



LESTER BOWIE.
All That Magic

LET'S CALL THIS: RACE, WRITING, AND DIFFERENCE IN JAZZ

WINSTON SMITH

Thelonious Monk gives the nominal impulse to this paper. Do we understand his directive as one of naming, or as one of directing — placing or displacing? In the former sense, we have the pinning-down-process of titling — that which can be spoken, and when spoken, placed: called, named.

In the latter sense, the verb “to call” is an active, therefore transitive element — something to be named must lie beyond. But it has already been titled, its naming/calling to come. Perhaps we have two sides of the same coinage, imprinting that which must always be the inscriptionary gesture of naming.

But Monk has inserted an oral component into the figure of written history — the urban cool of an African American aesthetic that inhabits the margin of pastiche. It is either “let’s call this: ‘Let’s Call This,’” or, it is in 4/4: beat, let’s (quarter note) call (half note) this (quarter note). Black speech of an urban arena rendering it cool, or in other words: ‘behind the beat’. It is here that the figures of difference reference themselves.

First, to the easy, but deliberate humour of the bop and postbop styles of naming: “Groovin’ High; Salt peanuts; Max making wax; Carvin’ the Bird; Klact-oveeseds-tene; Well You Needn’t; Nutty; Let’s cool one; Orinthology” and, ultimately, to the partial province of this paper — “Anthropology”. If it is in fact this continuum of difference, then the text is

cannibalizing itself in play, deliberately marginalizing itself from the realm of “seriousness” and double voicing all intentionality — signifying upon the edges of speech. In the essay: “Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol” (*Callaloo*, 1986) Nathaniel Mackey tells us

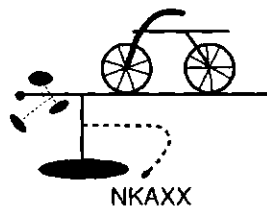
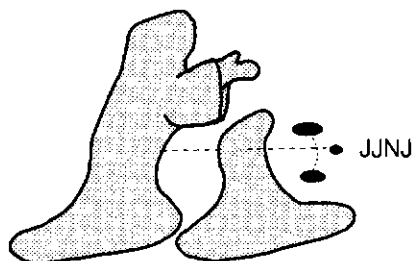
With the advent of bebop... black musicians began to assume a more explicit sense of themselves as artists, conscious creators, thinkers. Dizzy Gillespie would don a beret and a goatee, as would, among others, Yusef Lateef, who would record an album called *Jazz for the Thinker*. Anthony Braxton’s pipe, wire-rim glasses, cardigan sweaters, and diagrammatic titles are among the present-day descendants of such gestures. The aural equivalent of this more explicit reflexivity would come at times to resemble a stutter, conveying senses of apprehension and self-conscious duress by way of dislocated phrasings in which virtuosity mines its opposite.



This intensification of the mimetic impulse realizes itself in the creation of a metalanguage of dress and physical attitude. But all of this as Mackey clearly states is “assumed”, thus somewhat illicit. In what becomes an aesthetics of transgression, the characterization of the gesture is all the more important.

Anthony Braxton, for example, seeks a phenomenological universe through various abstractions of language: “transformational dynamics; vibrational affinities; information dynamics; transAfrican continuum; restructuralism; progressionalism” and a host of other linguistic interventions. Much seems tied to his need to escape the critical presuppositions of historical categorizations. All notions of history must be reworded. But Braxton goes even further by refusing to name his pieces in words, unaming them by diagramming them —forcing he who wants to call to create a description of the visual details.

But there is a second level of difference to be addressed when the second part of the paper's title becomes a contingency — that is, it is contingent on the necessarily plural reality of “Let's call this”. It — Race, Writing and Difference in Jazz — appears to complete the syntax of naming argued by the monkish figure, is itself figural. That I have borrowed Race, Writing and Difference from Henry Louis Gates, the title of an anthology of essays erected on the grounds of race, raceness and the racializing imperative of written language, and that he in the introductory essay tropes his own title — “Writing ‘Race’ and the Difference it Makes” — insures that the paper works at the level of paradox, pluralities of meaning and, I hope, joyful confusion.



Fools or crazy men are easier to walk away from than people who are merely mistaken.

Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones)

In this culture we've come to look at creativity as entertainment. Of course, a given manifestation can be entertaining, but there's another whole reality that's been attached to creativity as it relates to positive transformation; as it intertwines with science, spiritualism, and philosophy. That's where I come in. That's the aspect of creativity I was always attached to.

Anthony Braxton

The world of Jazz criticism is scarcely that. There is writing, and plenty of it often to the point of excess, but more often manifesting that theoretical limitations are forever a matter of

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM ANTHONY BRAXTON,
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language — the lack of a vocabulary to deal with a music that rests on the linguistic capabilities of its performers. The Afro-American photographer Beuford Smith, in an interview with Valerie Wilmer, makes the connection:

It reminds me of a conversation that Thelonious Monk had with Nat Hentoff, the critic. Hentoff wanted Monk to describe his music. Monk was very lucid and succinct. His reply went plink, plonk, plunk, just like his music. But Hentoff went into three or four long paragraphs!

Always a difficult taskmaster, Thelonious Monk does not play.

Nathaniel Mackey has understood what the Art Ensemble of Chicago meant when they insisted on the words "Great Black Music": that you cannot journey anywhere in the musics most heard in this century and escape certain Afro-American realities — an African continuum. And this is not to deny the obvious debts that "jazz" owes to the "West" or to the "East", but it is to the Art Ensemble's purpose, as it is to Mackey's, to affirm the possible origin and epistemology of a word which likely derives from the Mandingo, *jasi*: "to act out of the ordinary".¹

Mackey, an associate professor of literature at the University of California at Santa Cruz, wrote *Eroding Witness* (University of Illinois Press) which was a 1984 National Poetry Series selection. It is significant that Michael Harper, who selected the book, speaks of the poems as "...sometimes philosophical in bent, often musical in tone, steeped in history, in mode of telling linguistic, and reaching toward song" since Mackey sees language as history, its use is historical. His odyssey is one through the African world of Ancient Egypt ("Outer Egypt", "Memphite Recension"), the Dogon people of the Western Sudan and Mali ("Song of the Andoumboulou"), the Voodoo/Vodun complexities of Haiti ("Ghede Poem") into an understanding of Muhal Richard Abrams' appositely titled album, *Levels and Degrees of Light*.

"John Coltrane Arrived with an Egyptian Lady"

— belated prayer —

no sheet of sound enshroud
the Fount of this fevered
Brook becoming one
with God's Eye, not
a one of these notes

come near to the brunt
of the inaudible
note I've been reach-
ing towards

To whatever
dust-eyed giver
of tone to whatever
talk, to whatever slack
jaws drawn against bone

To whatever
hearts abulge with
unsourced light, to whatever
sun, to whatever moist
inward meats
of love

Tonight I'll bask
beneath an arch of
lost
voices, echo
some Other place,
Nut's nether suns

These
notes' long fingers gathered
come to grips of gathered
cloud, connected lip
to unheard of
tongue

This is so evocative of the later Coltrane: the sound reaching toward the string sound of the string sound pioneered in jazz bass by Wilbur Ware, whose open tunings were reminiscent of Country blues' artists such as Charley Patton, Robert Johnson, the acoustic John Lee

Hooker and others; an understanding of the sounds of speech through the vocally inflected riffing of their guitar lines. The assonance of “notes’ long fingers gathered/come to grips of gathered./cloud,...” having much more in common with Braxton’s “vibrational affinities” — fluid syllabic sustains to set up meaningful accentual patterns, “om” and “oud” in a chanting down African manner that is certainly a Coltrane voicing.

And all of this is carried over to *Bedouin Hornbook*, the first volume of *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*, an ongoing series of letters written by Mackey’s fictional composer/multi-instrumentalist *N.*, a founding member of a band known as the Mystic Horn Society. The *Bedouin Hornbook* letters, some of which can be found in *Eroding Witness*, cover three years, from 14.VI.78 to 17.VI.81, and are addressed: “Dear Angel of Dust”. This is consonant with the shadow and voice world’s of Mackey’s obsessions:

You should’ve heard me in the dream last night. I found myself walking down a sidewalk and came upon an open manhole off to the right out of which came (or strewn around which lay) the disassembled parts of a bass clarinet. Anyway, I picked up a particularly long piece of “pipe”, and proceeded to play. I don’t recall seeing anyone around but somehow I knew the “crowd” wanted to hear “Naima”. I decided to give it a try. In any event, I blew into heaven knows what but instead of “Naima” what came out was Shepp’s solo on his version of “Cousin Mary” on the *Four for Trane* album — only infinitely more gruffly resonant and warm.²

This is a remarkable opening. Implicitly, it comments on the nature of jazz improvisation — that in stepping away from the self one must seek a route home, even if it’s through another body, a host of sorts. It is an ecstatic progression through Plutarch’s understanding of the Osirian myth: that even as Isis gathers the limbs of her brother/husband, the act decomposes itself into motif. Therefore, it must show up again, elsewhere.

Midway in the journey of our life I found myself in a dark wood, for the straight way was lost. Ah, how hard it is to tell what that wood was, wild rugged, harsh; the very thought of it renews the fear! It is so bitter that death is hardly more so. But to treat of the good that I found in it, I will tell of the other things I saw there.

I cannot rightly say how I entered it, I was so full of sleep at the moment I left the true way; but when I had reached the foot of a hill, there at the end of the valley that had pierced my heart with fear, I looked up and saw its shoulders already clad in the rays of the planet that leads aright by every path.³

Mackey has shown up through the first lines of the Dante’s *Inferno*. We don’t have to perform the conventional rhyming of symbols in order to understand how the disassembled

bass clarinet becomes Dante's dark and crooked way. *N.* himself might reason that the otherworldly quality of his narrative might be assembled around the oracular presence of one who is not mentioned, but who certainly is *the* player of this instrument in modern jazz: Eric Dolphy. Both Dante's and *N.*'s disembodiments are articulated in John Coltrane's 1961 comments on Dolphy:

We've been talking about music for years but I don't know where he's going, and *I* don't know where *I'm* going. He's interested in progress, however, and so am I, so we have quite a bit in common.⁴

The letter goes on to tell of *N.*'s new group, at first called the "Deconstructive Woodwind Chorus". This is somewhat akin to Ronald Shannon Jackson's "Decoding Society", and testifies to the special linguistic sophistication of "free" players. And even though the group later abandons this name, finding it "stilted" and even "deracinated", there is an approach to *Bedouin Hornbook* at work here. It is one that questions "literature". The "shifting" nature that *Bedouin* implies might be explicated by Jay Wright: "I take the term, explication, from Willard Van Orman Quine's work in logic. Explication, he says, is elimination, beginning with expression, or form of expression [Harper's "mode of telling"], that is somehow troublesome and resolving it by some new channel." Wright, who is not only a major contemporary poet, but one of Mackey's spiritual ancestors, knows that art is suggested pattern. Perhaps, patterns of suggestion.

This problem is an intrinsic part of the *Bedouin Hornbook's* understanding of the music of the last thirty-odd years. The 1950s experiments of Cecil Taylor and Ornette Coleman were concerned with abandoning the tightly organized system of chord changes that structured the thinking of the *bop* period. Taylor absorbed the lessons of Thelonious Monk and Horace Silver, among others, to exploit and create shifting tonal centres of individual and grouped notes. He understood that complex rhythmic displacements, which are the essence of black music, are important to harmonizing all that seem disparate in his music, thus in himself.

Coleman coined the phrase *harmolodic*, to describe his ultimate aim of consolidating harmony and melody in the same key. This resulted in a constant search for an ideal untempered sound. The emphasis is less on individual notes, and more on tone; a realization that tone contains freedom — Braxton's "vibrational affinities" dissolving into *bent*

or *blue* notes. From John Litweiler's *The Freedom Principle* we get:

He had jammed with Albert Ayler in 1963; Ayler's concept of sound, especially his deliberate imprecision of pitch, certainly coincides with Coleman's point of view: "I'm very sympathetic to non-tempered instruments. They seem to be able to arouse an emotion that isn't in Western music. I mean, I think that European music is very beautiful, but the people that's playing it don't always get a chance to express it because they have spent most of their energy perfecting the unisons of playing together by saying, 'You're a little flat,' or '...a little sharp'. ...a tempered note is like eating with a fork, where that if you don't have a fork the food isn't going to taste any different.⁵

Indeed, Coleman's peculiar eloquence remarks upon the aural (oral) prose of *Bedouin Hornbook*. *N*'s letters eschew the small unisons of "proper" style, and on purpose, I think. These are missives that tribute the garrulous quality of the spoken word. There will be readers who will find the fractured — I prefer the Rastafarian "scatteration" — and abstractive changes of Mackey's/*N*'s language violent, in the same way that they find Taylor, Coleman, Braxton et al. unlistenable, but it is often a rule that too smooth a sentence betrays too facile a mind.

I don't claim to have come up with a solution yet. I've been listening a lot to Pharoah Sanders' solo on the version of "My Favorite Things" on *Coltrane Live at The Village Vanguard Again!* The fellow who wrote the liner-notes quotes Trane as having said that he was "trying to work out a kind of writing that will allow more room for improvisation in the statement of the melody itself". That may well be what I'm after as well. What gets me about Pharoah's solo is the way that he treats the melody towards the end of it, coming on to it with a stuttering, jittery, tongue-tied articulation which appears to say that the simple amenities or naive consolations of so innocuous a tune have long since broken down. He manages to be true to the eventual debris of every would-be composer. (Think about the movie the song is taken from.)

(B.H., 13.X.80.)

And so the book's prose.

There has always been a debate about the importance of notation in jazz, and as always this is related to the search for "accuracy". This has always been so in the minds of conservationists, but for the improvising musician, Wayne Shorter is an example: "Composing on paper is just a slower form of improvisation." This is, however, merely a dialectic, as Shorter knows well, for *compositional improvisation* is tautology. After all, "classical" composers soon realized this, and started to *write* those cadenzas. Mackey, in "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol", understands himself more explicitly:

Thelonious Monk's mock-awkward hesitations evoke an experience of impediment or impairment, as do Sonny Rollins' even more stutterlike teasings of a tune...

(Callalou, 1986)

A deeper reasoning of *N.*'s statements is evident in this "reflexivity". His explorations have grown alongside, and have been nurtured by a literature which he helps to rescue from the backwaters of intellectual legitimacy: *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms*, by John Miller Chernoff; *Conversations with Ogotemmeli: An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas*, by Marcel Griaule; *Deep Blues*, by Robert Palmer; *Divine Horsemen: The Voodoo Gods of Haiti*, by Maya Deren; *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography*, by Zola Neale Hurston, are among them. These, and many others are credited throughout *Bedouin Hornbook*, and even when not specifically noted, *N.*'s reflections bristle with knowledge of Robert Farris Thompson (cultural historian of Africa and Afro-America); music critics John Storm Roberts, Ortiz Walton, Valerie Wilmer, A.B. Spellman and John Litweiler; and the linguistic work of J.L. Dillard and Geneva Smitherman. All of these and many more. Mackey is concerned with historiography — a philosophy of writing history — and to this end, as noted above, he shares Jay Wright's perceptions:

In recent years, I've been energized by Samuel Akpabot's statement that "the African lives in music and number." My reading of history impels me to think that music, speech and calculation (the measuring of time and event) have been the complex relationships in which human spirit, action, social and political relationships have been most gloriously exemplified. I realize that asserting this makes literary phenomena seem primary. You could expect a poet to insist upon literature's central position in human affairs. We hardly apologize for this insistence any longer. But I should stop here to say that I include in the speech community all those practitioners of verbal art who are not normally included: the griot, the old Testament prophet, the ritual chanter, the fabulist, the legist, the chronicler, the preacher, even the mathematician, among others... Poetry is a concentrated, polysemous, literary act which undertakes the discovery, explication, interpretation, exploration and transformation of experience.

And this is supportive of Mackey's shifting and refractive centre: speech progresses in counterpoint to itself. For instance, in 26.III.81, two of the band's musicians, Lambert and Aunt Nancy (Anansi), get into the sort of argument that translates Wright's "polysemous act":

Neither of them was averse to contradicting him or herself so as to stay at odds with the other at any point where an agreement seemed at hand. They both bowed religiously to the demands of a contentious, evaporative "curve", a volatile rush which would admit of no closure, speaking as though possessed by the spirit of contradiction. They weren't long in getting to the point where they both spoke at the same time, all pretense of listening to one another giving way to a forked, finally parallel flow of ongoing talk, the most intense, two-sided exercise in devil's advocacy I've ever heard.

But isn't this much like the early "cutting" sessions in jazz piano playing, or the great tenor "battles" of the 1940s and 1950s, or even the drum and bass arguments (interplays) of Charles Mingus and Dannie Richmond. All of these created the space that is necessary for overhearing "the dislocated phrasings in which virtuosity mimes its opposite". It is, as Mackey will assert further on in his "Sound and Sentiment" essay, that "Part of the genius of black music is the room it allows for a telling 'inarticulacy', a feature consistent with its technique of a predatory coherence, the cannibalistic 'plan of living' and the articulacy which upholds it. The jazz musician is, and must remain, as Stanley Crouch puts it, "an artist in danger".



LESTER BOWIE, 1985

Bedouin Hornbook insists that those who would write about black musics, and make no effort to approach or apprehend the great range of black cultures, will remain always irrelevant to the dialogue. Although less overtly pugnacious than the Leroi Jones of *Black Music* and *Blues People*, and the Amiri Baraka of *The Music*, and less inclined to Marxist materialist impulses, Nathaniel Mackey convinces us that he knows the territory. Even a few conflated comments from the initial chapter of *Black Music*, "Jazz and the White Critic" underlines his response:

...the white critic's failure to concentrate on the blues and jazz attitude rather than on his conditioned approach [to] the music... [is] the major flaw... that it strips the music too ingeniously of its social and cultural intent. It seeks to define jazz as an art (or a folk art) that has come out of no intelligent body of socio-cultural

philosophy. We take for granted the social and cultural milieu and philosophy that produced Mozart. As western people, the socio-cultural thinking of eighteenth-century Europe comes to us as a history legacy that is a continuous and organic part of a twentieth-century West. The socio-cultural philosophy of the Negro in America (as a continuous historical phenomenon) is no less specific and no less important for any intelligent critical speculation about the music that came out of it.

...A critic who praises Bunk Johnson at Dizzy Gillespie's expense is no critic at all; but then neither is a man who turns it around and knocks Bunk to swell Dizzy. If such critics would... [try] to understand why each played the way he did, and in terms of the constantly evolving and redefined philosophy which has informed the most profound examples of Negro music throughout its history, then such thinking would be impossible.⁶

If we substitute the jargon of "socio-cultural" with the better word of the Annales school, *mentalite*, Baraka's assertions are beyond reproach.

What is important, however, is that *Bedouin Hornbook* can be appreciated even more when it is contextualized with the works of the Barbadian poet, Edward Kamau Brathwaite; the Guyanese novelist, Wilson Harris, and Wright, who like Mackey is American. There are others; notably, poet and novelist, Ishmael Reed, whose chief sign of correspondence is his high energy use of Voodoo, especially in *Mumbo Jumbo*. But the nature of Mackey's explorations reinforces his connection to the first three; and all might be considered under Mircea Eliade's term, "Technicians of the Sacred".

These are writers who have concerned themselves with a metaphysic that is encompassed by Wright's "transformation of experience". They are concerned to investigate the communities of voice, in order to re-word the notion of history. And *N.*, in a letter — 17.IX.80 — talks on, of this:

I was also uncomfortable with your throwing so trendy a word as "history" around as you do. I hate to say it, but you sound like those critics who seem to fear that anything any of us do could somehow escape being "history". I keep wondering whose "history" it is that you're talking about. I like your notion of "history as a manner of speaking," but when you accuse me of "trying to outshout or shut history up" I detect a sense of it not as a language but a lexicon, a fixed primer of permissible terms in which the tongue is either broken or embalmed by prohibitions. (A not very "historical" sense of the term, in other words.) In fact, I could go even farther and argue that what we're up to is hyperhistorical. Just the other day I heard a talk by Sun Ra in which he proposed a spelling of the term "word" which speaks, I think, to this point. He suggested "w-e-r-e-d" as a truer spelling, that "word", one might say, is the past tense of "were", an exponentially archival coefficient. Relatedly, I think of such things as scat, where the apparent mangling of articulate speech testifies to an "unspeakable" history such singers are both vanquishers and victims of.

This idea of the word receives an even more involved treatment in "The Creaking of the Word," a lecture that serves as an epilogue to the book.

And it is with the *word* that the real adventure of *Bedouin Hornbook* begins, brought around in the whirl of Mackey's vision, but never losing contact with the nucleus of that "reality".

Which reminds me: I had an odd dream about Braxton the other night. He came by to pick me up in a brand new BMW and as we pulled away from the curb he began to talk. The strange thing was that he kept his eyes glued to the road ahead, seeming not to make a point of looking my way, and talked about "Braxton" as though he were someone else. Badmouthed him in fact. Told me he couldn't be trusted and called him unreal. "That Braxton's real slick," he said. "Can't trust him. Unreal to the bone. Your basic trickster. A little bit false."

A little bit false as in "falsetto" perhaps? Did my dream foresee your essay's arrival?

Yours,

N.

NOTES

1. Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: the Language of Black America* (Wayne State University Press, 1986).
2. Nathaniel Mackey, *Bedouin Handbook* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1986).
3. Dante, *The Inferno* (The Divine comedy) Trans. Charles S. Singleton (Princeton University Press, 1975).
4. Valerie Wilmer, *As Serious as your Life* (Lawrence Hill).
5. John Litweiler, *The Freedom Principle: Jazz After 1958* (Da Capo, 1990).
6. Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones), *Black Music* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1970), 14-18.

