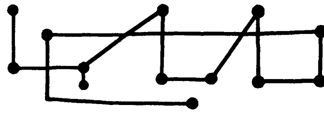
Cecil Taylor, Identity Energy, and the Avant-Garde African American Body



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Critic Greg Tate opens a 1983 essay on composer/pianist/poet Cecil Taylor with the assertion that the latter's "art pushes the question of Afro-American identity beyond mortal ken" (Tate 1992 [1983], 24). The question of identity is pervasive in discussions of African American musics, leaving critics able to comment generally that their work will, for example, "attempt to draw some broad continuities between the heterogeneity of musical expression in jazz improvisation and the heterogeneity of cultural identity found in African American musical communities" (Monson 1994, 285). To find "heterogeneity" in musical identity is an easily establishable matter in the case of much jazz, more so today in light of the proliferation of digital sampling in hip hop and the numerous, overlapping, and often ambivalently contradictory texts enacted in hip-hop performance.[1] That bebop was largely built out of what James

Patrick in 1975 called "melodic contrafacts" expropriated from popular tunes of the early 1940s is a virtual given these days:

> Many contrafact compositions derive at least in part from solo improvisations on well-known tunes and the blues. In general there are two possibilities. The original solo line (or a close variant) may appear as part of a composition either in its original (or similar) harmonic context or in a completely different harmonic context. The original material may often be nothing more than a pet phrase which becomes formalized as . . . a contrafact composition. (Patrick 1975, 7)

This expropriative paradigm for music improvisation/composition lends itself particularly well to claims like Ingrid Monson's (cited above), but the literalness of expropriations is by no means a constant in the crafting of a heterogeneous identity, nor is the expropriation reducible in almost any case to irony and/or parody, as Monson seems to suggest.[2]

In fact, heterogeneity may be an unsuitably vague nominalism that signifies nothing more than that a critic can and does recognize several contrasting elements in an art-piece. With the emergence of avant-garde improvisational jazz in the mid-to-late 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and on, questions such as identity in music become increasingly pressing and increasingly complex but are, ironically, largely absent from contemporary critical discussions of arts during the period and/or critical work on African American musical identity. Paul Gilroy's recent historicization of the importance of music in the African diasporic world finds that

> music becomes vital at the point at which linguistic and semantic indeterminacy/polyphony arise amidst the protracted battle between masters, mistresses, and slaves. This decidedly modern conflict was the product of circumstances where language lost something of its referentiality and its privileged relationship to concepts. (Gilroy 1993, 74)

The disjunction between "language" and any "privileged relations to concepts" again becomes recognizably and widely acute before and during the civil rights era and the period known now as the "Second Reconstruction" in the U.S. The official hegemonic political rhetoric of equality and democracy, increasing in intensity in the face of the cold war, was attacked both in numerous articles, books, and artistic productions, and in the numerous marches and protests that had begun most notably and intensely in December 1955, with the Montgomery, Alabama bus

boycott and had taken fuller flight in early 1960 with the Greensboro, North Carolina student sit-ins (Sitkoff 1981, Marable 1992). This is of course the period when previously revolutionary musics of the African diaspora were supplanted in their positions *as* avant-garde by the playing of Taylor (whose first recording was 10 December 1955), Ornette Coleman (whose 1960 *Free Jazz* LP gave rise to that generic term), Albert Ayler, John Coltrane, and scores of others. Heterogeneity, then, was cast through the prism of a highly political present where spaces for critical discourse were newly opened.[3]

The emergence of the avant-garde jazz musician/composer as an intellectual commentator on the political present, prone to delivering trenchant criticisms of culture both obliquely in full-throttle improvisations lacking traditionally cohering elements such as recurring melodies or identifiable harmonies or equally timed rhythms, and overtly, in interviews and album-jacket liner notes, happens in earnest for the first time in the early and mid-1960s.[4] Ornette Coleman (1961) had written the liner notes for his LP *This Is Our Music*, but otherwise musician/composers had rarely authored the often analytically based notes which have accompanied jazz recordings since the early 1950s and were most often authored by paid jazz critics. Even more rare was the occasion for a composer/performer to do anything further than act as explicator and explain his/her music.[5]

Relatively unprecedented, then, Cecil Taylor's 1966 LP *Unit Structures* (Blue Note 84237; CD reissue 1987, Capitol Records) had for its liner notes a critical essay-cum-prose poem, authored by Taylor, which simultaneously theorized the place of improvisational musicmaking in U.S. artistic culture, how that improvisational performativity related to jazz traditions, and how it was a critique of U.S. history, culture, and power relations therein. Far more than asserting a "heterogenous" identity, "Sound Structure of Subculture Becoming Major Breath/Naked Fire Gesture" theorized an aesthetic renegotiation of performative space and time and in so doing incorporated critiques of European-derived epistemologies and the cultural history of the African diaspora.

Taylor sought in the essay a communalization through his performativity, and this theorized a fluidity of identity not simply "heterogeneous" but powerfully rooted in historical interrogations and the implicit spirituality Taylor insists upon in these critical acts. Taylor comments in a 1984 interview that "the exploration of history is a spiritual process, in order to be able to judge one's self" (Buholzer and Breger 1984, 6). This cumulative temporality is not absolutely determining but offers knowledge as a means of self-understanding, something Taylor cites as key in improvisation. Ingrid Monson argues that "improvisational music . . . is a form of

social action, as well as a symbolic system; . . . that musicians articulate cultural commentary with sound itself" (Monson 1994, 313). Cultural commentary needs to be sought, though, with flexible parameters, since an artist such as Taylor made "space" for himself to expound in prose as well as in performance, carrying the social action/symbolic system continuity out of the record's grooves and onto its more visible, readable jacket.

Before "reading" Taylor's 1966 essay, it is important to note Paul Gilroy's challenge to the "folk-cultural, narrowly ethnic definition of racial authenticity" that he challenges "in the name of rhizomorphic, routed, diaspora cultures" (Gilroy 1993, 28). The rhizome, introduced to postmodern critical theory by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1983), is described by them as a "weed" but actually is meant to signify the absence of hierarchy (a simple definition of "rhizome" from the Second College Edition of *The American Heritage Dictionary* (1982, 1059) defines the botanical item as "rootlike," growing horizontally "under or along the ground" and sending roots beneath it and leaves above it). No clear binary dichotomy, then, can be maintained between the "leaves" and the "roots," since either ends and begins inexorably where the other begins and ends. Routed, *pace* Gilroy, through the discursive apparatus surrounding his musical performance, then, Cecil Taylor's performativity is situated amidst his astonishingly expansive diasporic critical discourse. Deleuze and Guattari comment that "[Music] has always sent out lines of flight, like so many 'transformational multiplicities,' even overturning the very codes that structure or arborify it" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 11–12). The "lines of flight" in Taylor's oeuvre and in numerous other avant jazz improviser/composers' incorporate, to be sure, the "heterogeneity" critics seek out, but the subsequent identity constructed by performativity would be shortchanged if left as merely "heterogeneous."

Heterogeneity, the centerpiece to much cultural criticism on African Americans, seems incongruous with diasporic (ancestral, historical, et cetera) discourse, mostly because of a critical poststructuralist hegemony which Gilroy challenges as a

> new analytic orthodoxy . . . [which] suggests that since black particularity is socially and historically constructed, and plurality has become inescapable, the pursuit of any unifying dynamic or underlying structure of feeling in contemporary black cultures is misplaced. The attempt to locate the cultural practices, motifs, or political agendas that might connect the dispersed and divided blacks of the new world and of Europe is dismissed as essentialism or idealism or both. (1993, 80)

Gilroy's concomitant focus on "ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean" as an "organising symbol" for some of his critical moments seeks not to literally retrace or redraw the diaspora but to

> focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural artifacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs. (1993, 4)[6]

Here the "roots" implied by the rhizome are simultaneous with the "routes" knowledge has taken, and with knowledge comes, in Taylor's aesthetic paradigm, a spiritualized historical sense that presents problems to critics more inclined towards formalist processes characteristic of contemporary criticism. In one of a mere handful of scholarly books on avant-garde jazz, Anthony Braxton scholar Ronald Radano addresses the rise of spirituality "as an aesthetic category" in late 1960s Chicago but comments that such spiritualism "might seem hopelessly subjective to the formalist critic who seeks to put a finger on the musical attributes of artistic greatness" (Radano 1993, 103). So Taylor's connection of history and spiritualism frustrates the sorts of "formalism" Radano has in mind and Gilroy critiques.

In traditional criticism of African American musical and performative aesthetics, as the latter has noted, reversion to "folk-cultural" paradigms is standard—and troubling. Juxtaposing the narrowness of such "folk-cultural" criticism and the aesthetics of historical recovery and interrogation (often accused of essentialism), Gilroy crafts a body of critical tools suited particularly well for Taylor. Likewise, historian Robin Kelley answers "formalism" with the concept of "infrapolitics" to describe modes of resistance which fall beyond the designated spectrum of contemporary critical analysis. Kelley rightly admonishes the schools of thought which have cast aside so many modes of protest in favor of the written record and the formal institutions of protest and organization.[7]

Perhaps because the album jacket (and now the CD insert booklet) have rarely been considered legitimate sites of protest or intelligent critique, there has been scarcely any critical discussion of Taylor's groundbreaking essay, despite the fact that it clearly cast a formally designated "public" space into a new discursive mode for the jazz artist, reflecting the ways in which Taylor interrogated that panoply of other "public" spaces like the stage, the nightclub, the tune, and so forth.[8] Perhaps as important as the tripartite model of Anacrusis, Plain, and Field which Taylor outlines in "Sound Structure" is his use of a spatial/architectural

term, "structures," for his compositions, and the ambiguously mechanical (but also suggestively martial) term, Unit, for his ensemble. The "structures" sound creates are not taken for granted as previously existing before the "opening field of question" (Taylor 1966, 1) occurs musically. Taylor's focus on the movement from "Anacrusis" to "Plain" is partially poetic/musical and partially geographic: Anacrusis comes from the Greek "*anakrousis*" for "beginning of a tune" and refers in prosodic terms to the unstressed syllables at the beginning of a metered verse line.[9] "Plain," we see, is for Taylor simultaneously musical and a geographically open but significantly unnamed flatland: "each piece is choice; architecture, particular in grain, the specifics question-layers are disposed deposits arrangements, group activity establishing the 'Plain'" (Taylor 1966, 1).[10] There is a simultaneity which becomes powerful as it moves from Anacrusis to Plain, from player to player to group:

> internal dialogue mirror turns: player to nerve ends, motivation "how to" resultant Unit flow. The piano as catalyst feeding material to soloists in all registers. . . . At the controlled body center, motors become knowledge at once felt, memory which has identified sensory images resulting social response. (Taylor 1966, 2)

The importance of "motor responses" cannot be overstated, as the body is the locus of the improvisatory process. The "knowledge at once *felt*" (my italics) transfers itself into "memory," and there couples with the "manipulation of known material," all in conjunction with time, whether a time signature or just the *time of performance*. The "resultant Unit flow" is an orbit in which players, amalgamations of known *material* and experiential energy, move. Taylor's focus is clear, "resulting *social* response." The "Unit" comes to fruition in the "Structures" they, in fact, actively build. That this process occurs proceeding from a term borrowed from traditional prosody to terms overtly spatial and expansive, addresses the cultivation of space (perhaps purely figurative space) achieved in the Unit's utilization of available "structures."

Limited to a music-theory discussion of the pianist's compositions and improvisations, Ekkehard Jost's 1974 discussion of Taylor's music was the first to approach it in a scholarly manner. As a trained musician and professor of musicology, Jost was prepared primarily to discuss the music and did not move beyond it. Significantly, though, Jost did discuss Taylor's music vis-à-vis a concept of "energy" that was more complex than a simple understanding of what that term might indicate. Jost described the "energy" of Taylor's music as "a variable of time" and argued that "[energy] creates motion or results from motion; it means a process in

which the dynamic level is not just *one* variable, and by no means a constant" (Jost 1974, 69). Bodily energy has long been insisted upon as fundamental to free jazz performance, with Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka) insisting in *Blues People* that the "kinetic philosophy" of avant-garde jazz improvisation differs little from "Negro music since its inception in America" (Jones 1963, 235).[11] Regardless of Jones's "always already" kinetic philosophy, his own discourse, like that of Taylor, was contemporary with (and certainly had an influence on) the proliferation of increasingly bodily oriented avant-garde aesthetics in the early 1960s.

From his focus on the piano "as catalyst feeding material to soloists in all registers," with the pianistic "Attitude encompassing single noted line, dyads, chord cluster, activated silence . . . played percussively" (Taylor 1966, 2), Taylor's insistence upon the physicality of his performative improvisationalism widens to discuss the multiply centered African diasporic and African American body organization as expressed in dance. Roger Abrahams notes that "In European social dancing the body is maintained as a single unit of behavior . . . with a strongly unified torso . . . and the center of balance . . . located at the sternum" (Abrahams 1992, 98).[12] This attempted expression of singular, individual control, Abrahams argues, was instrumental in the delineation of dancers' binarily divided genders and races. Taylor remarks in "Sound Structures" that while "hearing" is essential to players being able to "face away academy's superfluity" there is a "catharsis" in pelvic "undulation" that implies polymetricity in the body's complex dancerly organization: "Would then define the pelvis as cathartic region prime undulation, ultimate communion, internal while life is becoming, visible physical conversation between all body's limbs: Rhythm is the space of time danced thru" (Taylor 1966, 2). That the "conversation" is both "physical" and "visible," encompassing the body's entirety, suggests that instead of a "single unit of behavior" à la Abrahams's discussion of European social dancing, there is a physical "doubleness" that actualizes motion and kinesis in musical thought and execution and vice versa.

In Jost's discussion of Taylor's "energy playing," he insists that two coordinates, "impulse density and accent frequency" work to create a "subjective tempo" that he juxtaposes against the regularity of the traditional "objective tempo." Concomitant with Taylor's single-sentence collapse of time-space into rhythm and dance, Jost couples "density" and "frequency," one spatial and the other temporal, to capture the simultaneities Taylor seeks. Historicizing the increased aesthetic interest in the body on the part of avant-garde artists, Sally Banes writes that the early 1960s saw the rise of the "effervescent body" which served as "a profoundly political symbol" whose "boundaries are permeable; its parts are

surprisingly autonomous; it is everywhere open to the world" (Banes 1993, 191). And it is likewise a differently "permeable" body Taylor seeks, with tremendously historical attributes and knowledge, but with permeability that can at once be oriented towards the head and all its limbs.

Making it a point to emphasize the interrogative dialogue between the body's "gravity centers," Taylor's "energy" playing has been enhanced by his note clusters, which, Jost notes, are elemental in the disruption of the "traditional division of roles into soloist and accompanist" (Jost 1974, 75). Such simple observations are resoundingly important for discussions of Taylor, because the hierarchies which resemble that between soloist/accompanist are profuse in American culture and are elemental to hegemony in musicmaking. Spatially, the pianistic decision to utilize the entire keyboard at will, all in the process of "feeding material to soloists in all registers," disrupts even the most farreaching chordal inversions of bebop and the postbop musical interventions prior to Taylor. Without generalizing about Taylor's *intentions* as an artist who engages political ideas in his art, who, in Barbara Christian's words, theorizes performatively in "dynamic rather than fixed" musical ideas (Christian 1990, 336), it is important to recognize the disruptive and resistant modes of performance Taylor enacts, especially in light of both jazz tradition and the effervescent body which Sally Banes discusses. In Banes's paradigm, the body that can aesthetically theorize by way of "excessive eating, drinking, sexual activity and every imaginable sort of licentious behavior" (Banes 1993, 193), is almost surely a white body whose liberty to act aesthetically thus is taken for granted and pushed to the limit. The avant-garde African American body, on the other hand, theorizes performatively by way of astute discipline in a group context where the body is not licentiously individual, as in Banes's discussion of the white avant-garde, but committed to the "Unit Structure" at hand. This black avant garde body recalls Robin Kelley's description of "dressing up" in bebop/zoot-suit hipster culture as "constructing a collective identity . . . presenting a public challenge to the dominant stereotypes of the black body" (Kelley 1994, 169).

The "Naked Fire Gesture" of Taylor's theory of jazz performance allows the "player" a self-generated but always communally directed expressive field: "The player advances to the area, an unknown totality, made whole thru self analysis (improvisation), the conscious manipulation of known material." Improvisation stands parenthetically between "self analysis" and "the conscious manipulation of known material." Improvisation, it appears, is the bracketed moment when consciousness is

enacted and becomes behaviorally directed at utilizing the power knowledge allows, the power to exchange this process with other Unit members maximizing the "Structure." And this all becomes "Joint energy disposal in parts of singular feedings. A recharge; group chain reaction." Time is elemental to this "recharge," as it works to free performative spaces for simultaneity ("group chain reaction") to be pursued and actualized.

Taylor argues/asserts that time is equally permeable in his paradigm as the newly cast individual/group space: "Time not seen as beats to be measured after academy's podium angle," where "Western notation," Taylor asserts, presents a blockage of the "total absorption in the 'action' playing." And the "material" played is decidedly musical and extramusical:

> What used to be continues begging/memory contained constructs growths growing aligned with orders of perception, a vision holding first awareness: how it was to be then—one saw to feel the tastes in association. In performance the body is tool of mind feel nerves and muscle speak all beings in suspension nerve on coition a wedding an aisle—Poets live to eat spirits commingle. (Taylor 1966, 4)

The erotic union of past and present happens bodily, in the present, as a function of improvisation, which functions between self-analysis and the conscious mix-it-upness of what is known. Again, the possibilities are numerous when time is looked upon as "fused pulse." For Taylor, it is human energy that lies beyond "*feeling*," and because of this, he says, "To feel is perhaps the most terrifying thing in this society" (Hentoff 1975).

Human energy and feeling is the "determining agent" for the "continuance" of music, and the performance of music, especially *his* performances, are best when they "make somebody else lose all sense of time, all sense of his own existence outside [of the performance]" (Hentoff 1975). Paul Carter Harrison echoes this in his introduction to *Totem Voices: Plays from the Black World Repertory*,

> It is *feeling* rather than strict adherence to form that allows the storyteller—be it Leadbelly or Coltrane—to adorn the bare facts of . . . recitation. The improvisational character of these recitations, or rather, public testimonies, is best realized when the blues mediator . . . is able to tap into the emotional flow of the audience, thereby producing the effect of public participation in a communal drama. (Harrison 1989, xxxiii)

The merger of the performer, s/he who enacts the story or composition, with the listener or reader, is most complete when the feeling, the energy, immerses both simultaneously in a performative improvisation where exact progressions are undetermined and surprise the performers as much as the audience.

Like Taylor's disruption of the soloist/accompanist dichotomy, this audience/performer binary is troubled by the lack of recognizable "regular" elements (i.e. Jost's "objective tempo"), fusing audience and performers in the unexpectedness of improvisational dialogue within the structures established by players' interactions. Again Paul Gilroy makes a prescient, general observation concerning this "refusal" of dichotomized entities, by asserting that "black cultural production,"

> seeks to refuse the categories on which the relative evaluation of these separate domains is based and thereby to transform the relationship between the production and use of art, the everyday world, and the project of racial emancipation. (Gilroy 1993, 74)

Taylor's recognition of this re-fusing is, like Gilroy's, initially one in which improvisation and musical performance is the "ground" for action. The martial implications of the "Unit" perhaps recall the history and contemporaneousness of resistant orality:[13]

> Facing down, the ground springs tired chains. Voices spring from the eye there, at corners-sleep. Hoarseness becomes rhetoric seasoned/as first distinct words lacerate grim oppression reality a behind vision tomb widowed enfeoffment jettisoned. New orders arise as combatants are shadowed corners conscience seekers. . . . (Taylor 1966, 3)

Whether the Cecil Taylor Unit is representative of the "combatants" whose "new orders" differ from those which created a "rhetoric seasoned" out of the "hoarseness" peppering the "first distinct words" that served to "lacerate grim oppression," is unclear. And perhaps that is but one of the "rubs" with Cecil Taylor; these excursions into protomilitant, "essentialist" discourse are simply unacceptable to the "new analytic orthodoxy" Gilroy critiques. This exclusivity is precisely what is absent from Taylor, whose musical indeterminacy is fostered by the catalogue of influences he has cited (see Spellman 1970). Nevertheless, there is a progression hinted in "Sound Structure of Subculture Becoming Major Breath/Naked Fire Gesture,"

> The unknown, ever before life force our spirit considers action in reaction. Unchangeables as we proceed to grip memory identifying images then sight appearance, voice. Man only begins transliteration of the mean with cognition, mind inside frame and fed thru body. Move forward recognition not in experiment but as test of their singularity, unity and sanity. (Taylor 1966, 4)

This progression of course weights the music Taylor makes (with the Cecil Taylor Unit and as a solo performer) with much of the transference of the "images" into "voice" as a part of individual and collective historical engagement.

Taylor, then, thoroughly interrogates the epistemological question of music as a phenomenological event and as a category for representation of history and identity. In his career, this questioning happens most pronouncedly surrounding a 1977 concert Taylor played with swing and boogie-woogie pianist Mary Lou Williams at Carnegie Hall. While critic John Litweiler notes the "demolition of Williams" that Taylor enacted in his "extremely long, complex lines, turbulent as ever and at his fastest speed" (Litweiler 1984, 217), Taylor regarded the concert as "completely successful" and regarded the shock Litweiler and other reviewers expressed as a product of their lack of journalistic skills and their faulty "concepts of music" (Rusch 1978, 3–4). Noting the simplicity of critics' expectations to hear "an attempt to reduplicate styles of eras gone past," Taylor invokes an idiosyncratic and ultimately indeterminate notion of the usability of past "styles,"

> you can respect . . . and perhaps even love musicians as I do [of] a lot of different eras . . . but finally what has to be agreed upon is what music is and what the specifics of the tradition and how you want to apply it to a given situation. (Rusch 1978, 4)

Taking figurative ownership of the styles presumed by ill-informed and biased critics (and, Taylor admits, Mary Lou Williams, who was, in Taylor's words, "furious" with the concert) to be "reduplicated" in the concert, Taylor asserts that the "major principles of musical organization that these people have given us are the property of all succeeding musical generations" and that his performativity is "not about resurrecting particular situation[s], artifacts from a museum" (Rusch 1978, 4). This critique of traditionalism is based on the shared understanding of "what music is" and not the assumed proportions of "jazz" performance asserted unquestioningly by scores of literary and cultural critics working with the African American tradition. Taylor's ante-upping interrogation

of "music" instead of "jazz" or even "tradition" challenges the construction of a *jazz tradition* thoroughly, even the construction which seeks to read tradition radically and with Du Boisian "doubleness" at its core, like Ingrid Monson's and, by her extension, Henry Louis Gates's.

African American music has become a given in much literary criticism and has been constructed such that irony and parody, for example, are so pervasive as to be utterly constant, even essential elements. The ease with which numerous recent critics working primarily in the literary realm have invoked African American and African diasporic musics as critical models or paradigmatic precursors for literary works is deceptive on at least two levels. First, correlations between black literary works and music are far more complex than, for example, Eleanor Traylor intimates in her otherwise fine essay on Toni Cade Bambara's underheralded 1980 novel, *The Salt Eaters*. Traylor says that the "jam session is the ultimate formal expression of the jazz musician [where] . . . all the various ways, past and present, that a tune may be heard" are presented (Traylor 1984, 59). The problems here are several and revolve around the dehistoricized invocation of the "jam session" and the "tune," two notions which were radically interrogated in the avant-garde era. Bambara, that is, did not craft her narrative in the wake solely of a jazz tradition that, as Traylor argues, had the archetypal jam session, where musicians improvise on a given tune for extended periods, as its most shining beacon. Indeed, the overt mixture of politics and music-making, the theorizing of performative, spiritual, and ideological space, that emerged in the avant-garde jazz of the 1960s (and most pointedly in Taylor's 1966 essay) is much more appropriately analogous for Bambara's fiction than is the "jazz" to which Traylor tentatively refers.

Similarly, Ingrid Monson uses the sibling modes of irony and parody to read John Coltrane's rendition of "My Favorite Things," Roland Kirk's "Rip, Rig, and Panic," and Jaki Byard's "Bass-ment Blues." Without engaging her argument for irony/parody in each of these particular tunes, it is important to note her citation of Gates asserting that "there are so many examples of Signifyin(g) in jazz that one could write a formal history of its development on this basis alone" (Gates 1988, 63, quoted in Monson 1994, 292).[14] A history based on irony/parody/Signifyin(g) would be an altogether narrow history as far as music like Taylor's is concerned. Indeed, Taylor's art would have to be defined by a lack, in this case of the seemingly "essential" elements Gates outlines in his concept of Signifyin(g). The boundary asserted by Gates/Monson assumes parody/irony to be characteristic of those musics within the jazz tradition, and thus this boundary asserts an "inner" that requires the question feminist critic Judith Butler asked about the inner/outer binarism surrounding compulsory heterosexuality and gay/lesbian subversion:

"From what strategic position in public discourse and for what reasons has the trope of interiority and the disjunctive binary of inner/outer taken hold? In what language is 'inner space' configured?" (Butler 1990, 134).

Keeping artists like Taylor "outside" the schema for "formal history" by way of a generalized indication that certain elements are *constant* in jazz improvisation and verge on being quantifiable as such is a market-cornering gesture built to ensure the authenticity of *one* rendition of the construction of tradition (Monson is sure to remark that her method is but one of many).[15] While Taylor may make use of irony and/or parody, it is not done in the sense of a binary "doubleness" but rather asserts a bodily permeability that is alternately erotic, aggressive towards an instrument, and indeterminately evocative of traditional sounds, as opposed to song texts or distinct styles. In any case, it is vital to discussions of performativity to approach the body as a theorized entity within the improvisational framework. The insistence on pervasive textual exercises or textual metaphors like parody/irony replicates the problematic Gilroy outlines thus:

> Textuality becomes a means to evacuate the problem of human agency, a means to specify the death (by fragmentation) of the subject and, in the same manoeuvre, to enthrone the literary critic as mistress or master of the domain of creative human communication. (Gilroy 1993, 77)

Invoking identity contexts for the moment of improvisation surely offers the improviser tremendous sustenance, and this invocation is incomplete until the improvisation/performance is enacted. As Ingrid Monson states, "the music is anything but peripheral to the construction of cultural meaning" (Monson 1994, 313). Whether or not Sally Banes's "effervescent body" is effective in discussing the kinesis of free jazz, the growing urgency of the civil rights movement and subsequently more aggressive tactics like Black Power call for work which deals with the African American *body* as theorized aesthetically amidst similar modes of theorizing happening simultaneously.

At least two problems are prevalent in such an academic venture, though: one being the general reluctance to discuss bodily/spiritual issues with the same aplomb as, say, Taylor has, and the other a general reluctance to seriously consider the "self understanding articulated by the musicians who have made . . . [music in the black Atlantic world]" (Gilroy 1993, 74–75). It is vital, Gilroy and Taylor argue, to take seriously what artists say about their aesthetics. Taylor argues specifically for

a unity of scholarship: "You can't separate . . . a person's being most privately from what it is they say they're doing" (Rusch 1978, 6). Of course what it is Taylor says about what he does is difficult to make clear, especially in his poems. But the coordinates of history, the body, and community seem at the least a skeletal (no pun intended) beginning for a discussion of his art and of African American arts of the body and theories of the body throughout the civil rights era and after. It is significant, for example, that Taylor's time-space foldover and communalist assertions in "Sound Structure of Subculture Becoming" predate those of Toni Cade Bambara, whose novel *The Salt Eaters* concerns the traditional communal healing of a small-town woman activist whose several-minute healing session comprises the entire novel.

Greg Tate's highlighting of Taylor's "pushing" of the question of African American identity is vital to recognition of Taylor as a central aesthetic and identity theorist in the African diaspora. Taylor's training at the New England Conservatory of Music (1951–1954) places him, as Jost argues, in close proximity to European modernist traditions. But this training gives occasion again for Taylor to assert both his identity theory and his connection to Duke Ellington: "Everything I've lived I am. I am not afraid of European influences. The point is to use them—as Ellington did—as part of my life as an American Negro."[16]

In a 1964 *New York Review of Books* article, novelist Ralph Ellison commented that "any viable theory of Negro American culture obligates us to fashion a more adequate theory of American culture as a whole" (Ellison 1966, 246). Rather, again, than claim heterogeneity as an inclusive adumbration of African American or American culture as a whole, it is imperative to look closely at what artists like Taylor propose as their aesthetic and how that aesthetic theory is contextualized both historically and in the arts which are asserted as constitutive of the theories.

Notes

1. For a refreshing array of discussions centering multiply on sampling and hip-hop discourse, see Rose 1994 and Robin D. G. Kelley's "The Riddle of the Zoot: Malcolm Little and Black Cultural Politics During World War II" and "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: 'Gangsta Rap' and Postindustrial Los Angeles," in Kelley 1994, 161–227.

2. Cf. Rose 1994, especially chapters 3 and 4. Also see Bartlett 1994.

3. For discussions of the politics of earlier jazz movements, see Stowe 1994, and Lott 1988. David G. Such (1993) cursorily examines the range of discursive and performative activities of avant-garde jazz musicians.

4. For a representative collection of musician comments prior to the avant-garde jazz "revolution" of the late 1950s and on, see Hentoff and Shapiro 1955.

5. See also Kofsky 1970, especially chapter 2, "Critiquing the Critics," 71–99. See also the sometimes distressingly simplistic biography of Coleman by jazz critic John Litweiler (1992).

6. Referring to Gilroy's use of the trope of the ship in the middle passage, critic John Corbett makes a persuasive, if brief, case for a rereading of the idea of "space" with Sun Ra, George Clinton, and Lee "Scratch" Perry in mind (Corbett 1994, 7–24). The use of "space" as a discursive mode, while important in literary and visual arts in the African American traditions and important as well in contemporary criticism of these works, is not meant to be deterministic in the way Jacques Attali treats free jazz. Attali claims free jazz, and its attendant discursive leaps, amount to "a cultural-economic reappropriation of music *by the people for whom it has a meaning*" (Attali 1989, 138–59, italics added). This is the flipside of what Gilroy calls the "new analytic orthodoxy," an embrace of the idea that free music was/is essentialist.

7. For a brief quote, see Kelley 1994, 8–9. Redrawing a map of twentieth-century protest is Kelley's entire project, and to fully understand what he accomplishes with his recapturing of informal protest, the entire text of *Race Rebels* is recommended.

8. See Jost 1974, 76–77, for a brief and entirely structural discussion of Taylor's liner notes.

9. Definitions of Taylor's lexicon from *American Heritage Dictionary* 1982, 105. For a thoughtful discussion of the album jacket, see Paul Gilroy's "Wearing Your Art on Your Sleeve," where he argues similarly to my argument here that record jackets "have escaped sustained consideration from cultural historians of the black experience" (Gilroy 1993, 239).

10. Pagination is according to the compact disc insert booklet which reprints the full text of the original LP's liner notes which covered the back of the record jacket.

11. Less satisfactorily, Jacques Attali echoes the long-held primitivist notion that jazz, as "a music of the body" was "unwritten [and] almost entirely tied to very localized cultures and audiences." Further, jazz primarily "expressed the alienation of blacks" (Attali 1989, 103). With so many stereotypes wrapped up in this rendition of jazz's aesthetic lineage, Attali's comment needs more lengthy rebuttal than I have space for here. Edouard Glissant points to a far better, more expansive, lineage for bodily/performative critique. See his *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University of Indiana Press, 1989) and Michele Praeger's brief "Edouard Glissant: Toward a Literature of Orality," *Callaloo* 15, no. 1 (1992): 41–48.

12. For a discussion of the relationship between gender and race, see Smith 1978 [1949, 1961].

13. The term "resistant orality" is best used by Harryette Mullen (1992).

14. With her ironic/parodic reading, Monson has limited herself to one John Coltrane performance, the first of his recorded tunes on soprano saxophone. Several disparate melodies were selected by Coltrane for his soprano, including the English traditional melody "Greensleeves," Mongo Santamaria's "Afro-Blue," and "Chim Chim Cheree" (from the popular film *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*). A more illustrative reading of "My Favorite Things" would, I feel, have considered the tune amidst these other selections before applying a theoretical model like Henry Louis Gates' signifyin(g), thus taking into account that maybe Coltrane was not so concerned with prevalence of "white" imagery in "Things" (as Monson suggestively remarks) but was seeking an outlet for expanding the soprano's range and effectiveness in an era when the horn was receiving little attention in jazz. After all, if irony and parody are at the heart of Coltrane's "My

Favorite Things," then what is at the heart of "Afro-Blue"? Is Coltrane being ironic with that selection as well? If not, have we relegated the African American artist to a proscribed position in selecting "My Favorite Things," a composition from a white composer? I am concerned mainly that "signifyin(g)" may become in Monson's piece a bit essentialist, freezing Coltrane in a particular type of musical relationship—one which we will never know explicitly since Coltrane deflected most questions about politics and aesthetics.

15. See also DeVeaux 1991 and Gennari 1991. Ronald Radano's introduction to *New Musical Figurations* (1993) is also instructive here.

16. Quoted from a 1958 interview with Nat Hentoff in Tate 1992 [1983], 25.

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