9 Freedom in the jazz imaginary

Twentieth-century aesthetic revolt

Salim Washington

Introduction

Since its inception, this music developed as an antidote to colonial domination. It not only serves as a potent resistance to the colonial condition, but also functions as an epistemological framework capable of providing answers to its fruits, many of which survive *de jure* colonial structures. The decolonizing efficacy of the music resides in its theoretical underpinnings as well as in its various practices. The proposed chapter is a theoretical intervention rather than a case study per se. I argue that the jazz imaginary is a Pan-African invention, its most relevant origins and reinventions occurring in the contexts of spectacular displays of unfreedom, whether in slavery, settler colonialism, or systematic race-based discrimination. The music fashions its own presentation of freedom over time, formally increasing degrees of latitude with respect to musical features such as rhythm, timbre, and melodic/harmonic development. The jazz imaginary, too, has developed to help shape the reception, critical commentary, and ultimately the aesthetic and social meanings of jazz in such a way as to give credence to (or in some instances to deny) the revolutionary import of jazz music and culture. My analysis will utilize the insights and methods of ethnomusicology, Africana studies, literary theory, and the burgeoning field of Black Atlantic studies.

I argue that the origins of black modernity for African Americans, which culminate in various jazz traditions, begin with the Atlantic slave trade for African Americans. The dreaded Middle Passage, and the conditions with respect to racial versus ethnic identity in the United States presented the conditions for Pan-African consciousness in a way that did not necessarily obtain in what we now think of as Africa. The music is marked since its beginning by a longing for literal freedom. The music begins its modernist trajectory both borrowing from and utilizing Western musical instruments and ideas, while at the same time extending, and at times critiquing and even subverting these same traditions from the position of the subaltern to meet their (evolving) cultural needs.

The musical history considered would include the introduction of Afro-Christianity that emerged after the Great Awakening and result in the

musical matrix and training ground for many of the musicians who would “invent” and develop early jazz, with examples from the music of the South Sea islands off the southeastern coast of the United States, demonstrating the early compromises between tonal and rhythmic practices that were developed from Europe and Africa. Later would come the introduction of blues and then the urban blues, in the states, Marabi and then mbaqanga in South Africa. In both countries the music’s artistic development is related to the changing position of blacks within the political economy. Later still, and with markedly expanded musical parameters, would come the mid-twentieth century, self-consciously modernist music. Examples would include Charles Parker and Bud Powell in the United States and figures such as Kippie Moeketsi and Barney Rachabane in South Africa. Even in this revolt there is a care to master the diatonic forms in much the same way as the strategy of civil disobedience appealed to the higher conscience of their erstwhile oppressors. This trajectory continued during the modal explorations of Winston Ngozi, Wayne Shorter, Philip Thabane, and the later more-revolutionary assault upon the diatonic system by the likes of Albert Ayler, Mongezi Feza, and Dudu Pukwana.

In each of these examples, there is a positive correlation between time periods and the greater liberties and license represented in the melodies, rhythms, and timbres of the music. Further, in each historical moment the changes in the parameters of the music are accompanied by significant social movements among the people, and also the jazz imaginary as represented through literature, commentary, dance, visual arts, and especially poetry which all developed in tandem.

This trajectory, though discernible, is certainly not entirely linear. This is particularly evident in the music of post-Black Power days in both countries. However, the perceived need to seek further freedom in certain musical parameters remains a significant part of both contemporary jazz and its attendant imaginary, if in a decidedly post-modern fashion. Examples could include, for instance, Zim Ngqwana, Andile Yenana, and most recently Mandla Mlangeni in South Africa, and the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Matthew Shipp, and hip-hop star Kendrick Lamar in the United States.

In an interview published as “Sonny Rollins on Jazz as a Music of Freedom”¹ the “Saxophone Colossus” recalls meeting and performing with Sun Ra toward the beginning of his career in Chicago in the 1940s when he was still known as Sonny Blount. Ra, one of the most philosophical jazz musicians in the history of the music, made a statement that stuck with Rollins even after six decades: “Jazz, in all stages of its development, had to do with freedom. Otherwise it wouldn’t be jazz.” Sonny Rollins is himself speaking publicly quite often in an explicit philosophical mode. Perhaps, in terms of collaborations with the architects of the tradition and historic recordings, Sonny Rollins is perhaps the greatest living jazz musician. The only peer in

these respects may be Roy Haynes. Unlike Haynes, Rollins can no longer perform due to health issues. He has donated his papers and has become quite vocal about his experiences and thoughts about the meaning of the music. Commenting on Sun Ra's comments about jazz and freedom, Rollins goes on to consider the mechanics of jazz practice, especially in relation to other black music traditions: "Jazz always seeks to break down barriers; there is also a fight, a struggle, the need to make a breakthrough, to create anew."²

The twentieth century was witness to stylistic renderings through music of one of the greatly protracted struggles against social and political unfreedom through the aesthetic revolt that is jazz music. The published record of the music via commercial and amateur recordings shows that Amiri Baraka was right—the music can be heard as a repository of the history and aspirations of African American people. As the historic political and social victories of black people over time fashioned increasing degrees of self-determination including milestones such as emancipation from slavery, evading the peonage of the share cropping system, and dismantling the legal basis of Jim Crow practices, so too did the degrees of freedom evident in the musical features and processes of music-making show increasing degrees of openness and inventiveness. Nowhere is this more dramatically revealed than in the history of jazz. The ever-increasing lack of restrictions was expressed through an expansion in the choice of instruments, the use of the body, the strictures of melody making, the conventions of harmony and forms, the timbres used, as well as the philosophical notion of what constitutes a beautiful sound. As much as the musical features expanded in possibility there was also a decided progression away from the hegemony of Western musical thought and practices toward the fashioning of what came to be understood as a black aesthetic. The innovations that characterise the music are not simply formal experiments, but also represent the yearnings and advancements of a people inasmuch as the technical innovations have social and political valences.

This history of blackness, this tradition of jazz for instance, as a constituent of, and commentary on Western modernity is in Fred Moten's words where essence and performance meet. 'Blackness is ... a special site and resources for a task of articulation where immanence is structured by an irreducibly improvisatory exteriority that can occasion something very much like sadness and something very much like devilish enjoyment'.³ An aesthetic tradition that is born of a social history of oppression and exploitation does have traceable elements that can seem like anguish, sadness, and so forth. But to only see that side of the equation is one of the more common if most profound misreading of the blues in particular and black culture in general. The radical trajectory toward freedom in jazz is built as much upon the vision and hopefulness of the African American people as it is on the degree to which the people have grown in the context of unfreedom.

Rather than use their creative energy toward nihilism, African Americans fashioned a freedom of the imaginary that foretells the world as they would have it.

The essential nature of African American music was established by the needs that it fulfilled, including conditions that predate the starting point of the music that would come to be called jazz. The beginnings of African American music are on the ships of the dreaded Middle Passage. It was a traumatic beginning of a people and its culture. Being not only captives but chattel, not only property but officially demonised out of full humanity, African American culture by necessity was created expressing the need for freedom and for a more expanded sense of humanity for all. In a situation in which those on the ship had come from diverse cultures and language groups, in a way Pan-African reality was immediately a part of African American culture. The ethnic ways of being would over time evolve into a racial identity, foisted upon blacks through ideologies (sanctioned by the European intelligentsia) and social practices (sanctioned by the European governments and those of their colonies). Slavers would bring African instruments on board and force the captives to sing and dance as an antidote to the sickness and death that the living conditions engendered. So, African American music is since its inception both Pan-African in nature and quite literally utilised for the psychic and ontological survival of the people.

One of the earliest innovations in jazz and in African American music in general is the musical instrument known as the drum kit. Perhaps, its origins can be traced in a way to the Stono Rebellion of 1739 in the colony of South Carolina. In the aftermath of the rebellion was the enactment of the Black Codes which prohibited the practice of African religion and the playing of African instruments, especially drums. Without the continuation of specific religious institutions and musical forms and instruments, such as occurred throughout much of the so-called New World, such as in Cuba, Brazil, and other countries, African Americans were forced to invent new forms and practices to incorporate their need for African expressions and epistemologies, as well as to express their Americanness, such as it was.

The voice was (and remains) the primary musical instrument of African Americans. The spirituals and other songs utilised in sacred and secular situations formed the musical foundation of United Statesian music. When the leading scholar of what we now call the American Renaissance, Ralph Waldo Emerson, made his famous call for the American scholar, he played a part in what has been an enduring American tragedy. He wanted the United States to cease being a second-rate Europe in culture and intellectual pursuits and to develop its native genius on its own terms. The irony, of course, is that this was already happening as he spoke, but the right audience was not at Harvard where he was delivering his impassioned address. It was occurring on the plantations among the slaves. This subaltern voice was already artistically proclaiming the truth about America in insightful and original terms (Emerson 1837).

It may seem odd to focus on the antebellum period or slavery in general when discussing the contours of jazz music. It must be remembered, however, that the period of slavery was roughly twice as long as the period post-slavery, and thus an all-important incubator of African American culture, be it music, religion, political struggle, family structure, and so on. There also appears to be a correlation between the degree of unfreedom and the consequent expansion of freedom expressed musically. While the most original and important music from the country during slavery was the spirituals, the 1890s almost miraculously saw the birth of three internationally acclaimed African American musics which would fuel and define the national culture: ragtime, blues, and jazz. The 1890s, termed “the nadir” of African American history by Rayford Logan, was a time when the racist backlash against African Americans was at a feverish pitch after the dismantling of Reconstruction, which was America’s most serious attempt at establishing a multi-racial democracy. The 1890s saw a vicious intensification of extra-legal violence (including lynchings and bombings) against blacks, the erection of legal codes designed to curtail the freedom of blacks, the curtailing of due process under the law, and the segregation in employment, in housing, and indeed in almost all other aspects of life under Jim Crow, the US version of apartheid. So, decades after slavery African Americans still lived in the main without political franchise, without economic democracy. The one area under which they exercised meaningful control was culture. Among African Americans, then, there was the greatest flourishing of social and cultural formations that occurred during the nadir.

Just as there was a type of prefigured freedom—heaven on earth—in the music of the slaves that was not available under the physical, historical conditions, the music gave release of the innermost needs and desires. In the church there persisted the transcendence through trance, music, dance, and spirit possession. In the secular end of the spectrum in the jook joints, cabarets, and jazz clubs there was the improvisation of possibility through melodic improvisation and even group improvised form.

At the time that the three music forms began to attract international and critical attention, ragtime, blues, and jazz were not so neatly separated as the historiography of hindsight and categorisation might suggest. People that the history books have cemented as “jazz musicians” often used the term “rag” for instance to describe their music, and the first significant blues records were sung by blues goddesses backed by the likes of Fletcher Henderson or Louis Armstrong and other jazz musicians. By the jazz era the sacred world view that obtained during slavery was firmly a historical matter. Yet, music across various divides, including sacred/secular, continued to develop alongside one another, borrowing freely, and collaborating with and listening to one another. With the blues came first-person narratives, new dance forms, sexual mores, and entertainment designed to bring elegance and truth into the lives of black folk. Ragtime brought the piano, a type of European formalism, and self-conscious syncopation. Jazz brought

improvisation, Swing, and the transformation of the function and technique of several European instruments to fit the dictates of African American music making. The hybridity of the music forms included all of these elements as well as the stylistic features of each music genre. It mirrored the social hybridity that resulted from the Great Migration from the rural areas to urban areas and from the South to the North, where down-home country values mixed with urbane sophistication.

These forms developed around the great invention of the rhythm section, which was built around the drum kit. Eventually, certainly by the turn of the twentieth century, jazz musicians invented the drum kit. Around this kit, the most innovative and important New World instrument, was built a fundamental organisation of music that was unique, the rhythm section. The rhythm section typically consists of the drum kit, a bass instrument, and a chordal instrument. This section improvises together in such a way that they determine the tempo, meter, and idiomatic feel of the music. It represents a compromise between the polyrhythmic drive of African music with its untampered melodies and differing rituals of repetition and the metered, functional harmony of Europe. While one can legislate against specific practices such as hand drumming or the use of African languages and religions, one cannot legislate against one's way of being or feeling in the world. The ontological integrity of blackness survived the Black Codes and presented the world with new forms and practices that performed a vision of freedom that could not be contained by prescription.

Much more than a compromise really, the drum kit enacts the African American foundation of modern music. Whether the music is jazz, or blues, or gospel or R&B, hip-hop, or any of the countless variations of these, the rhythm section is the organising element in all of these musics. Throughout the world, most vernacular musics and popular musics are built around a rhythm section determining the feel, temperament, meter, and tempo of songs which feature singers and/or horns that improvise and perform compositions on top of the tapestry created by the rhythm section. Even countries with continuous hand-drumming musical traditions from Africa to the New World such as Cuba often incorporate rhythm sections alongside their drumming in their various popular musics. The jazz invention has changed the form and nature of the vernacular musics of modernity.

Thus, jazz has introduced a new way of modelling the world. The rhythm section combines improvisation, or individual expression, with the imperative of working jointly in groups to propel the music forward (a la Baraka, let us consider Swing, funk, both as verbs). Though this composite rests upon agreed upon conventions of cooperation, it nevertheless supports freedom, originality, and uniqueness. Indeed, this is one of African America's claims about what it means to be modern. The signifyin' practice of the soloist, along with the communal cooperation of the rhythm section necessary for the ensemble to Swing, be funky, or what have you, is a testament to the importance of freedom to a people whose origins are in various states of

unfreedom. This notion of freedom is not to be confused with unfettered license. While the soloist is free to sing her song or play her own melodies, for the most successful or profound music there must be an organic relationship between her ideas and those of the rhythm section. This organising principle of jazz brings to mind the Zulu saying, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*. That is to say, a person is a person because of people.

The most important institution with respect to the incubation and establishment of the music is undoubtedly the black church. This was so when the black church was largely underground during the antebellum period especially. Afro-Christianity has provided the universe in which African modalities could be ritually enacted in the United States. In the church music primary purpose was to enact what Lawrence Levine calls the sacred world view (pp. 3–18). This sacred world view which obtained in the music's prehistory during the centuries of slavery, when the music allowed visitation from the spirit world, where the paradigmatic actions of the culture's heroes and ancestors, be they Moses or Jesus, or even the General "Moses" aka "Harriet Tubman" herself could be invoked, and Divine visitation through the Holy Ghost could transform the nation's downtrodden and marginalised into heaven-bound Saints of God. These practices, including the musicking, were done by black people for black people. That is, there were no purse strings attached to the institution allowing control outside the affected group. Thus, this is a rare site where black autonomy reigned. The cultural and practical foundations for all the African American music of the twentieth century, from jazz and blues to funk and rap, were and are institutionalised in the black church.

Of course, there is quite a range of types of churches and congregations in black Christianity, and there is also a range in the degree to which a particular church or congregation might subscribe to the nation's dominant ideologies in the hegemonic dance between religious practice and thought and the class-inflected discourse that is expressed in individual instances. But in general, the cultural autonomy of the church has allowed it to be the de facto musical conservatory of Afro-America. Jazz, blues, funk, and rap are the most well-known music forms that can claim their origins within the black church. Music in the church serves the same function that it did during slavery, and indeed during the Middle Passage: it was the most plastic art form that served the ontological needs of African Americans. This is why Baraka would famously say that the blues is important to all legitimate jazz (Jones 1963). The term "legitimate" in this case is a racialised one, perhaps signifying on the long-standing practice of calling European Art Music (Classical Music) "legit(imate) music" while referring to improvising practices as "faking" it. What the term undoubtedly means, however, is that jazz is a music that was created to answer and present the psychic needs and cultural ideals of black people. That there is a legitimate history of jazz created by mostly European Americans is acknowledged, but differentiated from the blues-inflected jazz (no matter the "race" of the musicians playing it). An

excellent example of this distinction is made in Edward Bland's film, "The Cry of Jazz", where the film's main character is explaining the meaning of jazz at a party where there are blacks and whites in attendance. The film has a didactic tone, but nevertheless manages to succinctly explain the causes, needs, and limitations of jazz as it existed in 1959.⁴ The proclamation in the film that "jazz is dead" is explained that the spirit of jazz necessarily remains vital even as its forms were then in need of further development to express freedom as imagined contemporaneously.

And it is so that the blues is the ur-form of twentieth-century Afro-America. It is the summation in secular form of the values of the antebellum period of the nineteenth century and the bold entrance into a radical modern self for twentieth-century African American women and men. Each subsequent American music form would be built upon the structures and aesthetic of the blues: Gospel, Zydeco, Second line, Dixieland, Swing, bebop, funk, trap, rock, etc.

The blues as a music form has the distinction in its classical form of being neither major nor minor in tonality. Rather, it is built upon the dominant seventh chord as a tonality. Classically, it begins with the dominant seventh chord, continues its modulation to another dominant seventh chord, and ends with the dominant seventh chord. In the functional harmony of the West, the dominant seventh chord is not a stable resolution, but rather a transitory, unstable chord that must be resolved, usually to a chord a fifth below, either major or minor. If one consults the 29-volume *Grove Dictionary of Music* on consonance one would find several articles, even one written in German. If one consults the word dissonance, there is a single sentence. Consonance and dissonance are not absolute terms, but are culturally and historically determined. What is considered consonant or dissonant varies from culture to culture and also over time. In the functional harmony that governs most of Western music a consonance is stable, (a resolution), whereas dissonances are unstable and must be resolved. The dominant seventh chord is the maximum state of instability and the V-I cadence that governs harmonic music is based upon the dominant seventh, which is the seventh chord built upon the fifth degree of the scale, resolving down to the tonic or home key. The instability of the chord is centred around the fact that there is a tritone between the third and seventh scale degrees. This tritone is either the most dissonant interval or the most interesting interval in the diatonic scale. It must, then, resolve to a stable consonance. In Western Art music, dissonance is something that must be handled carefully in service to an ultimate resolution.

The blues is built upon a different harmonic aesthetic. The tritone that at one point in the theory of European Art Music was called the devil's interval is not something that one must avoid or treat preciously in the blues. After all, blues legend Robert Johnson was said to have made a deal with the devil to attain his musical mastery. Though the fact that he met the devil at the crossroads surely points to the fact that it was not the Judeo-Christian devil, but rather Elegba of the Yoruban pantheon. Elegba (also known as Eshu or

Eleguá in Latin America) is encountered at the crossroads and is the orisha that governs entry. Erroneously seen as the Devil by Christian moralists in the New World, Elegba is actually a trickster and as such is beyond good and evil, certainly not such a Manichean figure as the Devil.

The blues in its ethos and practice cuts against the normative grain of American culture. For instance, it flaunts the sexual mores of the dominant society. During the 1920s when a blues craze brought to the world's attention artists like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, these artists and many others openly practiced bisexuality and lesbianism, for instance, and included these themes in their music. Coming from the rural and urban black proletariat, the music was decidedly against the sentimentality of US popular culture. The boy-meets-girl-and-lives-happily-ever-after trope of romantic songs was replaced with honest portrayals of not only love and happiness, but also betrayal and loss. In a music form that went against the implied closure represented in functional harmony, the blues gave voice to unapologetically black points of view about the lives, real and imagined, of regular non-idealised black folk, completely absent of the need to resolve social tensions by invented fictions.

In jazz there is a saying, "it's not what you do, it's how you do it". The classic blues built its harmonic form around chords that are in fact the mainstay and foundation of European functional harmony, the tonic, the subdominant, and the dominant. In the blues, however, the expectations of this I-IV-V harmony are problematised by its choosing what heretofore was an instability as the basis for its form. It also bolsters the cyclical nature of the music form and thus implies that there is often no neat resolution to be had. This reliance upon repetition and cyclicity has other examples within the Black Atlantic. One striking example is *mbaqanga*, another twentieth-century Afro-modernist music is from South Africa. *Mbaqanga* also relies upon the I-IV-V sequence as its harmonic basis. In fact, young musicians routinely refer to both the form and the way of playing as "one four five". *Mbaqanga's* relationship to South African jazz is quite similar to the relationship between the blues and African American jazz. *Mbaqanga* incorporated the message, musical and otherwise, of other contributing streams to South African jazz such as *Marabi*, and set the aesthetic and stylistic tone for much of what is most compelling about South African jazz. Also, like the blues, it highlights cyclicity. Despite its functional basis, *mbqanga* relies upon repetition and danceability to be a successful act. That is, the teleological assumptions normally implied in Western functional harmony are suspended for both the blues and *mbqanga*. Added to this non-sentimental approach to musical meaning is the dance beat orientation of both music forms. In each case a newly urbanised proletariat existed as an oppressed and despised people. The terpsichorean emphasis in the music on joy, and on black bodies, and *pleasure* was in itself a bold insistence upon the humanity of black people, as well as their relevance in a cosmopolitan modernity (Snead 1998, Jaji 2014, pp. 1–23).

Both the blues and *mbaqanga* are ur-tropes that helped to map the intellectual development of Afro-Atlantic cultures. These musicians were in a sense self-conscious, Gramscian organic intellectuals. In 1966 South African writer Lewis Nkosi commented on the similar place in cultural history that the two forms share:

The industrial culture in South Africa especially, more than anywhere else on the continent of Africa, provides an ambiance where fusion between the Western and the African heritage has gone so far as to produce a new urban idiom. *Mbaqanga*, upon which South African modern jazzmen are constantly feeding, is really a fulsome (sic) of American jazz forms with some of these African strands I have enumerated. On any day in Johannesburg you can see shabby unemployed young Africans dancing on the pavements of the city to this jive music which is relayed by loudspeakers from inside record shops. If they survive the constant police raids, some of these kids, like Miriam Makeba, have gone on to conquer the world stage.

(Nkosi 1966:36 quoted in Kubik 2017)

In roughly contemporaneous times, the blues and *mbaqanga* became the music of the black proletariat and urban poor of each respective nation. Both forms would be dance beat-oriented. Both would be disseminated through recordings. And both would provide the well spring from which future distinguished jazz musicians would drink to tie to a tradition their future innovations.

And these innovations must need come in order that the music reflects and influences the expanded social conditions, and to meet the demands of the people with whom and for whom the music was created. Throughout the rest of the century in both countries the “common practice” musical parameters of the music would become increasingly free. Free in the jazz sense of an expansion of what is permissible, a redefining of the scope of practice-deemed idiomatic. For the blues, and in South Africa *mbaqanga*, the tuning of melodic content deviated from the diatonic system in ways that are consequential. The placement of blue thirds and sevenths in the melodies introduces a worrying of the very notes that determine whether a chord is major, minor, or dominant. This tendency toward elision of functionality is furthered by the fact that either the major or minor third can be perfectly idiomatic no matter the quality of the chord type. The hierarchy of tones within the diatonic system is thus subverted in the blues in much the same way that functional harmony is refashioned in a form that is based upon dominant chords. According to Gerhard Kubik, the partial-based tuning system used in various parts of Africa proves resilient in various encounters with Western instruments and music. It explains the blues tonality and intonation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century blues and also that of *mbaqanga*. Listen to tenor sax maestro Duke Makasi’s “blue sevenths”

in “Inhlupeko” (Suffering) by South Africa’s Soul Jazzmen.⁵ Interestingly, “*Inhlupeko*” shares the same music form as the jukebox hit record that became a famous anthem in the anti-apartheid movement, “*Yakhal’ Inkomo*” by tenor saxophonist Winston Mankunku Ngozi. Translated as “The Cry of the Bull” “*Yakhal’ Inkomo*” also uses *mbaqanga* (also in Eb major) in the main theme and Swing over jazz standard ii-V-I harmonies during the bridge. The cry of the bull also speaks to the sufferings of black people; the cry of the bull, an important part of the slaughtering ritual in the isiXhosa culture, represents its distress at seeing its fellow creatures slaughtered. Thus, in the same year South Africa’s two leading jazz tenor saxophonists wrote and recorded a protest song written over the same form. It’s as if John Coltrane had written an analogous suite in 1957 as Sonny Rollins’ *Freedom Suite*.

The first real flowering of jazz was centered in New Orleans at the turn of the twentieth century. The collapsing of the tripartite racial system in which Creoles were distinct from those categorised as either black or white resulted in Creole music practice melding with black musical practice. The raw improvising and the blues tonality of black musical practice joined with the musical literacy and formal complexity of Creole music. At its best this innovation in practice and form created artists like Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong who both delivered some of jazz’s first recorded masterpieces. The history of jazz as heard in its canonical recordings reveals that in musical parameters, such as rhythm, melody, harmony, and timbre, each generation of jazz musicians routinely expanded their sense of freedom through the techniques and practices of the era.

If the 1910s and 1920s gave rise to a polyphonic response to the hybridity and cosmopolitanism of black New Orleans society, the 1930s and 1940s saw the entrance of black music into mainstream white society through the dance craze around Swing music as a genre. This occurred during the first waves of the Great Migration when thousands of blacks left the South and travelled Northward and Westward, altering the demographic composition of America’s industrial cities as they did so. While the North did not prove to be the Promised Land it was expected to be, there was to some degree a welcome relief from some of the more onerous aspects of Jim Crow law in the South.

Swing was a music dominated by big bands and as such had greater structures, often with written music, designed to have many musicians play at once with clarity and order. While the various horn sections, saxophones, trumpets, and trombones might play homophonic passages, usually in call and response counterplay, there was a greater emphasis also on the virtuoso improviser. With the adoption of jazz as the pop music of the day, the dance music for the youth, Swing witnessed a degree of Americanisation of jazz and African Americanisation of US mainstream culture.

Star soloists, most emblematically “Prez”, tenor saxophonist Lester Young, began to expand the possibilities of jazz improvisation. In earlier

years, Louis Armstrong became an innovator when he gave improvisation greater harmonic relevance and rhythmic fluency in his virtuosic solos of the 1920s. Prez became one of the first major soloists to use the cool approach in contradistinction to the hot soloists that dominated the tenor saxophone such as Coleman Hawkins and Chu Berry. Young also liberated the soloist from the restrictions caused by the vertical arpeggios of the chord running style of improvisation. Now the melodic content could be more horizontal, thus freeing the soloist from the burden of articulating every single chord in detail. The hipness that Prez embodied relied in part on his ability to float above the harmonies through rhythmic inflection and harmonic implication. When we listen to the extant interviews with Lester Young, we can hear the insistently hip and modern voice he chose to speak in (it almost sounds as though instead of the 1950s he could be speaking in the 1970s or indeed today), mirrored in the vocabulary of his improvisational approach.

Perhaps, the capstone of Afro-modernism was in the 1940s–1950s revolt of “modern music” (so named by the musicians themselves), known canonically as bebop. Riffing on Ralph Ellison’s observations about bebop’s uncrowned king, Charlie Parker, Eric Lott says in “Double V Double Time: Bebop’s Politics of Style” that ‘Bebop was about making disciplined imagination alive and answerable to the social change of its time’ (Lott 1988). Ellison explained Bird’s grace and musicianship with a poet’s grace, but also ruminated about the inner meaning of the bebop generation’s muse.

Parker operated in the underworld of American culture on that turbulent level where human instincts conflict with social institutions; where contemporary civilized values and hypocrisies are challenged by the Dionysian urges of a between-wars youth born to prosperity, conditioned by the threat of world destruction, and inspired—when not seeking to total anarchy—by a need to bring social reality and our social pretensions into a more meaningful balance.

(Ellison, p. 49)

Ellison, in his review of Reisner’s biography of Parker, gives a more penetrating analysis of what bebop meant in artistic terms than virtually any contemporary writer, despite what we know about his disdain for the modernist from his now published private correspondence with his friend and mentee, Albert Murray. Bird might not have been Ellison’s personal taste, being mired in the aesthetics of the Swing era, but he understood the music brilliantly in terms of what was at stake artistically. Lott builds upon this to reveal the political significance of bebop. He ties the music to the anti-war sentiments of black and Latino youth cultures and the counter-cultural aspects of the modern music movement. The reluctance of black people to participate in yet another capitalist war that bolstered European imperialism

was assuaged by the Double V campaign—victory against fascism, at home and abroad. And like Ellison, Lott ties these phenomena to the virtuosity of the music.

Both writers see bebop as a revolt against mainstream American music and social mores. The modern music movement did represent the most thorough going intellectual achievement in jazz music, and is studied by all jazz students and would be musicians desirous of a classical jazz technique. The music dazzles with its extension of rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic possibilities, its use of the upper structures of the chords, its knowledge and utilisation of the classical world of music and the vernacular musics of the day including the blues, and, of course, its blinding virtuosity. What is only hinted at in Ellison's remarks, however, is that the modern music movement was an attempt to *outperform whites at their own game*. These musicians were committed to upholding the logic of functional harmony, only they did it with more complete harmonic understanding, with more complex rhythms and melodic structures, and at faster tempi while *improvising*.

A stunning achievement, but still somewhat within the musical universe of European functional harmony. This was in keeping with the mode of contemporaneous political activism and protest. The 1950s saw the cresting of the historic Civil Rights Movement (CRM). The CRM was concerned about the racist exclusion and segregation of America in its economic, social, and political life. While black people often could not vote, could not live wherever they desired, could not work in whatever profession they aspired to, could not attend schools of their choice, and so on, the *de jure* laws of the land said that they could. It was forcing America to live up to its promise that the judicial and social aims of the CRM were based on. And because of this there was a perceived need to continue with the politics of respectability that obtained in black political and activist social circles. Protesters and activists obeyed the law and showed better decorum than those whom they protested against. Non-violent civil disobedience in the face of lawless vigilantes and the most demeaning and spectacular violence. They took the fight to the courts and pushed for legislation. That is, they obeyed the laws and proved their humanity by living up to and exceeding the normative expectations for first-class citizenship. Similarly, the beboppers' ultra-modernist revolt continued to adhere to the rules of functional harmony even if their harmonic and rhythmic palette was greatly expanded. The combination of this erudite approach to music with the vernacular urgency of the blues marks this classical music as a capstone in Afro-modernity.

It would take the succeeding generations, however, to bring the musical revolt to full-fledged revolution. The Free Jazz and New Thing movements from the late 1950s to the 1970s would usher in the most thoroughgoing critique of Euro-modernism in jazz history. The post-bop experiments of artists like Ornette Coleman and Eric Dolphy began to loosen the functionality of the beboppers' praxis. By the 1970s after the October Revolution and the

ascension of artists like Archie Shepp and Albert Ayler, following the lead of Coltrane's late work, the New Thing ushered in an astonishing flowering of music as part of the Black Arts Movement.

This is the music that eschewed the practices and expectations of European American music in the most far-reaching way. It was more than symbolic that often the piano was absent in these new ensembles, and certainly functional harmony was no longer adhered to. The sounds of the horns regularly included shrieks and moans, within and beyond the normal range of the instruments. These moans have always been part of Afro-American music. But the new jazz practice privileged these sounds over the cleanly articulated gestures of the bebop movement. Also, the regular propulsion central to Swing was often abandoned as was the use of meter. Tempered intonation, long held as a measuring stick, was no longer always relevant. The explosion of sounds and practices announced a resolution to play on the musicians' own terms and to not be restricted by mainstream values and to not be beholden to whiteness, culturally or politically. The new coterie of musicians seemed to highlight more than a generational divide. It was as though a political manifesto was being issued, something that was explicitly alluded to by the writings of Archie Shepp, for instance, the explications of the new music by Black Arts writers and theorists of the culture such as Larry Neal and Amiri Baraka, and the naming of Bill Dixon's new music series as the "October Revolution", literally invoking the Bolshevik revolution.

There was political and social organisation that accompanied the stylistic advances in jazz. In Chicago the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) was founded, in St. Louis the Black Artist Group (BAG), which included other artists such as dramatists and sculptors. In Brooklyn the Collective Black Artists (CBA), in Los Angeles the Union of God's Musicians Artist Ascension (UGMAA), and others were started to provide the support for the new music for which the established industry had no place. Often the new music was played in privately owned lofts or community spaces. So, the geography of the industry shifted to accommodate the new music and the new organisation of musicians.

The new musicians were tired of trying to be recognised by the club owners, critics, and festival organisers, and thus took matters into their own hands, while creating a music that was fresh and exciting. This was part of the Black Arts movement, itself the artistic wing of the Black Power movement. The Black Power days were different in scope and method from the political work during the Civil Rights Movement. Where the CRM was centred around lawfulness and respectability toward the end of winning a moral victory over racists to force the nation to amend its ways, the Black Power days saw young people who felt that those methods were exhausted and the victories hollow. All deliberate speed, the mandate that the courts tasked America with in desegregation was ignored in both the South and elsewhere. Young people took to the streets rather than the courts, often after horrific incidents of racist police brutality. These were the days of urban

insurrection in which scores of cities erupted in flames and property destruction, claiming lives, with thousands of arrests, millions of dollars of property damage, the loss of control of the cities, and even deaths. Just as young activists began to feel that new methods were necessary to achieve their political ends, new jazz musicians often believed that new ways of playing were necessary to invoke the spirit of the times.

In South Africa there was a spate of urban uprisings as well, often reductively called the “Soweto uprising”. In fact, the black youth across the nation participated in this rebellion. Ostensibly about the students’ refusal to be instructed in Afrikaans, it was a rebellion against the Apartheid government and its way of life, its scientifically systematic oppression of the masses. Concomitantly, in music and poetry there was a Black Arts movement to accompany what would be also known in South Africa as the Black Power movement. Artists such as saxophonist Robbie Jansen and poet Lesego Rampolokeng would rise to prominence giving voice to the rage of the oppressed and the urge for freedom felt by the black masses.

During the 1980s there was a retrenchment of the revolutionary activities of the previous decades. In the United States, there was a rise of black conservative thought that reached the elite levels of academia and government. Public figures like economist Thomas Sowell and Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas were certainly from a different political stripe than predecessors such as Thurgood Marshall (whom Thomas “replaced”) and Angela Davis or Cornel West, both public intellectuals and social theorists. In jazz the decade saw rise to the top of the industry a group of musicians who were classists rather than mavericks. No longer were the elite jazz musicians searching for revolutionary utterances; they were reviving and championing an earlier, classic phase of jazz history. This was a new occurrence—the youngest most talented black jazz musicians playing the music of an earlier generation instead of reinventing the received practices and language. No longer was innovation the yardstick by which they were meaningfully measured. It was often presented as a technical matter to a large extent. Young musicians had to prove how technically proficient they were especially in the context of the neo-hard bop movement. The undisputed leader of this movement, trumpet prodigy Wynton Marsalis, not only proved his mettle in the Jazz Messengers, led by veteran band leader, Art Blakey, but also proved to be exceptional in European Art Music as well. At 19 he won Grammys in both categories.

Mr. Marsalis is the world’s most powerful jazz musician in history, even more so than Duke Ellington. He wields enormous institutional power and influence, especially since he has headed the jazz program at the prestigious and well-funded Lincoln Center. As he solidified his position as the official voice of jazz, Marsalis cleared the air by drawing the lines of the canon decisively and clearly. No longer considered canonical were the right and the left. That is, he dismissed most of the experimental pathways explored, nor the electronic, and especially not the commercially oriented were now held

in suspicion if not outright derision. It seems that in the decades-old feud between Ralph Ellison and Amiri Baraka, the two most influential black writers on jazz, Ellison's view prevailed. The elegance of the art form and the maintenance of a veritable tradition with canonical recordings and repertoire bands are more the order of the day than the revolutionary incendiary music championed by Baraka. While Baraka was a fully fledged music critic in a way that Ellison was not, it was Ellison's view that travelled through Albert Murray to Wynton Marsalis, the dominant voice on the contemporary jazz scene both as practitioner and as commentator.

The jazz neo-conservative movement came to prominence simultaneously with the hip-hop movement. It was in the hip-hop art forms, including rap music, where the proletarian, urban black agenda was being discussed and mused over artistically. And its reign continues till the present, as does rap music if not all of the various forms that came to prominence at the inception of hip-hop. Perhaps, the neo-hard bop direction of jazz has allowed hip-hop to take not only the reigns of youth culture in pop music but in jazz as well. One of the most interesting post-modern iteration of jazz is Kendrick Lamar's "For Free?" The fusion of gospel, rap, and jazz is used to stunning effect. Lamar's rap is reminiscent of a type of 1950s Sammy Davis Jr.-esque type of patter. The music settles mostly into a modal vamp a la Coltrane Classic Quartet minus Coltrane. The words in the lyrics are not respectable, and employ profanity as part of its artistic arsenal. In this risqué diction, one hears the language of the streets and the philosophy as argued among the black working class. One is reminded that jazz and blues at their inception were not respectable genres, were not part of the mainstream culture in the way that it has achieved under the leadership of Marsalis. Initially, not only did white journals and taste-makers object to the music but the black middle class was not always supportive either. Someone squeamish about the format, diction, and vocabulary that Lamar uses might easily miss the social and political messages that the song is ultimately about. This in your face, irreverent use of the vernacular that is a call for freedom that is cathected with libidinal energies while being hyper aware of the various levels of unfreedom that exist—socially, politically, economically. Perhaps, it will take a person like Lamar to bring the sense of urgency and danger, the revolutionary fervor that has been the birthright of the music for over a century.

While I agree with Dr. Cornel West in the opinion that it is in the tradition of music that houses the most thoroughgoing interrogation and critique of the West, the jazz imaginary also goes beyond music per se and includes practices in other arts, most especially the literary arts. In black literature, the jazz imaginary has significant achievements and developments in poetry, short stories, novels, essays, biographies (especially autobiographies), and of course the articles and books that deal with jazz analysis and history.

In the case of poetry, much is known and acknowledged about the symbiosis that can occur between the two art forms, inasmuch as poetry in some

sense directly correlates with music. There is a large body of literature that explores this, so my remarks will be brief.⁶ Most importantly, both forms, improvisatory music and poetry, explicate through inference. And then there are the more obvious ingredients of rhythm, cadence, meter, voice, and so on. And even further in a tradition which is tilted in importance toward the oral rather than the written forms of poetry, timbre and energy become other significant musical ingredients. To witness first hand “Somebody Blew up America”, by Amiri Baraka or Lesego Rampolokeng reciting “Tears of Marikana”, is to gain important emotional and semantic content not always evident on the page. Not just the sound of these poets projecting with the charismatic craft that musicians employ, but also the aesthetic stance of the work, which is to say the political and artistic reality invoked, is more fully realised in its oral form. Baraka’s insistent repetition of “Who!?, who!?” as he slams his fist upon the lectern while listing the last 500 years of Imperial conquests of the West (especially the United States) reminds me of a gospel preacher in the Afro-Christian tradition. The momentum in the rhythm and cadence along with the idiomatic use of repetition helps the listener understand the gravity of the words, of the magnitude of the history that is being interrogated. Similarly, in South Africa, Lesego Rampolokeng’s carefully crafted poem, “Tears of Marikana”, does indeed mark the solemnity of the strikers’ purpose and preparation, their brutal assault by the state sanctioned police force, as well as the systemic nature of this oppression, its representation of the failure of (state) capitalism in South Africa. His performance, along with the accompanying music, lends gravitas to the poem. The introduction of capitalism to South Africa is a particularly vicious one, one that encapsulates the theft of land, the systemic undermining of the black family, the enforced status of lumpen proletariat, and other horrors. We are so much living within this reality that it is easy to be numb to it. Worse, we can lose sight of the fact that while this arrangement precedes Apartheid (our current favourite designation of White Supremacy) and goes back to the origins of South Africa as a nation state. His performance of “Tears”, however, shows the disgust toward the captains of industry; it highlights not just the exploitation of the workers, but the very *inhumanity* of those who created their desperate state and those that massacred them for daring to request a living wage from a company making billions of US dollars in profit. Above and beyond the indictment for political and economic oppression, the jazz performance rendered through Rampolokeng’s poetry brings us into consciousness of the human dimensions of the conflict.

Fiction, especially in short stories, novels, and drama, is a very fertile ground for the jazz imaginary. There are of course many fictional tales where jazz or jazz musicians are featured. But there are also stories in which jazz becomes more than a prop or background; in these stories, jazz is featured as

a character, capable of affecting and progressing the plot through its own agency. These stories are fascinating for what they add to the jazz imaginary. Consider Ann Petry's "Solo on the Drums", a short story that hints of a fictionalised performance by a drummer in the Count Basie band. Kid Jones takes the solo of a lifetime. The power of his solo is not rendered nor heard in technical musical terms. Rather, it is heard as a force of nature, like thunder. Its genesis is bound in the need to transcend the ache of the drummer's possibly being made a cuckold by the band leader. Rather than mimic the emotions secondary to the treachery of betrayal, the music brings Kid beyond his sorrows as he fashions music that is powerful and potentially healing. Petry is an author that understands quite well that the blues impulse while "fingering against the jagged grain" of pain, as Ellison would have it, musically is closer to transcendence and even joy than it is to sorrow.

Another way in which jazz is personified in short fiction can be found in Baraka's "Screamers" which includes a fictionalised account of a performance by Lynn Hope (also known as El Hajj Abdullah Rasheed Ahmad). The context is a nightclub where a set of competitions are taking place. One is an implied contest between the honking tenor saxophonists—Big Jay (Big Jay McNeely?—a prime exemplar of the honking tenor style) and Lynn Hope—and the other, a class competition between the black middle class and the black working class. The tenor sax battle is a staple in jazz practice, but in this narrative it is elevated to class struggle as represented musically. Baraka, born to the manor of black middle-class culture but deeply distrustful of its political and especially cultural worth, has the narrator ridicule the class consciousness and colour-struck politics of this most maligned class. While Big Jay is playing, the contest between the classes is described from a patriarchal view of who will score with which women, light skinned women from "our camp" or women from "those niggers". Lynn Hope's performance results in the people carrying him outside and bringing a procession through the streets. The class contest is no longer about who will win the game of night club romancing, but rather about who will take to the streets in protest and who will walk away from the politicised action. The police come and attack those "Biggers". That is, Richard Wright's protagonist from his *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas, is referenced to underscore the inchoate protest carried out by the Screamers.⁷ Jazz is thus not only a site for the imagining of freedom, but a catalyst for political action.

Black South African novelists have a very distinguished tradition of jazz writings, of using the music to frame the social and political needs of their fictional worlds, and as a commentary on the aspirations toward freedom of black people in general. Interestingly, even though South Africa has a more than century long history of jazz performance, ranging from the music of nineteenth-century minstrel troupes enshrined to this day in the Coon Carnivals of Cape Town, to the modern music of Kippie Moeketsi, to the avant stylings of Andile Yenana, the novelists are decidedly and self-consciously

Pan African in their rendering of the jazz imaginary. Four novelist in particular stand out: Mandla Langa, Mongane Wally Serote, Fred Khumalo, and Nthikeng Mohlele.

Mandla Langa's *Rainbow on a Paper Sky* uses the music to provide understanding about the political trajectory of its three protagonists. The novel is a bildungsroman of three siblings and also a bildungsroman of a black village during late Apartheid. The music can inspire a joining with the spiritual and political expressions of the community, or could be a back drop for self-interest, or an entry into a transcendent consciousness. The music is not a figure for sainthood; the sibling who became a professional musician was a political sell out, collaborating with the apartheid government to ensure his celebrity. Rather, in Langa's treatment of the music we are made to understand that the music and the musicking actually enact a set of understandings that can be accessed with differing levels of profundity and efficacy. Through important encounters with the music one sibling becomes a prophet and another an activist. In his short story, "The Naked Song" places the figure of the failed musician and would be revolutionary in apposition to the Soul music that inspired hope for the younger generation.⁸ In *The Memory of Stones*, Langa also extends the jazz imaginary to interact with what could be called South African magical realism. The reality of the interaction between the ancestors and living actors in black South African ontology, the living and the "living dead" allows the music to also bridge these realms into one world. That the ancestors are on the side of justice and provide succor for the politically righteous (the community of black folk trying to survive the murderous machinations of first the colonial government, then the apartheid regime, and finally corrupt developers) lends metaphysical support to the imaginary of freedom.

The metaphysical strength of the jazz imaginary was famously treated earlier in South African fiction through Serote's *To Every Birth Its Blood*, which is written in two parts. The first a torturous rendering of the atrocities of apartheid and its effect upon a single protagonist and his family. He is rendered impotent in his ability to connect with his job, then his wife, and then his mistress, in particular, and eventually life in general. The back and forth of his descent and his struggles against it, his brief heroic attempts at life are narrated through music. The patron saint of the novel is clearly John Coltrane, but this is held in contrast with Miriam Makeba, Jonas Gwangwa, and other South African artists. The American jazz narrates and animates alienation, whereas the South African jazz artists provide the same functions for domestic reconciliation. Grippingly, the stalemate between alienation and inaction is broken in part two of the novel with an eruption of Soul music. With this music the protagonist becomes the black community and the alienation and impotence of Tsi, the protagonist of part one, is replaced with the political organisation and sexual urgency of the youth.

If Coltrane is prominent as the muse of revolutionary South Africa and its struggles against white domination after the Nationalist government took reign, Miles Davis appears as the patron saint for literary protagonists in post-1994 South Africa. In Khumalo's *The Longest March*, depicting the forced march of the Zulu people in 1899 in preparation for the Anglo-Boer War in South Africa, John Coltrane is again the patron saint of the work. In fact, the book is divided into the four movements of Coltrane's most acclaimed work, *A Love Supreme*⁹ (the original title for the novel), "Acknowledgment", "Resolution", "Pursuance", and "Psalm". This is an anachronism of sorts, but it is consistent with practice of Coltrane's spirit aesthetically overseeing the resistance to the colonial despotism visited upon black people.

But in Khumalo's earlier novel, *Bitches' Brew*, which deals with post-apartheid era of South Africa, the patron saint is acknowledged by both the author and the protagonist (who is also one of the narrators as *Bitches' Brew* is an epistolary novel) emphatically to be Miles Davis. Similarly, Mohlele's two jazz novels, *Small Things* and *Illumination*, both attest to a dystopian society devolved from the halcyon spirits of liberation in 1994. Davis, dubbed the dark prince of evil by some, is an artist with the type of ambiguity necessary to represent the ways in which one of the grandest modern heroic efforts is also accompanied by terrible greed and corruption. With Mohlele we see a further development of the figure of the failed musician explored earlier by Mandla Langa, and by synecdoche a failed society and nearly a failed state. Whereas Langa's failed musicians highlight that it is the communal agency of the art form that can engender liberation rather than subscribing to the hagiography of the artist, Khumalo's and Mohlele's use of the failed artist reflect the ways in which the society and the state have been compromised. These fictional artists live in a time of great social inequality, violence against women, state corruption, misogyny, and capitalism run amok. Behind the scenes, of course, is the compromise made at the very beginning of South African democracy in which black labour continued to be marginalised and abused.

The spiritual aspirations of the musicians are vulnerable to the social realities in which they operate, and in some ways doomed to failure. It is very interesting that Miles Davis is positioned as a patron saint for the protagonists in these novels. Davis is universally celebrated for his creativity and importance in modern jazz. He is also held in suspicion ethically because of his aesthetic choices, especially his merging with rock. There is an ethical back story as well; Miles Davis was an abuser of women. Couple this behaviour revealing his personal demons with the notion that he was willing to sell out musically, as well as his devil may care attitude toward propriety (including the prudish notion of the critical establishment that he should not join forces with the rock revolution of the 1970s), does indeed make Davis appear to fit in interesting ways with narratives that deal with aesthetic ambition in the face of the dyad of societal decay and political and economic

betrayal. Within the novelistic traditions of modern-day South Africa, Miles Davis' example that greatness does not necessarily imply perfection gives space for a departure from the hagiography that Coltrane still enjoys to this day. From his penchant for vulnerability and willingness to even miss notes (notes whose "absence" are still pregnant with meaning), Miles Davis' praxis opens a dialogue about the nature of competence, and the ontology of substance in music. Mohlele and Khumalo are asking the same questions within the jazz imaginary with respect to post-apartheid South Africa.

Within the jazz imaginary the jazz autobiography is especially illuminating as they can go beyond the preoccupations of professional biographies which concentrate on who played what with whom where and when. It's not that the autobiographies do not concern themselves with this type of documentary function (though on occasion such as Charles Mingus' *Beneath the Underdog*, they very pointedly do not), but they are more firmly in the realm of the jazz imaginary as they attempt to make meaning of their involvement in jazz, and even contemplate the importance of the music writ large. Mingus' autobiography is significant for the fact that in one way of understanding it the work is a series of meditations about the nature of God and divinity particularly in the dialogues between Mingus and Fats Navarro. Embedded within traditions of the picaresque novel, replete with pornographic episodes and old-fashioned African American toasts and lies, the pronounced thread of divine exploration in the autobiography is perhaps a surprise. It is less surprising when the conglomeration of writing styles is compared to Mingus' oeuvre as a composer and band leader. His compositional palette is perhaps the widest among the major American composers, and his praxis as a band leader is not without a certain amount of deliberate chaos as well as exquisite control. Perhaps *Beneath the Underdog* is exactly the type of document we should expect from Mingus as he attempts the ambitious task of considering the real meaning of jazz from the point of view of one of the music's innovators. Charles Mingus is one of the greatest bassists, band leaders, and composers within the tradition, yet his autobiography chooses rather to emphasise the meanings of the tradition and praxis of jazz, and as such goes far beyond these concerns which would normally be highlighted in a biography.¹⁰

Similarly, *Treat It Gentle*, by Sidney Bechet, engages the jazz imaginary and its insistence on freedom through its framing of "good music" as always being related to the message of "Omar's Song". Bechet retells a Louisiana folk tale about the slave musician, Omar, but tells it as if Omar was Bechet's actual grandfather. The tale is a romance in which a jealous slave owner is in competition with Omar, the drummer and dancer of Congo square fame, for the affections of a woman, who is also a slave. The tale is fascinating as the narrative goes from Congo square dancing to the free maroon society

in the swamps, and back again to the slavocracy of Louisiana. The various classes represented in the characters of the romance include a treacherous slave who is a snitch as well as heroic blacks who helped the protagonist. There is also the lecherous slave owner with murderous intent. The music of Omar is about freedom, both aesthetically and literally, and it is cathected with the romance of love as well. By framing all of the music in this tale of slavery and freedom, betrayal and heroism, including the ultimate sacrifice, is quite an explicitly political interpretation of jazz music as told by one of the actual fathers of the music.

This may well be why the claim, made by Gunther Schuller and others, that Louis Armstrong is the first great improviser in jazz is so ubiquitous; in addition to Armstrong's preeminence, his persona proved more palatable for the desired narrative surrounding the music. (Remember all of the first critics and authors on jazz were white.) Bechet has a plausibly legitimate claim to that honour, but his unsavoury behaviour (Bechet had a penchant for gun play) and his political views make him more problematic as a symbol as one of the fathers of jazz, perhaps as important as Armstrong and Ellington who are the undisputed progenitors of the art form. While Armstrong's importance and greatness cannot be exaggerated, and also noting the nuanced and complicated nature of his self-presentation, there is a difference in the political import of Bechet's autobiography and those of Armstrong. In fact, Bechet, though technically a Creole who spoke French, identified both himself and the music as being from Africa unlike, for instance, Jelly Roll Morton, whose maturity as a composer predates even Ellington. Identifying the music as African, and especially framing the music's meaning as being born in the crucible of slavery, makes it harder to fashion jazz as a symbol of American nationalism with Bechet as the founding father than it is with Pops who is his contemporary.

The tradition of black critical engagement with jazz has been bifurcated, reaching a crisis point with the publication of *Blues People*, the first book length study of the music written by a black author. One wing begins with Amiri Baraka, and includes such figures as A. B. Spellman, Larry Neal, and now Kalamu Ya Salaam. For these commentators the music is revolutionary and freedom seeking. The other, now dominant, wing starts with Ellison, and includes figures such as Albert Murray, Stanley Crouch, and now Wynton Marsalis. For these writers, jazz is chiefly characterised by its elegance and craft. For these writers, jazz is the music of *America* rather than the subaltern voice of the American slave.¹¹ With the apotheosis of musical phenomenon, and inheritor of this line of critical engagement, Wynton Marsalis, jazz as America's music is presently the official interpretation of jazz as preached through the most powerful institutions of the industry such as Lincoln Center, the Smithsonian, the Pulitzer Prize, etc., and perhaps more importantly myriad college syllabi throughout the nation. It is important to realise that this was part of the price of mainstream acceptance of the art form, and that as ever there is an underground, unofficial theory and praxis of jazz whose history goes back to the Middle Passage.

This interpretation of African American culture and music, as originating most substantially in slavery, remains alive through a number of extraordinary contemporary writers. Among the most extraordinary are Nathaniel Mackey, Fred Moten, and Saidiya Hartman. First comes Hartman (1997) who investigated the subjection African Americans—even the most commonplace and quotidian ways in which it was enacted, endured and the ways in which it informed identity and even resistance. Moten (2003), taking his cue from Hartman, investigates the ways in which the aesthetics of the black radical tradition cut against, and utilise, the horror and pain of slavery and subsequent oppression. In particular, he is interested in the ways in which the black radical tradition and black aesthetics have their literary origins in the screams of Aunt Hester, who as a slave is the victim of rape and physical assault, as narrated in Frederick Douglass' autobiographies. Hartman's and Moten's works are among the most sophisticated discussions of black radical aesthetics available. For me, however, one of the most delightful investigations is enshrined in Nathaniel Mackey's *Bedouin Hornbook* (and of course *Djbot Baghostus's Run*, *Atet A.D.*, *Bass Cathedral*, and *Late Arcade* the following editions in the series, *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*). Through this series Nathaniel Mackey is able to give a glimpse into the experiences of a musician and the investigations of a scholar in one character.

Mackey's *Hornbook* is an epistolary novel. We only read N's letters to the Angel of Dust, though her letters are referenced in those written by N. N is a peripatetic multi-instrumentalist who is a member of the Mystic Horn Society. The group travels around on the west coast practicing, performing, discussing, and developing their music. N is a philosophically inclined, well-read, and deeply listened musician/intellectual who has heard claims including the mystical ontology of the music itself from the point of view of the musicians while simultaneously referencing the iconic musicians, performances, and recordings of an edgy musician who is unusually erudite. It is a masterful tale that will touch on the reader's sense of wonder and keep the jazz imaginary in play at all times.

Mackey's character, N, reminds us that the jazz imaginary also includes social dance, political communities, and activism. Ultimately, it is involved in a set of cultural/intellectual/spiritual practices that are codified in the music but which operate in wider fields of influence and praxis. The 1960s and 1970s were spectacular times for the jazz imaginary. Within the music itself was perhaps one of the greatest revolts against European and Euro-American hegemony. One of the results of this ethos was the organisation of musicians and artists in order to better present and promote the music, but also for the added power of political cohesion.

The most successful, in the sense that it still exists today, is the AACM, the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. It has expanded from its home base in Chicago to New York, and continues to be active and important. The definitive study is George Lewis (2007) in which we learn

from his meticulous notes and recordings of the AACM over years. We see from an insider's viewpoint how this organisation of black musicians from the South Side of Chicago made a mark and changed the course of experimental music. The same can be said for BAG, the Black Artist Group from St. Louis. It was only active from 1968 to 1972, the height of both the Black Consciousness movement and the Black Arts movement. Also, explicitly experimental, BAG differed from the AACM in that it was deliberately interdisciplinary, moving beyond just music (Looker 2004). Both of these groups were social and artistic, political and experimental. Their influence on jazz music is still quite powerful; many of their members remain prominent and influential musicians on the contemporary scene. While these are the most famous and the organisations whose influence on the music scene is most enduring, there were other similar organisations that formed in Detroit, New York, Baltimore, and elsewhere.

A final note must be made to the aggregations of jazz musicians who have formed literal communities. More than the brotherhood (and sadly, only to a lesser degree "the sisterhood" in many cases), these communities form around ideas that go beyond attracting journeymen into the fold. Chief among these is the UGMAA, the Union of God's Musicians and Artists Ascension. UGMAA was a collective of African American jazz musicians formed by Horace Tapscott in the late 1960s. It was part of his work with the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra. UGMAA differed from other musician collectives in that it was explicitly community centred and politically conscious. One did not have to be a proven brilliant musician to join. UGMAA played free concerts for the community in Leimert Park and aligned itself with the Black Panthers' free breakfast efforts and conducted a music school (Tapscott 2001, Isoardi 2007). The focus on community was first modelled by Tapscott himself. Instead of continuing his career with Lionel Hampton as a trombonist, he decided to stay home in Los Angeles rather than moving to New York and following the usual trajectory of musicians with ambitions of having national followings and significance. He stayed in Los Angeles nurturing the black community through music and social programs. Unlike musician communities such as Sun Ra's Arkestra in Chicago during the 1950s and 1960s, and later basing them in Philadelphia up until his death (with a sojourn to Harlem to collaborate with Amiri Baraka at the beginning of the Black Arts Movement), Tapscott's pedagogy was in a way more democratic. Sun Ra remained the leader in all ways, composing the music, rehearsing the band, and building the musical praxis of the Arkestra. Tapscott allowed the members to compose and lead and even record, often before they themselves felt ready. What resulted was a unique focus on the community's work toward the national black aesthetic. It is so interesting that UGMAA, despite its differing approach to professionalism, also ended up producing musicians of national importance.

The author joined with composer/saxophonist/activist Fred Ho in the 2000s to form the Scientific Soul Sessions (Ho 2009). Scientific Soul was a

revolutionary group that engaged in political study and organisation coupled with artistic expression and performance. The scientific aspect was the approach to political organising and the soul part was the insurance that the political endeavours would be governed by the insights inherent in the music and other cultural expressions. It was a direct continuation of the contributions made by the earlier groups discussed here with a desire to remain relevant, politically and artistically, in the twenty-first century.

Indeed, the jazz imaginary remains governed by the need for and the ideas of freedom as imagined historically by African Americans. Whether in the music itself, or in literature or other arts, or explicitly in political and social terms, the jazz imaginary is a fertile terrain for freedom.

Notes

- 1 From the *Quarantine Tapes* Podcast with Paul Holdengrüber, November 11, 2020.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 See Washington 2004, Monson 2007, Litweiler 1984, Moten 2003.
- 4 The film was actually prescient. The film makes the claim that the spirit of jazz was still alive but that the art form was dead. It was dead because the endless cycles of improvising over chord changes was a straightjacket that killed the freedom of expression and limited the formal possibilities available. In this very year, Miles Davis released his epochal recording *Kind of Blue* in which modal jazz is explored and Ornette Coleman threw down the gauntlet with respect to chord change playing and the need to transcend it with Coleman, Ornette. 1959 *The Shape of Jazz to Come*. Atlantic Records, 1317.
- 5 See Kubik, pp. xvii, 329–384.
- 6 Among my favourite discussions of this relationship between jazz and poetry are the various discussions in Kimberly Benston's *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African American Modernism*, especially his meditations on the Coltrane Poem. While Benston's interests are in the Black Arts oeuvre, Brent Hayes Edwards' *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination* offers insightful analyses of the poetics of more outré figures, Mary Lou Williams and Henry Threadgill, and the magisterial Nathaniel Mackey. Edwards is primarily interested in the literary tradition as evidenced by writings my musicians themselves, and he begins with the canonical fathers Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington. His inclusion of Mary Lou Williams, Sun Ra, and Threadgill reveals that he is interested in the breadth and longevity of this literary tradition.
- 7 "The Screamers" by Amiri Baraka is anthologised in Baraka, Amiri. 2000. *The Fiction of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka*. Chicago: Lawnrnce Hill.
- 8 This figure of Soul music as representing the liberating force found in young people is also placed in Langa's novel, *Texture of Shadows*. In Mongane Serote's master jazz novel, *To Every Birth Its Blood*, we see again the trope of hopefulness (and action) of the youth being inspired by Soul music.
- 9 Coltrane, John. 1965 *A Love Supreme*. Impulse! 1764903.
- 10 Brent Hayes Edwards' (2017) *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination* is a tour de force study that offers a very insightful and nuanced discussion around the writings of Louis Armstrong. In *Epistrophies* Edwards considers Jazz's literary imagination through the writings of canonical musicians including founding

fathers Ellington and Armstrong and founding mother Mary Lou Williams. He even discusses the micro-poetics of song titles analysing the work of Henry Threadgill.

- 11 It is beyond the scope of this chapter to consider why these writers accept American nationalism while excoriating the proponents of black nationalism. It is curious, however, that the political conservatism of this wing of black criticism would emerge triumphant just as jazz reaches mainstream importance.

Works cited

- Baraka, Amiri. 2000 *The Fiction of Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill.
- Bechet, Sidney. 2002 [original 1960] *Treat it Gentle: An Autobiography*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo.
- Benston, Kimberly. 2000 *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African American Modernism*. London: Routledge.
- Bland, Edward O. 1959 *The Cry of Jazz*. KHTB Productions.
- Coleman, Ornette. 1959 *The Shape of Jazz to Come*. Atlantic Records, 1317.
- Coltrane, John. 1965 *A Love Supreme*. Impulse! 1764903.
- Dunbar, Paul Laurence. 1903 *When Malindy Sings*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company.
- Edwards, Brent Hayes. 2017 *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Ellison, Ralph. 1962 "On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz: *Bird: The Legend of Charlie Parker*, by Robert George Reisner." in *Saturday Review*. July 28, 1962, pp. 47–49.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. 1837 "The American Scholar". Speech delivered at Harvard University, Phi Beta Kappa Society.
- Hartman, Saidiya V. 1997 *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ho, Fred. 2009 *Wicked Theory, Naked Practice*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Holdengrüber, Paul. n.d. *Quarantine Tapes* Podcast. November 11, 2020.
- Isoardi, Steve. 2006 *The Dark Tree: Jazz and the Community Arts in Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jaji, Tsitsi Ella. 2014 *Africa in Stereo: Modernism, Music and Pan-African Solidarity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jones, Gayl. 1991 *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Jones, LeRoi. 1963 *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. New York: William Morrow.
- Khumalo, Fred. 2006 *Bitches' Brew*. Auckland Park: Jacana Press.
- . 2019 *The Longest March*. Cape Town: Umuzi.
- Kubik, Gerhard. 2017 *Jazz Transatlantic: The African Undercurrent in Twentieth-Century Jazz Culture*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Lamar, Kendrick. 2015 "For Free?" in Lamar, *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Interscope.
- Langa, Mandla. 1989 *A Rainbow on the Paper Sky*. London: Kliptown Books.
- . 2000 *The Memory of Stones*. London: Lynne Rienner.
- Levine, Lawrence. 1977 *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Lewis, George. 2007 *A Power Stronger than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Litweiler, John. 1984 *The Freedom Principle: Jazz after 1958*. New York: William Morrow & Co.
- Looker, Benjamin. 2004 *Point from which Creation begins: The Black Artist Group of St. Louis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lott, Eric. 1988 "Double V, Double Time: Bebop's Politics of Style," in *Callaloo* No. 36, pp. 597–605.
- Mackey, Nathaniel. 1997 *Bedouin Hornbook*. Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press.
- . 2008 *Bass Cathedral*. New York: New Directions.
- . 2017 *Late Arcade*. New York: New Directions.
- Mingus, Charles. 1971 *Beneath the Underdog: His World as Composed by Mingus*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Mohlele, Nthikeng. 2013 *Small Things*. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- . 2019 *Illumination*. Johannesburg: Picador.
- Monson, Ingrid. 2007 *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Moten, Fred. 2003 *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Ngozi, Winston Mankunku. 1968 *Yakhal' Inkomo*. World Record Co. ORL 6022.
- Nkosi, Lewis. 1966 "Jazz in Exile," *Transition* 5 (24), pp. 34–37.
- O'Meally, Robert. 1998 *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- O'Meally, Robert, Brent Edwards, Farah Jasmine Griffin, eds. 2004 *Uptown Conversations: The New Jazz Studies*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Petry, Ann. 1947 "Solo on the Drums". *The Magazine of the Year*. New York: Associated Magazine, pp. 105–110.
- Rollins, Sonny. 1958 *Freedom Suite*. Riverside.
- Serote, Mongane Wally. 1978 *To Every Birth Its Blood*. Johannesburg: Raven Press.
- Snead, James. 1998 "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture" in O'Meally (1998), pp. 62–81.
- Soul, Jazzmen. 1968 *Inhlupeko (Distress)*. Port Elizabeth: City Special, CYL 1000.
- Tapscott, Horace. 2001 *Songs of the Unsung: The musical and Social Journey of Horace Tapscott*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Washington, Salim. 2004 "All the Things You Could Be by Now: Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus and the Limits of Avant Garde Jazz" in O'Meally (2004).
- . 2015 "Silence, Music, Revolution Jazz as Narrative Agent in Mongane Wally Serote's *To Every Birth Its Blood*, in *Journal of Literary Studies*, special issue edited by Thlalo Radithlalo.
- . 2016 "Fingering the Jagged Grain: The Jazz/Blues/Mbaqanga Impulse of Mandla Langa". *The World of Music (New Series) Number* 5 (2). Berlin.
- Wright, Richard. 1940 *Native Son*. New York: Harper & Brothers.