entity.

From a poetic perspective, then, the issue, as it was for the Langston Hughes of *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, is not whether or not music can be accurately rendered in text, but whether or not the attempt to do so any longer communicates an authentic experience of identity. Like the poems in *Montage*, Mullen’s suggest that unreadability is a potentially constitutive condition of any racially-identified identity: as a set of words and lines animated by their relation to color, but reducible to neither a set of specific colors nor a set of words existing outside of the context of the poem, “Coo/Slur”’s engagement with color is both revelatory and resistant. In this, however, Mullen’s poem also evinces a mode of refusal different from that of Hughes’s poems. While Hughes’s poem detaches sound from identity, Mullen’s incorporates sound into its performance of color, all the while insisting that “color” cannot be read in any way other than proliferating and open.

It is not that the sounds in “Coo/Slur” are not evocative of color, nor that the poem’s “colored identity” does not gain its materiality in its sonic register. Rather, it is that sounds’ identity as colored depends on their sonicity being read in conjunction with their visuality, in a way that demands constant vacillation between the two. This refusal, the poem’s inability to be fixed within any given visual or sonic space or time, argues for color’s resting not in given ontology but emerging as the result of certain receptive *choices* the poem may enable but does not necessarily endorse. Both relying on and generated out of readerly performance, color here becomes a palimpsest of sorts, one whose levels are at once linguistic, visual, sonic, performative and interpretive. If the gambit of Charlie Parker and Miles Davis was to make the sonic signify most prominently its inability to signify, “Coo/Slur” situates its color-inflected voice within a web of mutual and incompatible techniques of reading, hearing, performing and imagining.

This, then, is this poem’s contemporary reading of blackness: to always stand between various interpretations, to be fixed as that which is never fixed, or only to be fixed by slurring the lines between aurality and visuality. A body and a voice perpetually deconstituted and reconstituted, “Coo/Slur” achieves identity only by being read (red) again and again, yet with different performative choices each time. Let us remember Ed Roberson’s “multiple spot,” the impossible fissuring of a single point into multiplicity. In this poem, as we see, the very idea of singularity is evaded from the beginning; to even attempt to identify any such moment is already to be caught within the web of sonic and visual implication precluding any definitive reading. Rather than oppose aural culture to written one, Mullen locates color precisely in the time and space between them. “Coo/Slur” doesn’t just create sound; its meaning is found only in its sound. But this meaning is also equally in what that sound is not. It is not, put differently, that

“Coo/Slur” disputes the real existence or experience of color – the “pure people” it proffers are not denied their experiential history. Rather, the very “purity” of “pure people”—the process that assigns fundamental status to visual appearance—is a condition both highly contingent and ever-present, operating only in this conjoined, at-once-mutually-exclusive-yet-mutually-necessarily relationship between perceptual states.

It is by way of this condition, then, that Mullen’s poem links jazz’s foregrounding of the body to the always-unformed temporality of improvisation and the indeterminacy of meaning imbued into each note and silence of an improvised solo. In Mullen’s case this temporal exigency is of course poetic, not (strictly speaking) musical. Yet by inhabiting a time and space always *between* any number of performative possibilities, I am arguing, “Coo/Slur” works much like the set of chords over which a jazz solo takes place, adopting the very idea of “form” I have been developing throughout. Caught between ontological states, each of which gestures to its other and is incomplete in itself, the poem provides infinite ways of being interpreted or performed, none of which, like any one particular jazz improvisation, will ever be *the* correct performance. Indeed, to even understand or comprehend the poem as something *to* be read is already to preclude a great number of its explicit interpretive possibilities. Perpetually foreclosing the possibility of there being a potential correct reading, or even a *singular* reading, Mullen’s poem is not only never finished, it is in a sense never really started. It is in this sense that the poem is never given as fully *present*. Like a jazz solo, “Coo/Slur” gains its ontological status precisely from the pervasive interruption of the unfinished into it, its indeterminacy located in the space between a never-fixed movement of sound and a never-fixed movement of the visual.

That this poem imagines itself as a type of music in this vein is made clear in the “Slur” in its title. Insofar as “slur” connotes a disparaging remark, the poem as a whole registers language’s role in the historical logic that turns visual difference into a debased category. But “slur” is also, importantly, a musical term, meaning to play notes in succession without articulating each independently (much like slurring one’s speech). Which means that “slur” functions not only as a description of what being identified as “colored” often means, but also a potential instruction for performing the poem, since to hear some of the words as colors, that is, demands that one slur when reading. As a guide for performance practice, for *aural* performance practice, “Slur” thus sets the poem as a musical score, one whose visual components are stitched into the very fabric of its voice.

Which is finally to say that within the logic of the poem, “Coo/Slur” poses colored sounds as that which makes the textual readable as such. This is a poetry whose voice is realized not so much in a sonic imitation of jazz, but through an individually-realized presence that is *essentially* jazzy, with all the possibilities and restrictions such a term involves. Neither a representation of a colored body or poem whose sounds or visuals signify on the categories with which colored bodies have been historically associated with certain sounds, the poem offers itself *as* a colored body, one whose materiality is realized in the always-incomplete time of improvisation. As a voice that makes indubitably present its socially-relevant materiality in time and space, yet in so doing troubles any deterministic or naïve attempt to read this body into it, “Coo/Slur” thereby offers a voice that suggests a deeply contemporary and experimental way of thinking about jazz, one that retains the historical implications and specificity of jazz in all its technical, musical and cultural guises, while refusing to reduce itself to a naïve notion of voice that locks its status into a singular role. Indeed, in this fashion, we might term the notion of

voice offered here the “post-jazz jazz voice.” And insofar as this condition indicates a constitutive state of unfinished-ness, it is perhaps one worth inhabiting further.

# Straight, No Chaser

Thelonious Monk

The musical score for "Straight, No Chaser" is presented in four systems. Each system consists of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The first system has three measures with chords F7, Bb7, and F7. The second system has three measures with chords Bb7 and a whole note chord. The third system has three measures with chords F7, A-7 D7, and G-7. The fourth system has three measures with chords C7 and F7. Arrows point to the first beat of the initial motif in each system.

Thelonious Monk, "Straight, No Chaser." Arrows indicate beats on which repetitions of the initial motif begin (not including pickup note).

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