Interaction, Collaboration, and Improvisation in the Intersection of Jazz and Poetry

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ABSTRACT

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In the simultaneous performance of poetry and jazz, artists bring the interactivity of jazz to texted music. This dissertation examines jazz poetry intersection as musicopoetic object and cultural practice. In improvisation, I argue, jazz poetry performance asserts an affinity between music and poetry—a bond based on sound and syntax rather than semantics. Jazz poetry intersection pushes at the boundaries of the music's generic boundaries, and the performances often challenge barriers to artistic mobility that have emerged from discourses of genre, race, and cultural hierarchy.

Four chapters put the overarching themes in dialogue with specific cases. In chapters on Charles Mingus and Vijay Iyer, I consider how two jazz composers structure the combination of music and word in improvisatory contexts. I examine the gendered politics of language in jazz in a chapter on Black Arts poet Jayne Cortez, reading her performances as a black feminist revision of the role of jazz singer. In the final chapter I survey the relationship between poetry and jazz in New York City between 2012 and 2014, situating the form within the jazz scene and the broader cultural landscape of the city.

This study of "intersection" bridges disciplines. Texted jazz has been marginalized in Jazz Studies, and this project brings deep analytical engagement to text in jazz. Further, the detailed study of how music and language intersect in performance has

been entirely based in notated traditions; I ask what the inclusion of improvisation brings to the understanding of musicopoetics. The fundamentally interactive nature of jazz practice has shaped jazz poetry intersection and in this dissertation I listen for the resonance of that interaction in the musicopoetics and the cultural practices of the form. In analyzing the diversity of jazz poetry performance, I recuperate the format; the poetry-read-to-jazz fad of the beatnik era has dominated the form's reception, occluding other examples. Writing against this erasure, I assert the richness of expression—personal, political, artistic—in jazz and poetry intersection.

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INTRODUCTION

You find relationships between the rhythms of poetry and the rhythms of music, they can be indirect relationships or kind of complicated relationships…I just like that sound. It's a human sound. It's humans interacting with forms.

-Vijay Iyer

It's sound. It's about sound. The sound of the poetry against the sound of the music.

-Jayne Cortez

A poem, like a melody, is a sounding phenomenon, and it is as both sounding phenomena and syntactical orders that poetry and melody engage one another.

-Leo Treitler

When speaking to artists about the intersection of jazz and poetry, it is clear: for them, poetry and music are not divergent artistic activities. Instead, both arts reside in the realm of sound. This view is nothing new; it dates to at least Aristotle, for whom music and poetry were both rhythmic, melodic, sounded arts. But this affinity did not last long, in either theory or practice. As Leo Treitler writes of the poetry of the troubadours, "Poetry withdrew from its cohabitation with Music in Song – that is, in the human voice – and bedded itself down in books."[1] Music, too, retreated from the pairing, becoming increasingly focused on its own complications. Disciplinary boundaries asserted fundamental distinctions between the arts. By the advent of modern musicology, a seemingly unbridgeable divide had developed between music and poetry, both in how they functioned and how they were theorized. Out of this rift grew Word and Music Studies, a field intent on listening for connections. Analysis often had more to say about

[1] Treitler, "The Troubadours Singing Their Poems," in *The Union of Words and Music in Medieval Poetry,* ed. Rebecca Baltzer and Thomas Cable (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 15.

the differences between music and poetry than what they shared, their communicative abilities conceptualized as separate semiotic systems.

Lawrence Kramer has challenged this stark divide, writing that "the opposition of music and language is untenable from a post-modernist perspective…Once music and language are understood, not as antitheses divided by the lack or possession of constative power, but as common elements in the communicative economy, their differences become practical, not radical."[2] Kramer responds to a history of understanding language as inescapably denotative–anchored, or perhaps trapped, by the meaning of the words. Observing that the space between music and poetry has been at times dramatically exaggerated, he shakes up this paradigm, opening to the syntax and sounds of language, as well as the semantics of music. And what are the "practical" differences between music and language? The answer depends on what music and what language. Art song, and often specifically the nineteenth-century Lied, has been the subject of choice for Word and Music Studies. It is on this repertory that detailed models for the interrelation of music and word are built.

In this dissertation, I bring jazz poetry intersection—that is, the simultaneous performance of poetry and jazz—to Word and Music Studies. Largely spoken rather than sung, and blending improvisation with composition, these pieces and practices offer a contrasting view of the "practical" differences between music and poetry. In four case studies, I listen for how artists navigate the combination of the media. Composer/improvisers Charles Mingus and Vijay Iyer each contribute significantly to this area, and the first two chapters concern their works and practices. Chapter three

[2] Lawrence Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 16–7.

focuses on poet Jayne Cortez and the feminism of her jazz poetry performance. The final chapter takes a broad look at poetry's place in New York City's jazz scene, as observed from 2012-2014.

In this dissertation I ask how jazz's fundamental interactivity affects the musicopoetics of jazz and poetry intersection. Interactivity and the metaphor of conversation have long shaped jazz discourse. Ingrid Monson's *Saying Something* formalized how these constructs function in the jazz rhythm section.[3] Musical conversation is definitional for jazz, a significant part of what musicians talk about as core to their practice. I listen for the trace of this human interaction in jazz and poetry intersection.

If the musicians are already "saying something" with their improvisations, what happens when a poet joins the conversation? The cases in this dissertation suggest that a focus on the syntactical and sound-based aspects of both arts reemerges in an improvisatory context. The musicians use the systems of jazz practice to fold the poet into the ensemble as, essentially, a horn. Syntax and structure, the most language-like of musical constructs, come to the fore in their encounter with language. And the poetry's musical surface shines—rhythm, rhyme, consonance and assonance join music in the play of sound.

For much of the dissertation, the primary interaction concerns the poet and the musicians, but other characters enter the conversation along the way. Venues and other institutions have shaped jazz poetry intersection. They contribute a metaphorical voice, determining who hears the performances and how the artists are compensated, as well as

[3] Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

setting the level of social prestige for their work. Jazz poetry intersection triggers a confrontation with the music's loaded discourse of genre and cultural hierarchy. Poetry retains its high art status, but jazz has had a shifting relationship with the brows. Boundaries between high and low are far from racially neutral. In joining with poetry, jazz, as an African American musical practice, challenges us to acknowledge the racialized policing of genre boundaries. This theme plays out in all four chapters, a signal of the persistence of this discourse, but is most fully developed in chapter four.

Poetry performed with jazz has largely been written off as uninteresting, as a format more concerned with cultural capital than aesthetic results. This project revises this view, asserting that the study of jazz and poetry intersection leads to rich insights into the way in which music and word interact. I build my study of interactivity on the premise that jazz and poetry intersection has produced compelling artistic objects and practices.

Definitions

The question of jazz's definition crops up throughout the project, in part due to jazz poetry intersection's location at the margins of the genre. For the purposes of this project, I have found it useful to think about jazz not as a musical style, but as a network of people and institutions. My questions about the relevance of pieces became not "is it jazz?" but "is this connected in some way to the jazz scene?" The recent collection of essays *Jazz / Not Jazz* proved helpful in refining my construction of what is increasingly, on the scene, being called "the J word." In that book, Eric Porter writes, "rather than placing jazz and invocations of jazz into a larger framework of something like 'jazz

culture' or expanding the circle of what counts of jazz or who counts as a jazz musician, we might identify and write about various spheres of musical activity that intersect with but are not coterminous with jazz but whose existences are still determined, at least in part, by the idea of jazz and the political economy of the jazz world."[4] This approach allows me to set aside evaluation of whether the musical component qualifies as jazz by some elusive (and illusory) criteria and focus on what jazz poetry performance might illuminate about the network of people, institutions, and creative practices that make up the jazz scene.

Why use the word at all? When several of the artists under discussion themselves resist the term, perhaps it would seem most appropriate to follow suit. Part of the work of this dissertation is to bring the study of music and word to Jazz Studies, and so my decision to continue using the word "jazz" is a discursive one, a way of connecting the works under consideration here with the community of scholars, critics, and musicians working in and around jazz.

Throughout, I remain attentive to the way in which "jazz" has been used to restrict artistic mobility for African American musicians. My intention is to wield the term discursively, but not stylistically. I remain suspicious of the term "jazz composer," and use it with caution. All of the artists under consideration in this dissertation push at the boundaries of genre, and challenge high/low distinctions. These provocations are always already racialized, and it is my sincere hope that my discursive deployment of "jazz" furthers an inquiry into that term and its historicized implications rather than reiterating those constructions.

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[4] Eric C. Porter, "Incorporation and Distinction in Jazz History and Jazz Historiography," in *Jazz/not Jazz: The Music and Its Boundaries*, 2012, 25.

I define the topic of this dissertation as "jazz and poetry intersection," but what precisely does that mean? Poetry itself is as slippery to define as jazz is, and a long history of popular song prompts the question: what counts? For my purpose, I formulate poetry much in the same vein as jazz; that is, as a sphere of artistic activity, in dialogue with other arts, with a core and a margin. Because I am interested in community interactions, I focus on artists who self-consciously identify as poets, or who label their work poetry. When performed, this text may be spoken or sung—it is the initial poet/poetry identification that I am concerned with, not the mode of performance. This leads to the tangled process of drawing boundaries between poetry turned into song and popular song lyrics. I have side-stepped these distinctions to some extent by relying on the self-conscious "poetry" identification. My aim here is not to classify song lyrics as poetry or not poetry; it is mainly to focus the work on intersections between communities of artists.

This definition of "jazz and poetry intersection" is, then, intentionally vague. I include pieces and performances, spoken or sung, that emerge from the work of musicians associated with jazz and writers that identify as poets. There are boundary cases that I have decided to include for a variety of reasons, and I am particularly loose with the "poetry" idea when the performance is spoken. When spoken against music, the more prosaic texts take on much of the aestheticization of language that characterizes poetry. I see these works as aligned with the other examples in that the combination of spoken word and music encounters the same set of aesthetic and compositional questions as the more obviously poetic examples.

Historical Overview

A brief summary of the history of jazz and poetry intersection sets the scene for the cases. Like any narrative history, there is a risk of constructing a teleology. Instead of an arch of development, I present a chronological listing of clusters of activity in jazz and poetry intersection. One did not lead to the next, nor did they necessarily comment on each other. But over the course of decades, these clusters have accrued into a precedence for the combined performance of poetry and jazz. A selected discography of jazz and poetry recording appears as Appendix A to this dissertation.

Little evidence exists of poetry performed with jazz prior to the mid-1950s.[5] At that point, a true fad exploded: poetry-read-to-jazz as performed by the Beats. The movement began in San Francisco in 1957, with a series of performances by Kenneth Rexroth and Lawrence Ferlinghetti at The Cellar, which led to the recording *Poetry Reading in "The Cellar."* For a brief three years, poetry splashed onto the jazz scene and, as designed, out to a wider audience. Jazz clubs in downtown Manhattan, including the Five Spot and the Village Vanguard regularly hosted poets reading with jazz. A flurry of recordings was released, including Jack Kerouac's *Poetry for the Beat Generation* (1959), and *Kenneth Patchen Reads with the Chamber Jazz Sextet* (1958). Generally speaking, these recordings make little attempt to craft a meaningful relationship between the music and poetry, and the movement has been dismissed by many as having been more focused on the *idea* of jazz than engaging in artistic exchange with the music and musicians. Langston Hughes, who had been writing with jazz themes and styles in his

[5] Langston Hughes is said to have experimented with the format as early as the 1920s, but unfortunately no record of these performances exist. Sascha Feinstein, *Jazz Poetry: From the 1920s to the Present* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997), 83.

poetry long before the Beats, benefitted from this surge in interest. He released a recorded collaboration with Leonard Feather and Charles Mingus, *Weary Blues*, in 1958 and performed in clubs and on television. His approach to text and music was considerably more nuanced than that of the Beats, but as interest in poetry read to jazz crashed in the 1960s, Hughes's mass-market stardom also evaporated.

As quickly as it emerged, poetry read to jazz faded from the scene; however, the Beats-dominated movement of the late 1950s continues to shape discourse of jazz poetry intersection more than any other examples. As Sascha Feinstein has noted,

> To this day, the term 'jazz poet' generally conjures up images of the hipster figures with dated jargon and self-conscious personas. Ironically, the stereotypes linked with the least successful jazz poetry performances from the late fifties still constitute the general image of jazz and poetry, as though no other relationship exists. For over thirty years, the most-pretentious qualities of jazz poetry have remained representative and have hurt rather than helped the diverse efforts by poets from the sixties to the present who have been interested in the union between poetry and jazz.[6]

Shortly after the Beat era, jazz and poetry reemerged with the surge of the Black Nationalist movement and its sister organization, the Black Arts movement. Amiri Baraka led the way in combining poetry with the avant-garde jazz of musicians like Milford Graves and Sonny Murray. Fellow poets Sonia Sanchez and Jayne Cortez also recorded and performed with music extensively. Musicians initiated collaborations as well, as in Marion Brown's "Karintha" from *Geechee Recollections* (1973) and Archie Shepp's extensive work with poetry. These recordings linked music and poetry in shared political cause, and the collaborations were typically longer-lasting than those of the Beat years. Many of the poets involved continued to record and perform their poetry with jazz

[6] Ibid., 78.

for many years after the initial recordings in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Their audience was always small compared to that of the Beats poets, but that targeted audience engaged deeply with the political work of the performances.

Performers and composers involved with the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) have contributed another cluster of recordings and performances. Established in Chicago in 1965, the organization was foundational in supporting black experimentalism. Many of these performers and composers created intermedia works, crossing between music, poetry, visual arts, and performance art, as in many of the recordings made by the Art Ensemble of Chicago, an ensemble that grew out of the AACM. For the black experimentalists, intermedia work was a matter of a broader artistic stance that asserted generic mobility in the face of rigid and racialized categorization. The format itself was political, rather than serving as a vehicle for political content.[7] The AACM and its related ensembles were most active in the 1970s and early 1980s in New York City, and this period produced a number of recordings of poetry with improvised music.

Jazz and poetry have continued their interaction after this final cluster, but the activity has been dispersed, examples appearing on records but not cohering into a movement. It is difficult to comment authoritatively on the live performance activity in the genre; without a political cause or mass-market audience, jazz and poetry intersection receives little press coverage. But working from the recordings, several things are clear. First, the artists associated with the Black Arts Movement and the AACM have continued their creativity in combining improvised music with spoken word. Additionally, a

[7] This is not to say that the content is never political, rather that the format was political whether the texts expressed political content or not.

handful of poets have found the genre particularly productive, notably Wanda Coleman and Robert Pinsky. Many musicians have also experimented with working with poets and/or their own poetry, including Steve Coleman, Don Byron, Roy Nathanson, Fred Hersch, Jason Moran, and Vijay Iyer.

Situating Jazz Poetry Intersection in the Field

A central concern of this project is bringing a detailed and fine-tuned analytical lens to the structure of musicopoetics in jazz poetry intersection. With no existing literature that deeply engages text and music in a jazz context, I build my theoretical models in conversation with broader musicological inquiries into how music and word interact. I then look to the particularities of jazz practice to shape the tools to the genre, in dialogue with a number of disciplines.

The literature on musicopoetics in song has offered many productive and helpful insights. Kofi Agawu's work on nineteenth-century Lieder helpfully typologizes the ways in which analysts have understood the convergence of the "two nominal semiotic systems, music and language."[8] First is what he calls the assimilation model, in which words lose their status as meaningful symbols when becoming song, subsumed by the music. In other models, the two forms coexist, "rub(bing) shoulders with each other, so to speak, without ever losing their individual essences."[9] In the pyramid model, music provides support for the poetry, which holds the dominant position and determines the

[8] Victor Kofi Agawu, "Theory and Practice in the Analysis of the Nineteenth-Century Lied," *Music Analysis* 11, no. 1 (March 1, 1992): 3–36.
[9] Ibid., 6.

musical content. Agawu then presents his preferred model, in which three simultaneous expressions coexist: music, text, and song.

From there, Agawu suggests an approach he calls "Schenkerian poetics," in which he starts with the music analysis (via Schenkerian analysis), moves to the poetry, and finally the song. His analytical goals are more semantically-oriented than that of my project, and his model does not particularly guide my analytical approach. But as I approached the works under discussion in this dissertation, I found myself thinking often of his analytical typology and the methodological clarity he offered within it.

As Agawu's influence suggests, semiotics silently undergirds this dissertation. The field offers a particularly tempting option for those working in Word and Music Studies, extending a promise of systematic ways to characterize semantic bridging between the mediums. Although ultimately I found it unproductive to try to reconcile the object-orientation of semiotics with the fluid field of improvisation in jazz poetry intersection, the precision of the semiotic approach was s inspirational when considering analysis in different modes.

A core challenge for bringing Word and Music Studies theories to jazz and poetry intersection is the basic reliance of that literature on what I call the single interpreter framework. In that approach, the different components of music and language may be acknowledged, but the final aesthetic result—the song, often—is conceived as the work of a single individual: the composer. In writing the music, the composer offers a reading of the poetry. Edward Cone takes this a step further, seeing the poetry as subsumed by his book's eponymous "composer's voice." He writes, "Because in song the complete musical persona embraces both vocal and instrumental components, the composer's

persona covers words as well as music. The words, that is, have become a part of the composer's message, utterances of his own voice. In a sense, he composes his own text."[10] Interpretive work since Cone's monumental text have chipped away at this imposing construction of the composer, asserting, at least, the listener's contribution to meaning-creation, or what Nattiez would call the *esthesic* phase. Popular music studies and media studies have been particularly effective in this regard.[11] But I am interested, in part, in reconsidering what is possible in the creative process for texted works. What would happen to the conception of music and language relationship if we moved away from the idea of an aesthetic object as necessarily crafted by a single artistic individual?

To understand the interactivity of jazz performance, I draw on Ingrid Monson's groundbreaking work in the area. Musicians have long characterized jazz improvisation as being about "saying something" to one another, that the interactivity is not just a means to an end, but part of the ultimate goal. She writes, "good jazz improvisation is sociable and interactive just like a conversation; a good player communicates with the other players in the band. If this doesn't happen, it's not good jazz."[12] Much of the music in jazz and poetry intersection is, at least in this regard, good jazz, and the interaction frequently includes the poet. Analysis must account for this interactivity.

Conversation as a metaphor and interactivity as musical praxis are irreconcilable with the single interpreter framework. That formulation applies to precisely one work under consideration in this dissertation. Otherwise, this basic structure for how music and

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[10] Edward T. Cone, *The Composer's Voice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 18.
[11] Philip Tagg, *Fernando the Flute: Analysis of Musical Meaning in the ABBA Mega-Hit* (Liverpool: Institute of Popular Music Liverpool, 1992); David Brackett, *Interpreting Popular Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990).
[12] Monson, *Saying Something*, 84.

poetry interact is simply irrelevant to the collaborative works of jazz and poetry intersection. In chapter two I take on this topic on in greater detail, and suggest an alternative method.

The most applicable and useful model from Word and Music Studies is also the most chronologically removed: Leo Treitler's writings on medieval music, and chant in particular. Working against a widely held view of fundamental disjunction between music and text in chant, Treitler turns to syntactical relationships. He finds a rich correlation between the forms in plainchant, which he considers to be no less "meaningful" than a semantic relationship. What is particularly useful in Treitler's work is not just the focus on syntax but his reframing of the goals of analysis. "Emphasis on the relationships between poetry and melody in medieval song in general is not meant here in the spirit of encomium—praising the musicians for their efforts towards the unity of words and music; on the contrary, all indications are that they would probably not have started out with an idea of words and music as separate expressive media that one could choose to unify or not."[13] In constructing his analysis, Treitler listens not just for the ways in which music and word interact, but also for a contemporary cultural understanding of those modes of expression.

There are some obvious discrepancies with jazz poetry intersection here: for one, the contexts of chant creation and performance are remarkably different from those of jazz poetry, and liturgical function plays a large role in chant's text/music structure. Further, the musicians and poets I discuss here clearly consider music and poetry as distinct media. But as the quotes at this chapter's outset suggest, they often downplay

[13] Leo Treitler, *With Voice and Pen: Coming to Know Medieval Song and How It Was Made* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 47.

these differences, grounding their improvisations in sound. For many of the musicians and poets that I discuss, the distinctions between music and poetry are not some great divide to be bridged, but facets of the same interactive performance.

None of the text and music sources I cite as methodological influences directly address spoken word. This absence is not an oversight. Rather, it reflects a lacuna in the Word and Music Studies literature. In part, the lack of theorizing on the relationship between spoken word and music is due to the relative rarity of repertory that uses spoken work—hip hop, melodrama, talking blues, and the preaching traditions of the African American church are among the few examples.[14] But work on these genres has tended to abstain from the kind of examination of systemic interaction that characterizes Word and Music Studies. As such, I build on constructs that stem from sung traditions, ever-aware of the way in which jazz poetry's (usually) spoken delivery impacts the intersection of music and text.

Poetry scholar Sascha Feinstein has contributed significantly to the study of jazz and poetry intersection. His book *Jazz Poetry from the 1920s to the Present* lays out the historical trajectory of the music's influence on poetry, with one chapter outlining the chronology of the poetry read to jazz trend.[15] Feinstein's strengths lie within the domain of poetry, and I have leaned on his foundational work on the genre frequently; however, the musical portion of his analyses are scant, only hinting at the details of text music relationships. His second book, *Ask Me Now: Conversations on Jazz and Literature*,

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[14] For a helpful example of theorizing spoken word in the musical context of African American worship practices, see William T. Dargan, *Lining Out the Word: Dr. Watts Hymn Singing in the Music of Black Americans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); while there is a rich literature on hip hop, little of this work engages with the details of how the music and lyrics interact. For an exception, see Kyle Adams, "Aspects of the Music/Text Relationship in Rap," *Music Theory Online* 14, no. 2 (May 2008).
[15] Feinstein, *Jazz Poetry*.

gathers together a series of interviews with poets and a few musicians who have been involved in the interactions between the arts.[16] Feinstein occasionally analyzes the sounded combination of poetry and jazz, but his overall focus is on the broader intersection of the arts. Aldon Nielsen's writings on black experimentalism in poetry and jazz offer the strongest example to date of jazz and poetry analysis. In *Black Chant*, he devotes a full chapter to the discussion of performances of poetry with music within the black radical aesthetic.[17] His writing is richly interpretive, but in most cases his analyses are brief. This dissertation contributes detail and depth to these analyses, engaging their structures while bringing a musicological perspective to the conversation.

A smattering of essays specifically on jazz and poetry intersection has emerged from musicology, ethnomusicology, and music theory. Among the most useful has been Travis Jackson's insightful analysis of Amiri Baraka's performance of "In the Tradition," in which Jackson reads that recording as signifying on constructions of the concept of "tradition."[18] Paul Steinbeck's article on intermusicality in the Art Ensemble of Chicago's recordings offers a thoughtful starting point for discussions of musicopoetics in black experimentalism.[19]

The nature of this dissertation's material demands an interdisciplinary project. In the process of the study I have found myself skittering across the discourses, looking for the balance of different fields' contributions to the conversation. The core exchange takes

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[16] Sascha Feinstein, ed., *Ask Me Now: Conversations on Jazz and Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).
[17] Aldon Lynn Nielsen, *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
[18] Travis A. Jackson, "'Always New and Centuries Old': Jazz, Poetry, and Tradition as Creative Adaptation," in *Uptown Conversation :The New Jazz Studies*, ed. Robert O'Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 357–73.
[19] Paul Steinbeck, "Intermusicality, Humor, and Cultural Critique in the Art Ensemble of Chicago's 'A Jackson in Your House,'" *Jazz Perspectives* 5, no. 2 (2011): 135–54.

place between Word and Music Studies and Jazz Studies. But numerous other disciplines have played important roles in shaping the methods and content of the work. Improvisation studies overlaps with Jazz Studies, but encourages the focus on creative process that features heavily in my analyses. This literature has been particularly helpful in modeling how to treat improvised performance in analysis in a way that aligns with many of the core values of improvising communities. Performance studies and ethnomusicology ground the final chapter, particularly the reflexive ethnographic work of scholars like Michelle Kisliuk.[20]

Poetry studies offers an obvious counterpoint to the musical grounding of my work, and I am especially indebted to those analysts with an ear towards poetry's historical ebb and flow between sound and page, particularly James Winn, Deborah McColley, and Marc Berley.[21] A rich body of literature discusses the ways in which jazz has infused the work of poets like Langston Hughes and Yusef Komunyakaa.[22] These writings have been particularly helpful in offering background, skills, and insights into a body of work that relates to the jazz poetry intersection I discuss in this dissertation.

My methods in this project have shifted, sometimes radically, from chapter to chapter. In choosing my approach, I followed the lead of the topics, pieces, and people I

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[20] Michelle Kisliuk, *Seize the Dance!: BaAka Musical Life and the Ethnography of Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[21] James Anderson Winn, *Unsuspected Eloquence: A History of the Relations Between Poetry and Music* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); Diane Kelsey McColley, *Poetry and Music in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Marc Berley, *After the Heavenly Tune: English Poetry and the Aspiration to Song* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2000).

[22] T. J. Anderson, *Notes to Make the Sound Come Right: Four Innovators of Jazz Poetry* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2004); Meta DuEwa Jones, *The Muse Is Music: Jazz Poetry from the Harlem Renaissance to Spoken Word* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011); Tony Bolden, *Afro-Blue: Improvisations in African American Poetry and Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003); David Yaffe, *Fascinating Rhythm: Reading Jazz in American Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Aldon Lynn Nielsen, *Integral Music: Languages of African American Innovation* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004).

interacted with for the project. For each case, I selected the method which best addressed the questions raised by the material. At times, my work resembles Word and Music Studies analysis, interpretively reading the relationship between words and music in a static object. At others, reflexive ethnography shapes the analysis. Thus, the methodology of this dissertation blurs distinctions between musicology, ethnomusicology, and music theory.

The Chapters

As a case study project, each chapter of this dissertation considers in detail an example of the intersection of jazz and poetry. These cases are not intended to construct a narrative of how jazz poetry intersection has developed; rather, they are designed to weave discrete paths through the dissertation's themes, each case offering a different view. Chapters one, two, and three each center on a core figure or a pair of collaborators: Charles Mingus, Vijay Iyer with Mike Ladd, and Jayne Cortez. Chapter four inquires into poetry's role in the jazz scene of New York City in 2012-2014.

These particular cases allow both a broad and deep theoretical consideration of the intersection of jazz and poetry. They contain a range of musical and poetic styles, and diverse approaches to the combination of poetry and music in performance. The timeline of the works covers the scope of jazz and poetry interaction: Charles Mingus's works are from the 1950s and 1970s, Cortez the 1980s, Iyer the early 2000s, and chapter four extends forward to the date of this dissertation's completion. Each of the three central figures is/was prominent in his/her milieux, and their work reflects broader trends in jazz poetry intersection, as described in the chapter summaries below.

Chapter one centers on the texted music of composer and bassist Charles Mingus. Mingus had a lively and varied relationship with poetry throughout his career, and his oeuvre demonstrates his lifelong interest in text setting. He was among the earliest participants in the jazz poetry performance fad of the late 1950s, and his best-known examples of jazz poetry intersection come from this period. But Mingus continued working with texts, written by himself or others, throughout his career.

In this chapter, I look at two works, one from relatively early in his career and the other from when he was established, to consider how this celebrated jazz composer negotiated the combination of music and word. From 1957, "Scenes in the City" shows Mingus taking an innovative approach to form, crafting a flexible framework that allowed his ensemble to interact meaningfully with the text in their improvisations. I argue that Mingus's "plastic form" serves as a particularly flexible vehicle for the combination of music and word in the presence of improvisation. The later work, String Quartet No.1, was commissioned in 1972 and performed only once, at the Whitney Museum of American Art. I document the work's genesis and reintroduce the music, drawing from the Library of Congress's Charles Mingus Collection, as well as from several other archives. Scored for violin, viola, two cellos, and contralto and setting a poem by Frank O'Hara, the piece shows Mingus working in a high modernist vein, a stylistic approach unseen in any of his other works. I ask how Mingus came to this style, and suggest a reading of the piece that connects the stylistic elements with the poetry. Considered together, this sensitive example of text setting and the thoughtful approach to

combining poetry and improvisation in the earlier piece suggests an understanding of Mingus as poetically oriented.

This chapter listens for the interactivity between music and poetry possible within the work of a single individual. Mingus's String Quartet No. 1 offers the sole appropriate application of the single interpreter framework in this dissertation, and I use the piece to forward a view of Mingus's poetic sensitivity. In "Scenes in the City," I focus on how Mingus integrates the text within his form, finding an interactive potential within the scripted performance. In addition to the archival sources, I draw from an edition of the Quartet that I created from the manuscript, as well as the several biographies and many articles on Mingus, his music, and his life. Of all the chapters of this dissertation, this one most resembles a Word and Music Studies approach.

In chapter two, I turn to the work of two contemporary artists: Vijay Iyer and Mike Ladd. Composer/improviser Iyer and poet/MC Ladd have collaborated for over a decade on a series of pieces that combine Iyer's dense and complex music with Ladd's political poetry. In this chapter I turn the frame of improvisation as conversation onto a piece they wrote in 2003, *In What Language*. I analyze the album version, released the same year as the premiere of the evening-length live performance. The work's poetry concerns the experiences of people of color when navigating systems of global mass transit, particularly focused on international airports. Ladd conducted years of fieldwork, interviewing people from all strata of the airport system, from janitors to international businessmen. Ladd and Iyer then crafted their piece collaboratively through a deeply interwoven creative process. Using my interviews with Iyer and Ladd as guides, I turn to

an example from the record for a detailed analysis of the interaction between music and word. Ingrid Monson's ideas of interactivity in jazz deeply inform the analysis, which looks for traces of human interaction in the text/music relationship. I listen particularly for formal interactions between the mediums, and note how the improvised conversation shapes the track.

In forwarding an alternative to the single interpreter framework, this chapter offers a direct intervention into Word and Music Studies, bringing both collaboration and improvisation into conversation with detailed analysis. My approach emerged from my interviews with Ladd and Iyer, and from time spent observing them in performance. The syntax-based analysis, related to Treitler's work, also reflects how Ladd and Iyer describe their own work, how they hear the intersection between music and word.

In chapter three I turn the focus from composer to poet; the chapter centers on Black Arts poet Jayne Cortez. Cortez recorded nearly all of her poems with her band, The Firespitters. As an African-American woman performing in a texted format fronting an all-male ensemble playing jazz and blues, her performance indexes those of female jazz and blues singers. I examine Cortez's praise poetry written for these women performers, through which she constructs a personal relationship with their legacy. Her jazz singers are exploited—their bodies sexualized and commodified—and yet Cortez holds them responsible for the political work that their performances wrought. In her own performance, Cortez creates coalition with her band members, eliding the difference between her own performative position and theirs, through her approach to improvisation, and her spoken delivery. She places herself next to, rather than in

opposition to, her band mates in a collaborative relationship. I see this approach as reflective of her coalition feminism. Cortez took on the role of jazz singer through her jazz poetry performance in the misogynistic context of the Black Arts movement. From her collaborative position, she crafts a feminist performance that addresses the legacy of the female jazz singer. She retains both creative and logistical control of her performance, forming her own press for her books and recordings, and serving as bandleader for The Firespitters. She reclaims the body in performance, foregrounding organs and viscera in her poetry, asserting her own presence as a relatable body rather than an objectified one.

In this chapter, interactivity converses with structures of power. Cortez's performances with her band construct her relationship to a historical legacy, but also her lived authority. I ask how her approach to the conversation with her musicians shapes her musicopoetics as well as her politics. In my analysis, I draw heavily on feminist scholarship that examines Cortez's poetry, along with my own interpretive work.

Chapter four interrogates the state of jazz and poetry intersection in New York City in 2012-2014 through an ethnographic approach. In the chapter, I position jazz poetry intersection in relation to the broader jazz scene of the city and critique the entanglement of racial politics and cultural hierarchy. I sketch out a state of the jazz scene, drawing on two years of participant/observer interaction as well as criticism and scholarship. I suggest that a recent generational shift has broadened the jazz community's relationship to hip hop and experimentalism, and that this change has opened new paths for spoken word in jazz. Positioning these intersections in the scene, I note the ways in which venue and genre interact to place jazz poetry intersection at the margins of the

scene, even when the musicians involved are themselves core members of the jazz community.

In this final chapter, I draw heavily on my ethnography of the scene. In order to allow the richness of these experiences to interact with my theorizing, I interweave reflexive sketches with the main argument. These passages are designed to illustrate the larger narrative of the chapter while (re)presenting the layered experience of scene. Improvisation studies plays an important role in understanding how communities of artists shape their art through both their artistic and social interaction.

Contributions

Poet Nathaniel Mackey, in an essay collection on improvisation theory, writes that "improvisation, in its divergence from the given, frequently will not allow us not to hear noise, the creaking of categorization, the noise categorization suppresses, and the noise (not admitting doing so) it makes."[23] In this dissertation I bring improvisation to Word and Music Studies. The detailed study of how music and language intersect in performance has been based almost entirely in notated traditions, and I ask how the study of improvised contexts can enrich the understanding of how the two media interact. In my inquiry, I have heard the "creaking of categorization," the ways in which the practices of musicians and poets resist the stark division of music and word. The fundamentally interactive nature of jazz practice has shaped jazz poetry intersection. In improvised performance, music and poetry are returned to an ancient relationship, their basic similarity restored.

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[23] Nathaniel Mackey, "Paracritical Hinge," in *Collected Work: The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue* (Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 369.

Text has long been marginalized in jazz discourse, and in my listening I bring a detailed analytical look at the function of text in that music. Rigorous consideration of how words, sung or spoken, interact with music in jazz contexts has been sorely lacking. While bringing improvisation to Word and Music Studies, I bring text to Jazz Studies. And finally, there is a recuperative aspect of this project, as I assert the richness of expression—political, personal, artistic—in jazz and poetry intersection.

CHAPTER 1
CHARLES MINGUS AND TEXTED JAZZ COMPOSITION

"I'm trying to play the truth of what I am. The reason it's difficult is because I'm changing all the time." Charles Mingus

Charles Mingus had a way with words. From his blustering monologues to his legendary memoir, he crafted his public persona through his experimental use of language. Even his music overflowed with words. Mingus composed texted works throughout his career, combining music and word in a wide range of styles and compositional methods. This diversity makes Mingus a useful focus for this chapter, which turns the larger questions of this dissertation to the work of a single jazz composer.

Mingus had a fluctuating relationship with the role of improvisation in his compositional process. He called himself a "spontaneous composer" and wrote about his compositional process as an extension of improvisation. At the height of his career, he refused to notate any of his music, devoting himself and his ensemble to orality. In his later years, he returned to the page, penning dense scores for large ensemble. Throughout this remarkable career, he continued to write music with text.

In this chapter, I look at two works from his oeuvre to consider how Mingus, as a jazz composer, approached the combination of music and word. "Scenes in the City" was recorded at the height of Mingus's orality stage. In my discussion I consider how Mingus manipulates form to provide a framework for improvisation while preserving tight expressive connection between text and music. I then turn to Mingus's written period, examining his unknown String Quartet No. 1. This work was performed only once, on the evening of April 26, 1972, and never recorded. Here, I bring String Quartet No. 1 out of

the archive to consider what happens when Mingus combines text and music in what most closely resembles an art song. This curious work sheds new light on Mingus, and hints at the composer's late career ambitions. The piece's surprising modernist style complicates the racialized categorization of Mingus as a "jazz composer." Listening to String Quartet No. 1's musical resistance highlights Mingus's broader confrontation of the intersection of race and genre. Throughout the chapter I listen for the ways in which poetry was an integrated part of Mingus's creative practice, a part of his identity as composer.

"He turned a mean phrase"—Mingus and Text

The above quotation, from Mingus's arranger Sy Johnson, refers to Mingus's famously inventive use of language, both in everyday speaking and in artistic practice.[1] He often showcased his linguistic virtuosity, including in his texted compositions. But more broadly speaking, Mingus had a keen awareness of how language shapes self-presentation, and the power of that process over a performer's career.

Mingus's works with text span his lifetime of composition, and a selection of them are listed in Table 1.1. Starting with the early "The Chill of Death," first written when he was seventeen years old, Mingus worked with texted components in his music until his death. His texts, which he often authored himself, ranged from the gothic poetry of "The Chill" to the shout-inspired exclamations of his mid-1950s recordings. Like many jazz composers, Mingus also wrote in the popular song tradition; his most notable examples include "Weird Nightmare," "Eclipse," and "Duke Ellington's Song of Love."

[1] Sy Johnson, Interview by author, November 11, 2011.

Near the end of his life, he was working on a final texted work, a collaborative album of songs with Joni Mitchell.

Title	Year	Text Author	Spoken/Sung
Baby Take a Chance with Me	1946	Mingus	Sung
Weird Nightmare	1946	Mingus	Sung
The Chill of Death	1947, unreleased	Mingus	Spoken
Portrait	1952	Mingus	Sung
Eclipse	1953	Mingus	Sung
The Clown	1957	Jean Shepherd and Mingus	Spoken
Scenes in the City	1957	Lonnie Elder	Spoken
Weary Blues	1958	Langston Hughes	Spoken
Fables of Faubus	1959	Mingus	Spoken
Eat that Chicken	1961	Mingus	Sung
Devil Woman	1962	Mingus	Sung
Freedom	1963	Mingus	Spoken and Sung
Don't Let it Happen Here	1965	Based on Niemoller poem	Spoken
String Quartet No. 1	1972	Frank O'Hara	Sung
Duke Ellington's Sound of Love	1974	Mingus	Sung
Cumbia and Jazz Fusion	1977	Mingus	Spoken
Joni Mitchell Songs	1979	Joni Mitchell	Sung
Pansies	Unrecorded	?	Sung
Jackie's Blues	Unrecorded	?	Sung

Table 1.1 Selection of texted works by Mingus

These compositions include a number of pieces that take an experimental approach to the combination of text and music. Text functions as an integral part of their larger forms. Some of these extended works incorporate spoken word and improvised musical content, relatives of the Beats' poetry-with-jazz performances; others are fully-determined works of sung text. In all cases, though, Mingus engages with text deeply, and the diversity of his approaches reflects his larger development as a composer.

Mingus knew the weight that words carried in shaping his persona and legacy. He spoke at length in his interviews, lectured to his audiences, and published short essays in the form of "open letters." Recordings of Mingus speaking capture his propensity for monologue, his fast-paced streams of stylized linguistic play. And most famously there is

Beneath the Underdog, Mingus's semi-fictionalized memoir filled with psychological self-exploration and, notoriously, tall tales of sexual exploits. Significant scholarly work has been done on this fascinating book, most successfully by Nichole Rustin in her dissertation.[2] Rustin positions the book as an articulation of Mingus's self-determination, and his particular black masculinity. In it, she sees Mingus proactively shaping his image and his legacy.[3]

Beneath the Underdog was released in 1971, to turbulent reception. This period was also the time of Mingus's commission from the Whitney Museum, leading to String Quartet No. 1. A manuscript in the Charles Mingus Collection suggests that these years may have been a period of heightened interest in text for the composer. The manuscript, in Mingus's hand, is titled "Pansies" and subtitled "A Sane Revolution, words by DH Lawrence, music Charles Mingus, the trials of OZ."[4] These cryptic markings likely allude to two obscenity trials in London: the 1960 trial of Penguin Books for the uncensored publication of Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and the highly publicized 1971 trial of the British underground magazine Oz.[5] The release of *Beneath the Underdog* coincides with the Oz trial, and given the risqué content of the book Mingus may have been paying

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[2] Nichole T. Rustin, "Mingus Fingers: Charles Mingus, Black Masculinity, and Postwar Jazz Culture" (PhD diss., New York University, 1999).

[3] For additional work on the memoir, see: Thomas Carmichael, "Beneath the Underdog: Charles Mingus, Representation, and Jazz Autobiography," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 25, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 29–40; Kevin McNeilly, "Charles Mingus Splits, Or, All the Things You Could Be by Now If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 27, no. 2 (January 1997): 45–70; Christopher Harlos, "Jazz Autobiography: Theory, Practice, Politics," in *Representing Jazz*, 1995, 131–68; Holly E. Farrington, "Narrating the Jazz Life: Three Approaches to Jazz Autobiography," *Popular Music and Society* 29, no. 3 (July 2006): 375–86; David Yaffe, "Pimp My Memoir: Jazz Autobiographies' Tricked-out Personae," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 52, no. 18 (January 6, 2006).

[4] Charles Mingus, "Pansies," Box 19, Folder 11, Charles Mingus Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

[5] "3 London Editors Free in Smut Case," *New York Times*, August 10, 1971, 23; Anthony Lewis, "Britain Tightens Obscenity Curb: Court Rules Single Item Can Send Editor to Prison," *New York Times*, November 6, 1971, 6.

close attention to the obscenity trials. Extrapolating from these connections, it seems likely that "Pansies" was penned during this period, placing it in the same basic timeframe as String Quartet No. 1.

The two-page sketch lays out twenty-seven measures of a song, set for bass voices and piano.[6] Mingus likely composed the text himself, as the margins of the second page of the sketch are filled with the trace of his creative process. There, he listed words rhyming with revolution, from the straightforward (diminution, constitution, evolution) to the delightfully unpredictable ("subterfusion," "Rosicrucion," Lilliputian). The inclusion of "your intrusion" and "new conclusion" suggests that he may have been looking for four syllable examples. He also wrote out brief definitions for some of the words, including the distinction between elusion, illusion, and allusion.

Although the piece did not make it into Mingus's performing repertory, the sketch's content draws another connection between Mingus and text. In the early 1970s Mingus was in the midst of revitalizing his career, and the "Pansies" sketch corroborates that he was particularly interested in the expressive potential of texted music in those years. The marginalia makes visible Mingus's textual signifying, displaying his playful and experimental use of language.

Between *Beneath the Underdog*, his essays, his texted music, the "Pansies" sketch, and his general habit of producing a stream of commentary at every turn, what emerges is a sense that language, and poetic language in particular, was an important medium of artistic expression for Mingus. Although some other jazz composers have

[6] The scoring for the piece shifts around and the line that is labeled as the "bass voices" on the lowest stave at the start of the piece. Later, the vocal line appears on the top stave and looks to shift to treble clef, and a piano part appears on the lowest two staves.

extended their work with text beyond the boundaries of popular song (including Duke Ellington, notably) Mingus's linguistic play sets him apart as particularly poetically oriented.[7] The cluster of works from the early 1970s suggests that the period of String Quartet No.1 was an especially significant time for Mingus's textual focus.

Scholars and friends of Mingus have speculated on his preoccupation with text. Sy Johnson suspected that in some instances Mingus was willing to participate in projects for financial reasons, if they struck him as interesting. "He needed to live like everybody else, and so he was open to almost anything at some point in his life if it was a challenge and if enough good people seemed to be involved in it."[8] We might also consider what poetry, specifically, offered Mingus. As Langston Hughes said, "Jazz gives poetry a much wider following and poetry brings jazz the greater respectability that people seem to think it needs. I don't think jazz needs it, but most people seem to."[9] In his study on jazz and literature, David Yaffe writes of Mingus as striving for this respect in his collaborative work with Hughes, and argues that literary legitimacy is at stake in some of his texted works.

Finally, Mingus's texts can also be read as a site of racial resistance. As John Gennari writes,

> Until the advent of the Lincoln Center jazz program under Wynton Marsalis, no major U.S. cultural institution having anything to do with jazz has had black leadership. U.S. jazz magazines…historically have been dominated by white ownership and editorial control. White voices likewise have dominated jazz's representation in the mainstream print and broadcast media. Record companies

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[7] For an insightful study of Ellington's relationship with literature, see: Brent Hayes Edwards, "The Literary Ellington," in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2004), 326–56.
[8] Johnson, Interview by author.
[9] Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes, Vol. II: 1941-1967, I Dream a World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 280.

> and booking agencies have always been white-controlled. In the face of this, it's hardly surprising that some black jazz musicians would liken the jazz world to a plantation economy.[10]

These "white voices" shaped an essentialist discourse that demeaned black musicians, downplaying their intellectualism and attributing artistic achievements to "natural" abilities.[11] Portrayals of jazz musicians in film and the press sensationalized drug use, sexuality, and other appetites.[12] These primitivist constructions eclipsed the reality of musicians as highly trained working professionals. Further, the focus on innate musicality framed the musicians' abilities as one-sided, rather than as the achievements of multi-faceted individuals. As Ingrid Monson has written, "musicians stressed their fundamental disdain at being cast in the image of the jazz musician as untutored, instinctual, nonverbal, and immoral rather than knowledgeable—an image that has been transmitted in a wide range of (primarily non-African-American) historical writings."[13]

A far cry from "nonverbal," Mingus spoke publically against this discourse throughout his career and his poetic orientation can be seen as a figurative resistance. [14] If jazz musicians were portrayed as "nonverbal" and "untutored," poetry offered the ideal medium in which to defy the primitivist characterization. One way of understanding Mingus's texted output is as an assertion of a poetic voice in the face of an essentialist discourse that suppressed his linguistic agency.

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[10] John Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics* (Chicago, 2006), 9.
[11] For a discussion of the early history of this discourse, see: Ted Gioia, "Jazz and the Primitivist Myth," *The Musical Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (January 1, 1989): 130–43.
[12] For an analysis of a group of these portrayals, see the chapter on Charlie Parker in Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics*, 299–338.
[13] Although, in this quotation, Monson is referring to the musicians from her ethnographic work around 1990, this position holds true for musicians in Mingus's period. Ingrid Monson, "Doubleness and Jazz Improvisation: Irony, Parody, and Ethnomusicology," *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 2 (Winter 1994): 286.
[14] See Ingrid Monson's *Freedom Sounds* for details of Mingus's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement.

Mingus's texted works prefigure the jazz avant-garde's proliferation of intermedia projects. Salim Washington has called Mingus "the avant-garde's reluctant father," and cites his work with text as a "direct precursor to the more integrated efforts made during the Black Arts movement."[15] The difficulty in finding appropriate performance spaces for these intermedia works points to the interwoven constructions of genre and race. In chapter four I discuss race, genre, and venue more fully, but for now it is worth remembering that Mingus's composition of a piece for string quartet to be performed in a prestigious art museum was far from a racially neutral act.

Jazz Composition

To call Mingus a composer is already a complicated claim. The notion of composition has emerged largely from the Western art music tradition, and jazz has had a fraught relationship with both composition and art music. As John Howland writes in his book on symphonic jazz, "in classical music culture that was the legacy of Beethoven, the powerful romantic myth of artistic genius has made it a virtual prerequisite that true musical art be entirely written and orchestrated by the composer."[16] If this is the case, what use is the category of "composer" to jazz and how is one to conceptualize the role of a composer in a form so defined by improvisation? Commentators, critics, and analysts have argued over the question of what a "jazz composer" is and what qualifies as a "composition" in jazz. I do not propose to come to any radically new definitions here, but

[15] M. Salim Washington, "'All the Things You Could Be by Now': Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus and the Limits of Avant-Garde Jazz," in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 37.
[16] John Louis Howland, *"Ellington Uptown": Duke Ellington, James P. Johnson, & the Birth of Concert Jazz* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 263–4.

briefly touching on the discourse will lay the groundwork for thinking about Mingus as a composer of texted music.

Some jazz historians have claimed improvisation and composition as overlapping, or even identical, practices in jazz. For example, Frank Tirro writes, "In jazz, process and product are simultaneous. When the analyst deals with syntactical relationships, he is dealing with the results of the compositional process, the music itself."[17] There is merit to this argument; but the distinctions drawn between great jazz soloists (Armstrong, Parker, etc.) and great jazz composers (Ellington, Morton, Mingus, etc.) suggest that the matter is not so easily resolved.[18] The distinction between the roles of arranger and composer adds another wrinkle, as described here by Jeffrey Magee:

> For most historians and musicians, the difference between a composition and an arrangement is straightforward and lies in the work's origins: a composition is an original work; an arrangement is a new version of an existing work. In jazz, though, the distinction often seems blurry. As one recent jazz history text puts it, 'jazz arrangers usually create so much new material for their arrangements that there is really no difference between arranging and composing.'[19]

Constructing the definition of a jazz composer requires a further complication: defining a jazz composition. Improvisation shapes a significant portion of the content in jazz, yet there is something that we call a jazz text, with enough fixed content to relate one performance of a piece to another. For our purposes, a jazz composer might best be understood as someone who contributes—through melodic invention, structural organizing, style of improvisation, etc—to an instance of jazz, and does so to a larger

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[17] Frank Pascale Tirro, "Constructive Elements in Jazz Improvisation," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 27, no. 2 (Summer 1974): 296.
[18] Gunther Schuller's jazz histories are perhaps the most famous examples of this, but the distinction appears throughout the literature.
[19] Jeffrey Magee, "Fletcher Henderson, Composer: A Counter-Entry to the International Dictionary of Black Composers," *Black Music Research Journal* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 62.

degree than the other musicians involved. This broad definition allows for inclusion of the fluid and aural contexts in which so much jazz is made. There may not always be a composer in every instance of jazz, but whenever there is an authorial figure shaping that example, composition could be said to be taking place.

The identity of composer was central to Mingus's self-construction. As Nichole Rustin writes, "Mingus' major priority was to establish himself as a composer; Duke Ellington was the barometer by which he measured himself."[20] Ellington's towering legacy guided Mingus's ideas of what jazz composition should be, and yet Mingus took a more experimental stance toward the compositional process. As Eric Porter has noted, "describing [Charlie] Parker's improvisations as compositions enabled Mingus to redefine jazz and Western classical music as part of a universal tradition by finding parallels…between written composition and the spontaneous composition that occurs when jazz soloists improvise on preexisting melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic structures."[21] Composition also offered musicians more economic leverage in the music industry than they had as performers. A composition became copywritten material that could bring in income. Or, as Rustin writes, "being a composer, and what Dizzy Gillespie called a musical industrialist, meant that he could stake out the boundaries which framed his music and could thus own it discursively, economically, and perhaps most importantly, he could own it individually."[22]

My approach to analyzing Mingus's texted pieces—semantically focused, within a single interpreter framework—more strongly mirrors Word and Music Studies than at

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[20] Rustin, "Mingus Fingers," 159.
[21] Eric C. Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 50.
[22] Rustin, "Mingus Fingers," 156.

any other point in this dissertation. Mingus wielded a fierce authority as a composer, and his music was, often, intensely personal. In the history of jazz there have been few musicians who resemble the figure of the heroic composer, but Mingus, in many ways, fits that bill. Using a Word and Music Studies lens on Mingus's texted works allows for insights into how poetry and music composition intermingled in his creative practice.

Mingus, Text, and Improvisation

Between 1957 and 1960, Mingus recorded a number of works with text in which there was also a high degree of improvisation, many more than at any other point in his career. Here, I will argue that Mingus's approaches to composition and bandleading in this period were especially well suited to combining poetry and improvisation. An extended analysis of the "Scenes in the City"/"A Colloquial Dream" recordings demonstrates how Mingus's unique approach to form shaped a fluid-yet-structured environment in which the text and music could interact. The analysis works against a discourse that erases the possibility of jazz musicians being interested in—not to mention capable of—poetic expression.

As summarized in the Introduction, this period was particularly active in jazz poetry intersection. Poetry read to jazz exploded onto the scene in the late 1950s, fueled by the popularity of the Beats among countercultural youth. The early recordings usually employed an unobtrusive jazz ensemble in the background while a poet read in the foreground. These recordings fulfill every cliché the phrase "jazz poetry" evokes, conjuring Maynard G. Krebs as much as anything from the jazz tradition, and points to

the troubling racial politics of white poets capitalizing (culturally and monetarily) on the hipster credibility of black jazz musicians.[23]

Despite this dissertation's preoccupation with the affinity between music and poetry, I want to acknowledge some basic challenges in combining the two media in an improvisatory context. Poetry is almost always written in advance of the performances or recordings, and its main elements are essentially fixed. There is fluidity and improvisation in the delivery of this material, a point that I take up in detail in chapters two and three, but doing so effectively requires a sensitive, listening ear on the part of the poet. Otherwise, as is the case in many of the late 1950s attempts, a basic temporal barrier exists between the poet and the musicians. Without preparation, the musicians are expected to react meaningfully to the dense, metaphorical poetry in the moment of performance, constantly playing a game of catch-up as the poetry streams by while they improvise. George Lewis and Ingrid Monson have established the high stakes and personal nature of jazz improvisation, a format in which the musicians describe themselves as "sayin' something."[24] Combining this improvisation with poetry while neglecting to attend to the semantic density of that layering may simply have been a case of trying to say too much at the same time.

Although the initial reactions to poetry read to jazz were breathless, shortly after the trend's peak, the discourse soured. As poet David Meltzer quipped, "Jazz and poetry was an interesting experiment that failed to advance beyond its hybrid and awkward

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[23] For a good discussion of the racial dynamics at work in hipness, see: Ingrid Monson, "The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48, no. 3 (October 1995): 396–422.

[24] George E. Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives," *Black Music Research Journal* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 91–122; Monson, *Saying Something*.

propositions."[25] Commentary tended to focus on the disjunction between music and word. Poet Kenneth Rexroth wrote that, "The poet ended up sounding like he was hawking fish from a street corner. All the musician wanted to do was blow. Like, 'Man, go ahead and read your poems but we gotta blow.'"[26]

Here, Rexroth plays into the racialized conception of musicians as fundamentally disinterested in the poetry, completely absorbed by their musical drive. It is this construction that has shaped much of the reception of jazz poetry intersection. But Mingus's late 1950s projects simply do not fit. In his compositional approach, Mingus crafted a framework for thoughtful and meaningful interaction with the poetry, while leaving open enough space for improvisation to allow his bandmates to "say something." His recordings suggest a figure unaccounted for by the reception of the 1950s jazz poetry fad: an artistic individual concerned with, and skilled in, both musical improvisation and poetry.

Plastic Form, Spontaneous Composition, and Orality

Mingus's use of orality in composition fluctuated throughout his career, but in the mid 1950s he was committed to staying off the written page. When Mingus worked with the Jazz Workshop he transmitted his compositions entirely orally, in contrast with his earlier scored works. He taught his compositions to his ensemble by singing or playing their parts. It was a painstaking process and sometimes caused frustration among the musicians, but Mingus was dedicated to the philosophy of his method.

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[25] Barry Sileski, *Ferlinghetti, the Artist of His Time* (New York: Warner, 1990), 90.
[26] Rexroth, as quoted in Sascha Feinstein, *Jazz Poetry: from the 1920s to the Present* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997), 77.

Mingus believed that this orality allowed for the stylistic contributions of each of his bandmates. As he wrote in his liner notes to the album *Pithecanthropus Erectus*:

> My whole conception with my present Jazz Workshop group deals with nothing written. I play them the 'framework' on the piano so that they are all familiar with my interpretation and feeling and with the scale and chord progression to be used. Each man's own particular style is taken into consideration, both in ensembles and in solos. For instance, they are given different rows of notes to use against each chord but they choose their own notes and play them in their own style, from scales as well as chords, except when a particular mood is indicated. In this way, I find it possible to keep my own compositional flavor in the pieces and yet allow the musicians more individual freedom in the creation of their group lines and solos.[27]

Some scholars have interpreted this move as fundamentally egalitarian, granting full agency for the members of ensembles.[28] Others see it as simply shifting Mingus's authorial voice to a different format.[29] Certainly, one of Mingus's central concerns was whether, and how well, a written score communicated the composer's ideas in the first place, as seen in the following excerpt from the *Pithecanthropus Erectus* liner notes:

> …a jazz musician, although he might read all the notes and play them with jazz feeling, inevitably introduces his own individual expression rather than what the composer intended. It is amazing how many ways a four-bar phrase of four beats per measure can be interpreted![30]

This radical shift from written to oral did not, however, simplify Mingus's approach to form. Always at the leading edge of experimentation in jazz, Mingus pushed beyond the theme–solos–theme structure common to much jazz of the period. In his Jazz Workshop pieces he often used what Andrew Homzy has termed "plastic form," and

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[27] Charles Mingus, liner notes to *Pithecanthropus Erectus,* Atlantic, 1956.
[28] Charles Hersch, "'Let Freedom Ring': Free Jazz and African-American Politics," *Cultural Critique*, no. 32 (January 1995): 97–123.
[29] Jeff Schwartz, "New Black Music: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Jazz, 1959-1965" (PhD diss., Bowling Green State University, 2004).
[30] Mingus, *Pithecanthropus Erectus* notes.

Mingus himself called "extended form." Mingus built sectional compositions, but the way in which his group moved through the sections differed with each performance, depending on the mood of the soloist, the scene in the venue, or whatever other factors were at play. This flexibility gives Homzy his term. Scott Saul describes the process:

> Sections of a composition would be elongated, compressed, or recombined, their underlying rhythms radically altered through stop-time, background riffs, new bass vamps—and much of this would be signaled as the composition was being enacted. The oral instruction before the gig was followed by a collaborative environment during the gig, where the musicians would cue each other in the next section spontaneously.[31]

In this mode, composition took place not only in the original creation of the musical material, but also in the expansion, contraction, and rearrangement of that material. Mingus, characteristically, had a broad view of how this compositional mode functioned, including processes beyond the confines of a single piece. "The greatness of jazz is that it is an art of the moment, it is so particularly through improvisation, but also, in my music, through successive relation of one composition to another."[32] Thus compositional process grew to include the events of an entire evening's performance.

In this formulation, Mingus moves boldly between the distinctions of improvisation, composition, and performance. But as music philosopher Philip Alperson wrote, "Insofar as improvisation is a kind of music-making and to the extent that the composition/performance distinction is useful, improvisation must involve composition and performance to some extent."[33] Or, as Mingus himself said, "If you like Beethoven,

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[31] Ibid., 162.
[32] Mingus, as quoted in Nichole T. Rustin, "Cante Hondo: Charles Mingus, Nat Hentoff, and Jazz Racism," *Critical Sociology* 32, no. 2/3 (March 2006): 321.
[33] Philip Alperson, "On Musical Improvisation," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 43 (Fall 1984): 20.

Bach or Brahms, that's okay. They were all pencil composers. I always wanted to be a spontaneous composer."[34]

Mingus's vehicle for his spontaneous composition was, in the 1950s and early 1960s, his Jazz Workshop. Conceptualized as an experimental collaborative structure with Mingus at the helm, the ensemble performatively explored orality in jazz. Members sometimes referred jokingly (or not) to the ensemble as the Jazz Sweatshop. Mingus demanded much of his players, and when they failed him, Mingus aired his displeasure bombastically. He berated his band members, even in front of the audience. Musically, too, Mingus kept them on their toes. According to Sy Johnson, "When he felt the band had become too facile—just swinging along—he'd destroy that ambience because he wanted us to *think* about what we were playing. He'd suddenly switch from four to six beats to the bar, and it was like slipping on a piece of ice on the street. You'd fall on your ass. But you'd surely be thinking. Mingus gave you *resistance*. He never thought his function was to support the soloist but rather to stir him up."[35] Mingus's commitment to orality required a committed group of musicians willing to work under the unpredictable challenge of Mingus's leadership. The ensemble was critical in helping Mingus reach the heights of his acclaimed Jazz Workshop years.

The following analysis of Mingus's "Scenes in the City" argues that plastic form helps Mingus navigate the challenges of combining poetry and improvised music. The sectionality inherent in the form meant that Mingus could craft small-scale environments for short segments of the text, allowing for close correspondence between the two

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[34] Charles Mingus, "What Is a Jazz Composer?," *Liner Notes for "Let My Children Hear Music," Columbia*, 1972.
[35] McNeilly, "Charles Mingus Splits, Or, All the Things You Could Be by Now If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother," 68.

mediums without restrictive adherence of the music to the narrative. Meanwhile, the performance-based expansion and contraction of these sections required that all of the performers take a listening stance, preventing the disconnection between poet and musicians so common in the genre. From Mingus's experimental plastic form emerges a responsive, listening, improvisational environment for the intersection of music and word.

"Scenes in the City"

"Scenes in the City" appears on Mingus's album *A Modern Jazz Symposium of Poetry and Music.* Despite the album title, "Scenes" is the only track on the record that combines text and music. Following shortly on the heels of "The Clown," it was the second of Mingus's group of pieces from the late 1950s that combined text and music.

"Scenes" has a curious recorded history. It was first recorded as "A Colloquial Dream" by a group of Mingus regulars as part of what would become *Tijuana Moods*. Lonnie Elder, the actor and playwright who first conceived and wrote the text for the piece, performed as narrator. When *Tijuana Moods* was eventually released, "A Colloquial Dream" was withheld, and remained unreleased until the 2001 rerelease of the album. In October of 1957, just a few months after the *Tijuana Moods* sessions, the piece was rerecorded as "Scenes in the City," with actor Melvin Stewart performing the narration. It was certainly not unusual for Mingus to record and release multiple versions of his pieces, even renaming them if it prevented legal trouble, but the swiftness of this rerecording, and the withholding of the initial recording suggests that Mingus was

dissatisfied with the first result. The personnel list is identical between the two recordings, with the exception of the narrator and the pianist.

The two recordings provide an opportunity to analyze how improvisation functioned in the piece. Comparing "Scenes in the City" and "A Colloquial Dream" reveals that the bulk of the material was fixed, despite Mingus's renunciation of written notation. Still, the improvisational elements inherent in Mingus's oral approach persist within this largely pre-composed structure. Mingus biographer Brian Priestley calls out the performance as an especially successful example of Mingus's band from the period, characterizing their playing as "brilliantly self-assured in their handling of the periodic structure and frequent time changes."[36]

In the following analysis of "Scenes in the City" I aim to show how the sectional nature of "Scenes" creates a responsive, collaborative environment for the text, allowing for meaningful interaction between the music and the text without eliminating improvisation. As discussed above, in Mingus's plastic form segments of pieces could expand or contract depending on parameters of the individual performances. Movement between sections was dictated by cues, sometimes delivered by Mingus, sometimes by other band members. What I will suggest below is that the text of "Scenes in the City" served as both a deliverer and a receiver of cues, that the narrator became folded into the fluid environment of the Jazz Workshop. And in this enfolding, the text becomes truly in dialogue with the music.

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[36] Brian Priestley, *Mingus, a Critical Biography* (London: Quartet Books, 1982), 89.

The vernacular text of "Scenes in the City" is not clearly definable as either poetry or prose. Narrator Melvin Stewart describes it as " an examination of a guy from Harlem and his relationship with jazz. It shows what jazz can mean to someone who's not basically a musician but who 'lives on the music' a lot…Jazz helps the man in this piece hear *himself*, the way he is and feels, and every note becomes a part of him as he is now and as he'd like the world to be."[37] The text has four main sections. It opens with the narrator located downtown, listening to and reflecting on the music he loves: jazz. The second section depicts his chaotic Harlem lifestyle and the brief third section reminisces on how the narrator converted his mother to a jazz fan. The work closes with an introspective section, reflecting on life as full of both hope and the blues. The following sequential description of the music of "Scenes in the City" establishes the sectionality of the work, and draws connections between the musical environment created in the sections and the content of the text. Mingus's musical treatment makes vivid the shifts between downtown and uptown, external and internal.

The piece opens with a bustling, full-ensemble passage, horns moving in rhythmic unison through dissonant voicings, evoking the busy eponymous city. The brief opening riff stops suddenly and into the silence enters narrator Stewart with, "Well, here I am." In this effective opening we already we hear Mingus preparing a thoughtful musical frame for the work's text, while remaining sensitive to the particular challenges arising from the coexistence of spoken word and music.

The text continues with a description of the narrator, "sitting on a high barstool holding my dreams up to the sound of jazz music," and his splintered life between his

[37] Stewart, as quoted in the liner notes to *A Modern Symposium of Music and Poetry,* Bethlehem, 1972.

mundane residence uptown and his artistic home downtown. Mingus bows a plaintive solo bass passage in response, with arrhythmic and chromatic material. He pauses between fragments, giving Stewart space to move through his lines while the bowed bass sets the melancholic mood of the textual segment. Two chimes, forward in the mix, mark location as the narrator announces, "I live uptown, why I don't exactly know 'cause I'm always downtown."

As the narrator declares, "I love jazz," Mingus moves his ensemble to the next section [0:37]. He puts down his bow and drummer Dannie Richmond joins him in rhythmically open improvisation. The passage is quietly chaotic. Richmond and Mingus keep the narrator distinctly in the foreground, but their sparse improvisations provide a brooding setting for the text.

The trumpet enters with a wistful ballad tune, as Mingus and Richmond drop out with no obvious sectional cue from the text. This moment turns out to be a bit of foreshadowing by Mingus; a few lines after the trumpet enters, the narrator points out, "that's jazz music you're listening to," and indeed we are [1:05]. After a brief pause, the trumpet repeats the tune, this time supported by slowly moving bass and, after a bit, piano chords. The narration slows down, punctuating each short phrase with pauses, allowing the listener to take in both the words and the increasingly dense music without struggle. The topic of the narration reflects explicitly on the music we are hearing, encouraging the listener to continue attending to the musical content. [1:37] "That's pretty music, boy. Pretty."

Here the text shifts to the second section, describing the narrator's uptown life. Mingus marks the division musically with a swift accelerando, sweeping us uptown. At

the narrator's "Now catch this! Dig!" Mingus returns to the opening bustling melody, layering his horns with a driving groove on drums. [2:19] Until this point, two and a half minutes into the recording, the narrator has been sonically foregrounded, but here Mingus shifts the focus to the music. By bringing in his horns one by one, Mingus introduces his ensemble. The forty-five seconds of musical outburst lets the band members stretch out, reminding the listener that this is a jazz piece as well as a narration, while also marking the text's sectional transition to the Harlem scene.

Both text and music take on a raucous tone in this second section. [3:05] The narrator describes the chaos of his uptown home, the noise from the neighbors, waiting for the washroom, and avoiding the landlady. Mingus walks an ostinato chord while Richmond maintains the groove of the previous passage. The piano and horns interject short bluesy licks. The frenzied and dense music overwhelms the text, as the trumpet squeals dissonantly and Mingus and his band mates yell wordlessly in the background. Instead of carefully underscoring the text, here Mingus drowns out the narrator, using his setting to depict the commotion described in the text.

Mingus marks another sectional division by slowing the tempo, finally landing on a sustained full ensemble unison with a cymbal roll. [5:05] The text shifts to a contemplative tone, and Mingus returns to open improvisation, keeping the texture thin and the dynamic level low, once again foregrounding the text. As the narrator mentions iconic musicians, "Bird…Bud…Miles…" [5:37] the corresponding members of the Mingus band improvise licks that either directly quote from or index the jazz giants' styles.

As the text mentions the Monk tune "Round Midnight," Mingus brings his ensemble back into the spotlight for a slow and melancholy blues. After saying "and somewhere along the line, the blues walked in," [6:14] the narrator stays silent for a full three and a half minutes, the longest strictly musical passage in the work, marking a division in both text and music.

Even while free from the demands of the text, Mingus works sectionally. The music shifts tempos and textures constantly, reflecting the larger work's structure in this interlude. After two choruses of the slow blues, the ensemble winds down with a bowed bass cadence [7:36]. Mingus launches a free improvisation section, reminiscent of the background for the early portions of the text but with more expansive timbres and dynamics. The saxophone and the trombone alternate riffs, punctuated by the drums. This brief section leads to a double-time blues with a saxophone solo. [8:22] Finally, the ensemble bookends the interlude by returning to the original slow blues.

Total silence marks another major sectional division. [9:46] Following a quick quasi-fugal section, Mingus returns to the melancholy trumpet melody from near the beginning of the work as the narrator muses, "I wonder why it's so tough for me." [10:32] In familiar musical territory, the listener's attention is redirected to the narrator. The text ends on a cautiously optimistic note, and Mingus closes his twelve-minute exploration with a rolling cadence on the now-familiar trumpet theme.

In his sensitive reading of "Scenes in the City," Mingus shifts constantly—in texture, in dynamics, and in his treatment of the narration. At times, he tiptoes musically with his ensemble, making way for the denser text. At others points he puts the musicians onto center stage, granting expressive space to the musical component of the work. These

interludes allow time to contemplate the text, avoiding the kind of semantic overload frequently experienced in jazz poetry collaborations. Each section of the music creates a gem-like musical environment for the episodes of the text. More than a static backdrop, these environments respond to the narrative, enabling a synergy between music and text rare in jazz and poetry collaboration of the period.

Thinking broadly about Word and Music Studies, what is remarkable here is not the tight connection between the music and the text in "Scenes in the City." For as long as there have been intersections between music and word, composers have been working to make their music reflect meaningfully upon their texts. What sets "Scenes in the City" apart is that Mingus accomplishes this connection in the context of an improvising ensemble. To demonstrate the degree of improvisation in "Scenes," I turn to a brief comparison of the piece with the earlier recording "A Colloquial Dream."

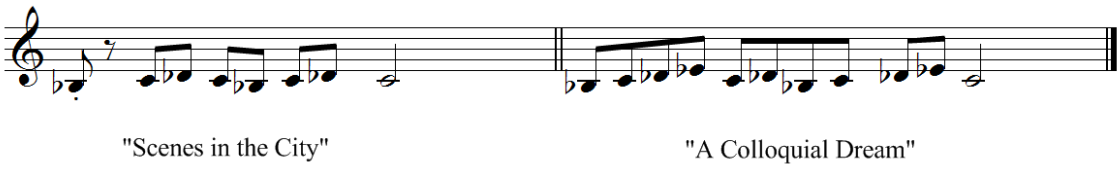
My discussion of "A Colloquial Dream" requires a side note. There is no question that "Scenes in the City" is the more polished of the two recordings. On "A Colloquial Dream," Lonnie Elder reads the text with a slurred and occasionally rushed tone, and reverb further distracts from the text. Mingus's band plays well, overall, but comparison of the two recordings makes clear that all of the musicians learned from the first date and improved upon their performances. With this in mind, I look to the two recordings mainly to understand and isolate the role of improvisation in the work.

At first listen, the two recordings strongly resemble each other; however, a more thorough examination shows that while similar in contour and mood, the exact musical details are improvised. Section by section, "Scenes in the City" and "Colloquial Dream"

follow the same pattern, but in this similarity there are small variations that suggest Mingus's compositional method and the structured freedom of his plastic form.

The second section of the piece, immediately following the opening busy horn section, serves as an example of the improvisatory flexibility in Mingus's structure. Both recordings feature solo bowed bass, and both are relatively sparse in texture. But the pitches and timing of the segments of melody are entirely different between the two. In "Scenes in the City" Mingus enters nearly immediately following the horn section, playing melodic lines in the middle to high register. In "A Colloquial Dream," Mingus waits significantly longer to enter, and when he does it is in a much lower register. He pauses longer between his fragments, and they are less melodic than in the other recording. The two recordings share some key characteristics here—bowed solo bass, sparse, quiet—but are otherwise distinct.

A transcription from later in the piece shows the type of variation typical between the two recordings. In the transition out of the busy Harlem section of the text, a solo saxophone line signals the mood shift.



Example 1.1
Alto saxophone transitions
[5:12] "Scenes in the City; [5:32] "A Colloquial Dream"

The contour and basic pitch set between the two recordings are very similar, but not identical. This kind of variation is exactly what you would expect of the oral method of

composition used by Mingus at this point in his career. Mingus would likely have sung a suggested melody line, but left the details to improvisation. With nearly the exact same personnel, it is unsurprising that the results in "Scenes in the City" and "Colloquial Dream" are so similar, but the small variations demonstrate the degree of openness in this work.

This improvisational space creates, necessarily, a position of listening for everyone in the ensemble. The narrator and the musicians depend on cues from each other to time their progression through the work. Mingus's composition creates sections of music that support the text, while the improvisational elements require all members of the ensemble, including the narrator, to stay dynamically connected to each other. Mingus, in typical form, kept tight controls on his ensemble and scripted a musical response to the poetry that allowed for both his compositional response to the text and for the core improvisational component of jazz. In doing so, he found a way of integrating improvisation into a texted work: his plastic form. Instead of being a barrier to intelligibility and cooperation, improvisation became a path to a deeper correspondence between music and word.

Mingus, Text, and String Quartet No. 1

In early 1972, Mingus had just finished his monumental and ambitious album *Let My Children Hear Music,* filled with full-composed pieces for large ensemble. Sy Johnson described the album as a companion to the recently published memoir *Beneath*

the Underdog.[38] On the tails of this enormous project Mingus began composing what would become one of his most unique yet least known works: his String Quartet No. 1.[39]

The Whitney Museum of American Art had been hosting a new music performance series, The Composers' Showcase, since 1968. As part of a spring festival, curator Charles Schwartz organized a concert honoring the recently deceased poet Frank O'Hara, commissioning and premiering new musical settings of the poet's work. Mingus composed String Quartet No. 1 for the event, but abandoned the piece after its sole performance. It survives only in manuscript form in the Charles Mingus Collection at the Library of Congress.

In the following pages I introduce the piece, attempt to clarify the circumstances of the commission, and situate it within the texted music of Mingus. What kind of music did Mingus write in response to this prestigious commission? What can we say about the relationship between the unique (for Mingus) style of the work and the high art context of the concert? And what does all of this tell us about Mingus and jazz poetry intersection?

What little is known about String Quartet No. 1 is overwhelmed by the obscurity and misinformation about the piece.[40] Mingus researchers have known of the piece's existence, but next to nothing else about it. We don't know how Mingus was selected to be included in the concert, nor how he chose the poem he set, or how he arrived at the

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[38] Johnson, Interview by author.

[39] The performers' parts identify the piece as "The Clown," which is the title of the O'Hara poem that Mingus set, but this title is scratched out and "String Quartet No. 1" is handwritten in its instead. The change was likely due to there already being a Mingus piece named "The Clown," and indeed another work combining music and text! Because "String Quartet No. 1" is how the work is catalogued in the Mingus collection, I will refer to it by that title.

[40] For example, Mingus biographer Brian Priestly misidentifies the instrumentation as being two violins and two cellos; though, to his credit, he guesses that Mingus included two cellos without (apparently) having seen the score. Priestley, *Mingus, a Critical Biography*, 189.

instrumentation of the work.[41] Although Mingus's social circle included a variety of artists and poets, according to his widow he did not have any personal connection with Frank O'Hara.[42] In an interview shortly after the piece's debut, Mingus forgot O'Hara's name, referring to him just as "the guy that got killed on the beach at Fire Island, a poet."[43] Mingus had previously appeared on the Composers' Showcase Series in 1970, performing three of his tour warhorses with a quintet and sharing the bill with iconoclastic composer/poet Moondog.[44] Perhaps Schwartz's familiarity with Mingus after this event led to him contacting the composer about the commission.

An earlier concert from the Composers Showcase Series hints at possible reasons for Mingus's choice of instrumentation. Held on February 18, 1969, the concert was titled "New Dimensions in Jazz"; a press release stated that it would "present three leading American jazz composer-performers, with the Carnegie String Quartet, playing works commissioned for the event."[45] Ornette Coleman, Sonny Rollins, Jimmy Giuffre, and Cecil Taylor all presented works at the concert, though only Coleman and Giuffre included the string quartet in their pieces and Coleman's work had, in fact, been composed prior to the commission by the concert series. Rollins played a solo improvisation and Taylor performed "Tongues" with his Cecil Taylor Unit. Coleman performed "Saints and Soliders" and "Space Flight," which are listed in the program as

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[41] Mingus biographer Gene Santoro suggests that there was a competition to win the commission, but I have not found any corroboration of this claim. See: Gene Santoro, *Myself When I Am Real: The Life and Music of Charles Mingus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 308–9.
[42] Sue Mingus, email message to author, November 2007.
[43] John F Goodman, *Mingus Speaks* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 56.
[44] Program from the concert, April 7, 1970. Whitney Museum of American Art, Frances Mulhall Achilles Library, Performance Series Archives, Series 3, "A Moondog – Charles Mingus Concert."
[45] Press release, February 10, 1969 Whitney Museum of American Art, Frances Mulhall Achilles Library, Performance Series Archives, Series 3, "New Dimensions in Jazz."

receiving their concert debut (they had been recorded previously) and Giuffre premiered a work for clarinet and string quartet titled "Orb."[46]

Letters between Charles Schwartz and Sonny Rollins suggest that bringing string quartets and jazz together was Schwartz's idea. He wrote to Rollins in September of 1968, introducing the theme of the concert as, "key jazz composers will perform the solo part in their respective works which will also utilize string quartet…we hope to have a total of five key jazz figures participating in this exciting and historical event."[47] Rollins replied that his participation was "somewhat of a possibility" but asked for clarification "concerning concept and use of string quartet, etc."[48] Schwartz wrote that they were hoping for a "concert work," preferably under fifteen minutes, but that "the scope and concept of the piece is completely up to you…Moreover, it can be as far out as you want it."[49] In the same paragraph he further asked that the work be in the hands of the Carnegie String Quartet no less than a month in advance of the performance, suggesting that although the "scope and concept" of the piece were Rollins's choice, the inclusion of the string quartet was expected. Schwartz also wrote that Cecil Taylor, Jimmy Giuffre, and Ornette Coleman would all be writing works for string quartet (plus soloist in the cases of Taylor and Giuffre).

I know of no existing correspondence between Schwartz and Mingus, but based on the material from the New Dimensions concert, it seems reasonable to speculate that

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[46] Program from the concert, February 18, 1969, Whitney Museum of American Art, Frances Mulhall Achilles Library, Performance Series Archives, Series 3, "New Dimensions in Jazz."
[47] Charles Schwartz, "Letter from Charles Schwartz to Sonny Rollins," September 25, 1968, Box 8, Folder 10, Charles Schwartz Papers, New York Public Library.
[48] Sonny Rollins, "Letter from Sonny Rollins to Charles Schwartz," November 6, 1968, Box 8, Folder 10, Charles Schwartz Papers, New York Public Library.
[49] Charles Schwartz, "Letter from Charles Schwartz to Sonny Rollins," November 8, 1968, Box 8, Folder 10, Charles Schwartz Papers, New York Public Library.

Schwartz might have been involved in Mingus's choice to write a work for strings. Perhaps Mingus had been among the "key jazz composers" contacted for the New Dimensions concert and, although he didn't participate, the idea of writing a quartet for the Whitney series stuck with him. Or perhaps he was *not* among the composers contacted but heard about the project and (characteristically) wanted to make a point about how he ought to have been included.

Two newspaper articles published in February of 1972 suggest that Mingus was at work on the piece by that point. The articles describe it as part of comeback for Mingus, and highlight the prestige of the commission. "Now into his fourth decade as an instrumentalist and composer, he is the only jazz artist among 10 composers (including Leonard Bernstein and Aaron Copland) invited by the Whitney Museum to prepare music for a spring tribute to the late poet, Frank O'Hara."[50] Although Bernstein and Copland may have been invited to participate, neither of them contributed works to the concert.

Mingus likely intended originally to compose two pieces for the O'Hara concert. The program lists two works: "The Clown" (our String Quartet No. 1) and "Ode on Saint Cecelia's Day," but according to reviews only the first was performed and I have found no evidence of the second piece beyond its title in the program.[51] This mysterious second listing hints at Mingus's source for his chosen O'Hara poem: a new collection of the poet's work published by Knopf in 1971.[52] In this collection, on the page facing the poem

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[50] "Mingus Is Back after 10 Years," *Amsterdam News*, February 5, 1972.

[51] The archive contains a nine measure long fragment with the same instrumentation, and in Mingus's hand. The fragment, titled "The Critic" and sets the opening lines of O'Hara's poem of the same name: "I cannot possibly think of you / other than you are: the assassin of my orchards." This is clearly not a full second piece, but shows Mingus experimenting with the instrumentation in the context of the commission. Charles Mingus, "The Critic - String Quartet," Box 32, Folder 12, Charles Mingus Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

[52] Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 26–7.

used in String Quartet No. 1, is a poem with the same title as the non-existent second work from the program.

The months leading up to the Whitney concert were particularly busy for Mingus, and he likely composed the work quite quickly. Work on *Let My Children Hear Music* had recently wrapped up and preparations for his Philharmonic Hall concert and European tour were in full swing. Paul Jeffrey served as arranger for the quartet, though the extent of his involvement is unknown.

The concert took place on a Wednesday evening, April 26, 1972. As was typical of the Composers' Showcase Series, the concert was well attended, mostly by younger concertgoers. Seating was on the floor for most of the audience, with a few chairs and bleachers available. As noted by reviewer Byron Belt, the museum environment attracted a different crowd than concert hall events. "Why crowds would rather be uncomfortable in the Whitney than in a concert hall, we can't pretend to know. But other than the professional modern music crowd (which will go anywhere, and usually does!) it is great to find so many young people enjoying adventurous music in the handsome museum setting."[53] The first half of the program included works by Lucia Dlugoszewski, Lester Trimble, Virgil Thomson, Ned Rorem, and Lukas Foss, with instrumentation ranging from the traditional art song piano and voice to an ensemble of clarinet, French horn, percussion, violin, bass, piano, and tenor voice. Mingus's piece appeared first on the second half the program, followed by Jimmy Giuffre's suite for jazz trio and voice, *The Many Sides of Frank O'Hara*.[54]

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[53] Byron Belt, "2 Fine Ladies of Song," *Long Island Press*, April 28, 1972.
[54] Program for the concert, April 26, 1972, Whitney Museum of American Art, Frances Mulhall Achilles Library, Performance Series Archives, Series 3, "New Songs to Poems by Frank O'Hara."

Reviews of the concert largely ignored String Quartet No. 1, focusing instead on the offerings from Rorem and Dlugoszewski. The lukewarm and scant discussion of his piece mostly criticized the vocal writing. Byron Belt called the piece "haunting," but complained of "too little variety in the vocal line."[55] Still, he called the string group "stellar" and wrote that it was "good to hear Mingus working in such a vein," without elaborating on exactly what vein that would be. Allen Hughes, writing for the *New York Times*, was less generous, stating simply that the piece "did not work out well chiefly because the voice part lies too low."[56] Mingus talked up the piece in the press later that year, calling it his "string quartet," but the music he wrote slipped into obscurity.[57]

String Quartet No.1

Two sources exist for the music of String Quartet No. 1 in The Charles Mingus Collection at the Library of Congress: individual parts for all of the performers and a condensed score. [58] Judging from the pencil markings, these were the parts used by the performers for the concert. There is a high degree of agreement between the two sources with virtually no differences in pitch or rhythm. I suspect that the parts were copied from the condensed score. Tempo, dynamics, and bowing indications are minimal, consisting of just a few pencil markings likely made by the performers. These manuscripts were helpfully filmed for the microfilm *Let My Children Hear Music*. I used these microfilms

[55] Belt, "2 Fine Ladies of Song."
[56] Allen Hughes, "Composers Honor Frank O'Hara with Vocal Works," *The New York Times*, April 28, 1972, 34. This review also tells us that the singer was actually Rose Taylor, not Betty Allen as was indicated by the program.
[57] Richard Williams, "Mingus: The Clown's Afraid Too," *Melody Maker*, August 12, 1972, 16.
[58] Charles Mingus, "String Quartet No. 1," Box 23, Folder 2-5, Charles Mingus Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC Neither of these sources appears to be in Mingus's hand. The instrumental parts are in ink and were prepared by a copyist. The condensed score is in pencil, and the Collection's finding aid calls it a "copyist manuscript."

to prepare a performing edition of the piece, from which I excerpt throughout this analysis.

String Quartet No. 1 is scored for low female voice and four strings. In a typically Mingusian bias toward the low range, there are two cellos, one viola, and one violin. Based on the breathing opportunities for the singer and the playability of the string part, I estimate that the work is about seven minutes long.[59] It is fully composed, with no suggestions or space for improvisation in performance. By this point in his career, Mingus had become almost entirely a "pencil" composer, having moved away from his oral-transmission approach following his treatment at the Bellevue Psychiatric Hospital. According to Sy Johnson, Mingus was having memory trouble by the early 1970s, perhaps related to the onset of his ALS.[60] Certainly, this would contribute to his increasing focus on the written form of composition. But Mingus continued to compose works with improvisational sections, including the pieces he wrote for his 1971 Guggenheim Foundation grant. The entirely fixed nature of String Quartet No. 1, not to mention the piece's high modernist style, suggests Mingus was making a deliberate generic shift in this composition.

[59] Mingus corroborates this estimate in his interview with Goodman, in which he says that the quartet is 6-7 minutes long. Goodman, *Mingus Speaks*, 55.
[60] Johnson, Interview by author.

Mingus chose to set a poem entitled "The Clown." In it, O'Hara avoids metrical and formal conventions. The eight groups of three lines generally have between eight and ten syllables per line.[61] Their rhythm falls into no recognizable metrical pattern, thus enabling Mingus to sidestep one of the challenges of setting poetry as song: reconciling the poetic and musical meters and rhythms.[62]

The poem's narrative traces the rise and corruption of an artist. It opens with a naïf, discovering his power in a natural world. An unspecified "they" interrupts his idyll, forming a human audience for the boy. This audience appears at first to be enthralled by the boy— "they / sighed over the spectacle and sent him / compliments lest he make a noise or / scandal"; but the fifth stanza brings a sinister turn. There, the audience takes dictatorial control over the boy, directing his performance and lavishing him with unwanted attention, causing the boy to grow "uneasily older by their seriousness." Unable to block out the demands of the audience, the boy turns inward, listening to his heart in an attempt to regain grounding. Instead, he only hears his own sadness, taking the form of Niagara Falls, perhaps as wild and demanding as the external audience. The poem closes with the proclamation of corruption, summarized bluntly by the "they" in response to the boy's demand of an explanation: "you were not like us."

Although O'Hara avoids rhymes both at line ends and internally, the prosody reflects and expands on the narrative of the text. In the stanza before the major turn, as the boy is being corrupted without knowing it, the text hisses with alliterative S sounds:

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[61] Three lines in the poem stray from the eight to ten syllable range. The closing ling is seven syllables long, the first line of the second stanza is eleven syllables, and the third line of the fifth stanza is twelve syllables.

[62] I do not mean to say that free verse poetry does not have a rhythmic component, just that poetry with a metrical pattern poses a specific kind of challenge.

"sighed over the spectacle and sent him / compliments lest he make a noise or / scandal. He smiled at their solicitude." As the point of disillusionment arrives, the pace slows through broad vowels and the longest line of the poem: "uneasily older by their seriousness."

The figure of the clown holds a prominent place in Mingus's music, and he was likely drawn to this particular O'Hara poem first by the title. Mingus's earlier "The Clown" is his most famous example of texted music. Lesser known is his "Don't Be Afraid, the Clown's Afraid Too," a work for big band from the album finished just before the Whitney commission, *Let My Children Hear Music.* Once drawn in by the title, Mingus may have found that the narrative of the poem resonated with his own life's story. Mingus appears in clown face makeup for the album cover of his *The Clown*, associating the fate of the tragic character in the title track with himself. He notoriously battled with record companies for fair economic treatment, resisting their exploitative practices. To escape their control, he founded his own record labels, with mixed success. If Mingus read O'Hara's poem "The Clown" like I do, perhaps he would have related to the poem's portrayal of struggle for self-determination.

Mingus sets the poem with a disorienting and dissonant musical environment, underscoring the entire song with the sinister tone of the poem's closing. Mingus wrote nothing else resembling this piece in the rest of his career, and its uniqueness alone makes it interesting for study. But there is more to String Quartet No. 1 than novelty. In the following analysis I first outline the general characteristics of the work then return to a discussion of what it might tell us about Mingus and text.

The compositional techniques of String Quartet No. 1 support that it was written fairly quickly, and Mingus said that he composed it at the piano, transcribing it later.[63] Although there are ostensibly four string voices, their frequent octave doublings reduce to two parts for much of the composition. The upper string parts are fiercely difficult, with fast runs soaring to precarious heights. Mingus was no stranger to challenging his musicians, but this level of near-unplayability is unusual even for him.[64] The lack of bowing and dynamic markings and some strange enharmonic choices suggests that the string players had a difficult task.[65] The state of the parts could be a symptom of Mingus's relative inexperience as a string writer. Sy Johnson suggests that he believes Mingus would have done quite a bit of revision on the work had he returned to it, based on what Johnson saw of the score and his experience with Mingus's creative process.[66]

Formally, String Quartet No. 1 is completely through-composed. There are a few snippets of music that are recalled after their initial appearance, but repetition is rare. Time signature changes might be said to mark sections, but these sections seem to have more to do with the poetry than with some kind of musical structure, a point I will return to later. There is no sign of any kind of traditional jazz form or Mingus's plastic form.

Mingus pushes into the realm of atonality in String Quartet No. 1. The piece occasionally has a vague B-flat center, at its clearest in Example 1.2, measures nine and

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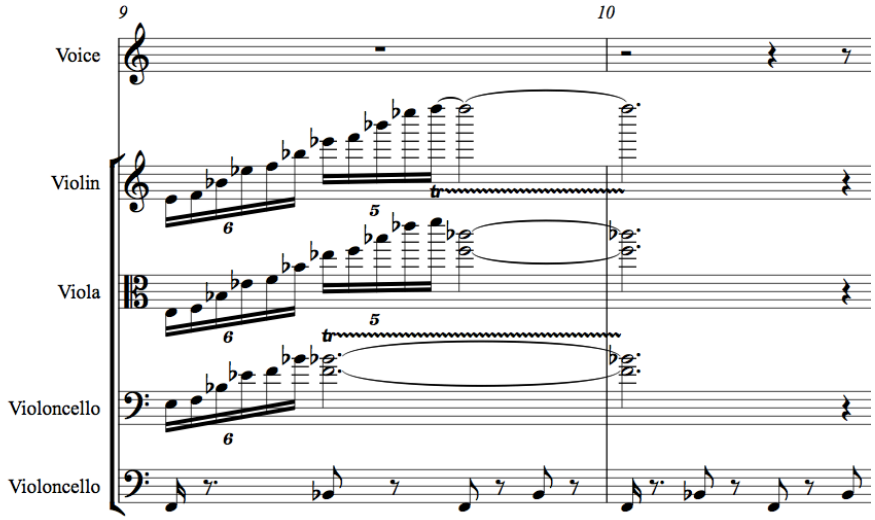
[63] Goodman, *Mingus Speaks*, 55–6.
[64] The string players for the Whitney concert impressed Mingus. He commented later, "The guys read it at sight. I rehearsed for months with the big band and the music hasn't been played yet. And the string quartet was 9,000 times more difficult." Priestley, 189. Byron Belt also called the group "stellar."
[65] When preparing an edition for a spring 2012 reading of the piece, I took an urtext approach. Understandably, the string players found the parts frustrating to work from, and my guess is that Mingus's string players would have too.
[66] Johnson, Interview by author.

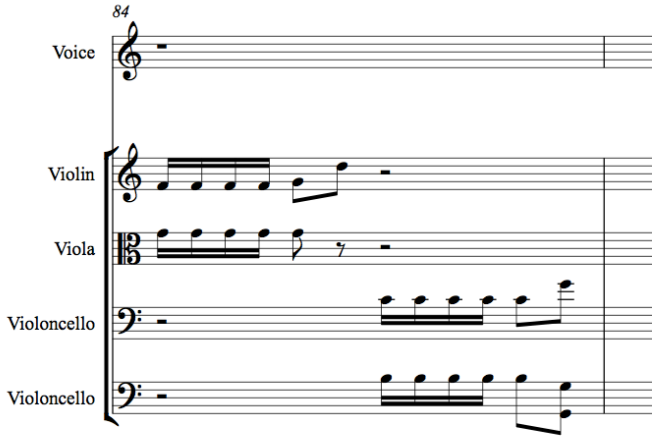
ten of the string parts. The second cello articulates a repeating V-I motion while the upper voices play a rising figure that fits largely within B-flat major. These moments of clarity are, however, rare flirtations with tonality in a piece that largely meanders through tonally undifferentiated space.



Example 1.2 Measures 9-10, strings, String Quartet No. 1

Mingus further undermines the stability of the work's pitch-world in moments of thwarted expectation. Although in the majority of the piece the upper and lower strings pair off in octave or unison, there are occasional points of departure from this texture. Example 1.3 shows a typical passage. Here, the violin and viola first play the rhythmic motive, separated by a whole step. The cellos then play a version, beginning a half step apart but coming to an octave on the second of the eighth notes. Although the relatively small divergence from the octave/unison texture might be explained by copyist's mistakes in the parts—time was certainly short leading up to the performance—these "mistakes" are far too numerous and consistent among the sources to be unintentional.

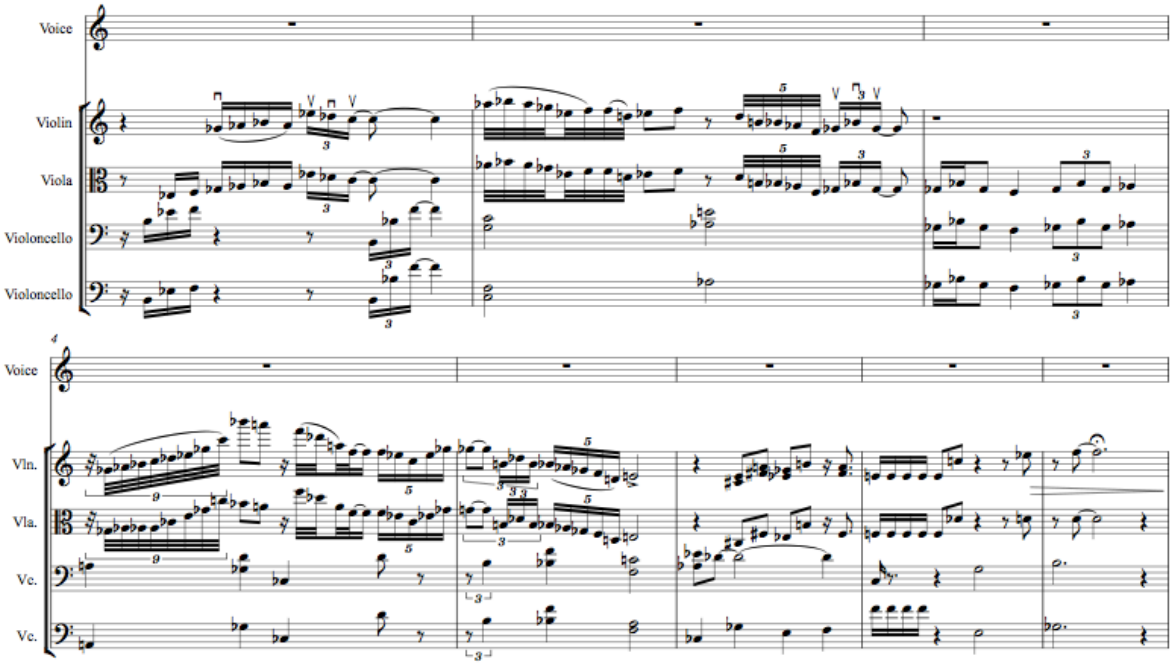
These “off” moments occur throughout the work, but especially at instances of the rhythmic motive shown in Example 1.3. Dissonance is integral to Mingus’s style, but the particular approach here, with the setup of the unison/octave texture rupturing into harsh, hammered clashes, is uncharacteristic.



Example 1.3 Measure 84, strings, String Quartet No. 1

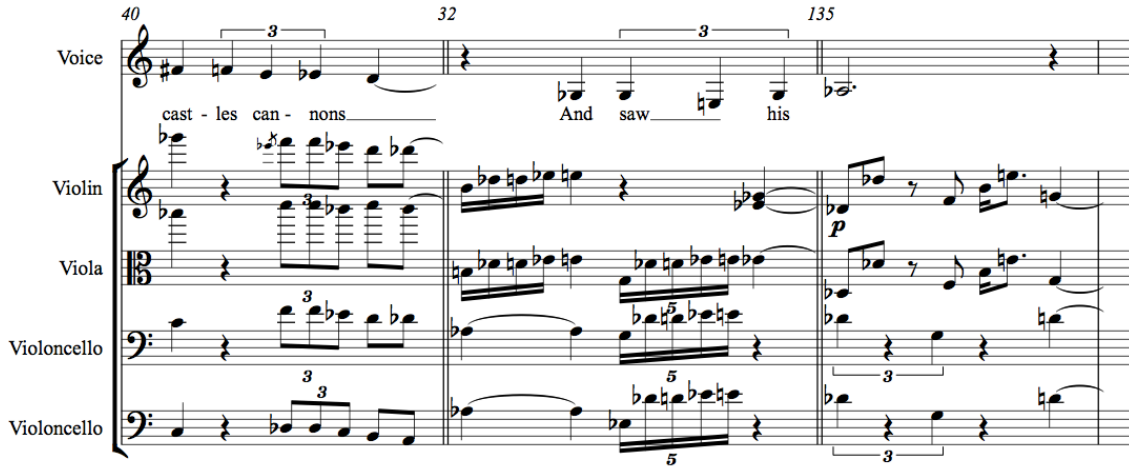
Rhythmically, the work continues to surprise. Although Mingus certainly pushed at stylistic boundaries throughout his career, nearly all of his other works are, at their core, groove-centered. Certainly, he used ametrical sections, especially in introductions, and played with obfuscating the groove, but the basic sense of metrical pulse and direction is rarely far from reach. In his setting of the O’Hara poem, Mingus gives us little in the way of pulse to hold onto, much less any sense of meter. Shifting subdivisions and offset downbeats disorient the listener. In the string introduction, for example, Mingus sets up an instability of rhythm that continues throughout the piece, starting with the opening empty downbeat. In measures 2-4, the cellos articulate a basic metrical framework while the upper voices shift through a series of tuplets. Measure five troubles this rhythm with a delayed downbeat, the cellos entering on the second eighth note triplet

of the measure. Mingus sprinkles these metrical hiccups throughout the work, using the cellos to establish and then undermine rhythmic stability. The vocal entrance breaks down the meter further. The melody begins on the final eighth-note of a measure and ties through the downbeat. The clear rhythm in the cellos helps maintain the pulse, but this dissolves in the next measure with another offset downbeat, this time an anticipation.



Example 1.4 Measures 1-8, String Quartet No. 1

Clashing subdivisions further disorient a listener's sense of rhythm. In measure 40, the singer's mid-measure quarter note triplets push against the homorhythmic strings. In measure 32, a similar subdivision challenge occurs as the singer's quarter note triplets clash with the strings' sixteenth note quintuplets. These collisions happen between the string parts as well, seen here in measure 135, where the violin and viola play a simple eighth note rhythm against the cellos' quarter note triplets.



Example 1.5 Measures 40, 32, and 135 of String Quartet No. 1

In short, it is not that Mingus avoids meter and pulse altogether, rather that he plays with bringing rhythm in and out of focus, keeping his listeners (and performers) unsettled. Layer this rhythmic approach with the intense dissonance and melodic avoidance of the composition, and you have a truly unusual Mingus composition.

In rhythm, pitch, and form Mingus's String Quartet No. 1 more closely resembles an example of high modernism than a typical Mingus piece.[67] Faced with this outlier to Mingus's typical compositional approach, one is left with the question of why Mingus made the choices he did, and what it tells us about him as a composer, and particularly as a composer of texted music.

[67] In an interview that touched briefly on the quartet, Mingus makes this connection himself, saying (in reference to the vocal part) "those kind of sighing things, like in Hindemith, Bartók - Bartók, the theory was Bartók." Goodman, *Mingus Speaks*, 56.

"I know I'm a composer"[68]—Genre, Race, and Prestige

Throughout his career, Mingus fought for the dignity and privilege granted those in the high art world. He was acutely aware of the politics of prestige, and the impact it had on his ability to make a living. Musical hierarchies seemed to be on his mind in his later years, as he shaped his legacy. In an essay from the liner notes to *Let My Children Hear Music* Mingus declared himself a composer, but did the rest of the world see him that way? He may have viewed the commission from the Whitney as an opportunity to gain respect for his work as a composer, and one way to understand the style of String Quartet No. 1 is as a bid for recognition from the art music world.

David Yaffe has compared Mingus to Langston Hughes, and he characterizes their aspirations as fundamentally dissimilar. "Mingus…was striving for a different kind of literary credibility, closer to the hierarchical modernism of Ellison."[69] Yaffe writes further, "if Hughes was a poet who worked as an entertainer, Mingus was an entertainer who aspired to poetry."[70] Always aware of his self-presentation, Mingus thoughtfully positioned himself in the public's eye with specific goals in mind. From the style of his music, to his fashion choices, all aspects of his life came together to tell the story he sought to tell, as Nichole Rustin has detailed. "Mingus imagined his 'personality' as a tool enabling him to mediate the relationship between his art, the expectations of fans and critics, and his daily life…He realized that it was up to him to create his own mythology, to articulate his own framework for understanding his genius."[71]

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[68] Mingus, "What Is a Jazz Composer?".
[69] Yaffe, *Fascinating Rhythm*, 124.
[70] Ibid., 120.
[71] Rustin, "Cante Hondo," 320.

Jazz musicians, Mingus included, occasionally turned to concerts halls as legitimating venues. But the Whitney takes this one step further, extending prestige in a cross-arts gesture. From Byron Belt's review of the concert, quoted earlier, it sounds as though the audience was generally younger than at the more formal concert halls. The Whitney's concert series managed to convey institutional prestige while cultivating an enthusiastic and youthful audience. This particular branch of the elite art world may have been especially appealing to Mingus, who was always seeking new audiences for his work.

Other compositions from this period show Mingus treating text experimentally, stretching beyond the popular song tradition. Perhaps the most notable example is his "The Chill of Death." Composed largely when Mingus was just seventeen years old and first recorded in 1947, this large-scale piece was Mingus's first texted work. Its fully composed and thickly textured score sets Mingus's own romantic gothic poem. In the later *Let My Children Hear Music* arrangement, the ensemble plays through the score twice, the first time with Mingus reading his poetry and the second time with a saxophone soloing over the ensemble. Biographer Brian Priestley comments that the piece is "more tied to the story of the poem than in most of Mingus's later experiments involving words," but his is the lone sympathetic voice in the work's reception.[72] Others have found it to have major problems, including Aldon Neilsen, who calls the piece "marred by sentiment."[73] Mingus commented on the tone of the album in the liner notes,

[72] Priestley, *Mingus, a Critical Biography*, 13–4.
[73] Aldon Lynn Nielsen, *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 188

writing, "I think the music on this record is serious in every sense."[74] That Mingus included his own poetry in this self-described "serious" effort suggests his aspirations not only as a composer of texted works, but also as a composer of texts.

In the late 1970s, Mingus reached out to singer/songwriter Joni Mitchell to participate in a collaborative project. His first proposition is described by Mitchell:

> At the time he had an idea to make a piece of music based on TS Eliot's Quartet and he wanted to do it with—this is how he described it—a full orchestra playing one kind of music, and overlaid on that would be bass and guitar playing another kind of music; over that was to be a reader reading excerpts from Quartet in a very formal literary voice; and interspersed with that he wanted me to distill TS Eliot into street language, and sing it mixed with the reader[75]

One can't blame Mitchell for turning down the project.[76] But the idea was nonetheless reflective of Mingus's experimental stance in this period—crossing brows and genres in densely layered performance, with a distinct aim for high art status.

If Mingus aspired to a prestigious positioning of his texted works of the period, associating himself with Frank O'Hara would certainly have helped. In his private life, Mingus circulated in an interracial bohemia. From living with Farewell Taylor in the Bay Area early in his career, to his marriage to Sue Mingus by Allen Ginsberg, he was no stranger to the *avant garde* of poets, painters, dancers, and filmmakers. These artists generally came from subversive or subcultural group, as did Mingus's previous poetic collaborators: Langston Hughes was marginalized by the artistic elite and Jean Shepherd worked explicitly in the entertainment sphere. Frank O'Hara's poetry offered Mingus

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[74] Charles Mingus, liner notes to *Let My Children Hear Music*, Bethlehem, 1972
[75] Leonard Feather, "Joni Mitchell Makes Mingus Sing," *Down Beat*, September 6, 1979.
[76] Eventually Mingus and Mitchell worked together on a less conceptual project—the songs that would make up her album *Mingus*.

something novel: a poetic text with all the prestige of institutionally and academically supported poetry.

Mingus, who was carefully sculpting his legacy in these years, would likely have seen the commission as a potential boon: a piece supported by a great institution of American art, setting a poem by a renowned poet. Within this frame, one way to understand the surprising style of String Quartet No. 1 is as an attempt to show an elite artistic community that he could compete on their terms. But several factors complicate this reading. First, choosing to write a high modernist style art song for strings and voice would be a decidedly conservative gesture within the art music community of 1972. Second, Mingus himself fought unflaggingly for the respectability and seriousness of *all* of his music, and privileging the style of the constructed art music elite would have been something of a contradiction for him.

When performing in nightclubs, Mingus demanded that his audience attend with concert hall demeanor. Inevitably, cash registers or conversations interrupted his performances, and Mingus would lash out, sometimes violently, at the audience. As Jennifer Griffith writes, "An audience was under his care and in a position to get hip to *his art*. This stance reversed the roles of audience and performer. He demanded outright that his audience transcend the role of passive listener, that they distinguish between art and entertainment, and that they make concerted efforts to *please him* by listening quietly to his music as other audiences were accustomed to doing in concert halls."[77]

This social control is reminiscent of the nineteenth century rhetoric that accompanied the transformation of concert halls from interactive spaces to silent and

[77] Jennifer Griffith, "Mingus in the Act: Confronting the Legacies of Vaudeville and Minstrelsy," *Jazz Perspectives* 4, no. 3 (December 2010): 339.

appreciative ones.[78] For Mingus, this observant silence represented respect for him as a composer, whether pencil or spontaneous. Recounting a fight between Mingus and an audience member, Scott Saul writes that "[it] was a battle over the power of self-revelation—who might circulate their story over the din of someone else's, who might incorporate someone else's story into their own…Mingus refused to believe that the customer was always right—especially when she believed in the utility of the art world as it was, not the power of art to model a utopian world to come."[79] Mingus's nightclub skirmishes took place during the height of his spontaneous composition years, when his style was furthest from conventional ideas of high art music, yet he expected the same attentiveness from the noisy nightclub patrons in that period that he received from the "young music lovers" at the Whitney concert. For Mingus, there was no question of one style deserving legitimacy and another serving as background. It was all Mingus music and all to be taken seriously.

Yet when faced with the prestigious Whitney commission, Mingus turned to a style that carried its own pedigree. Within the frame of prestige this can be read at least two ways. One interpretation is that Mingus was being granted access to an audience and venue rarely opened to African American musicians. Mingus recognized the opportunity for framing himself as a composer to be taken seriously outside of the jazz sphere, and decided that a high modernist style might best serve him to those ends. A second reading recognizes Mingus's competitive streak, and sees his stylistic choice as a sparring gesture on the prestigious turf of the art music world. That these interpretations contradict

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[78] For a discussion of this movement, see chapter three of Lawrence W Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).
[79] Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't*, 402.

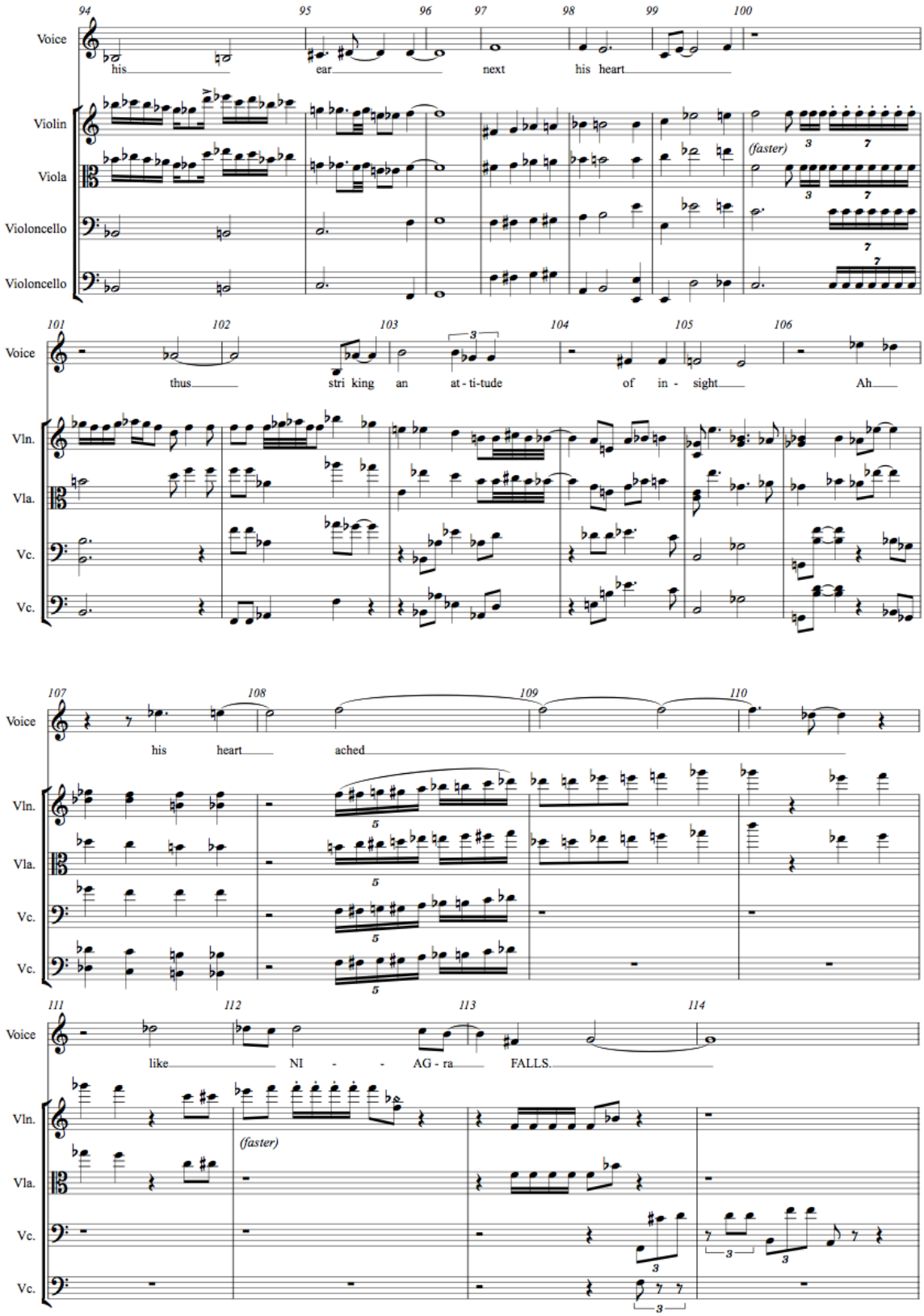
Mingus's broader philosophies concerning musical hierarchies reflects the racial and generic boundaries imposed on African American musicians, and the doubleness that the experience of these restrictions creates.

The Poetic Mingus

Although the location and prestige of the commission almost certainly contributed to Mingus's compositional choices for the piece, a more nuanced view of String Quartet No. 1 also takes into account Mingus's poetic orientation and his life-long interest in the interplay of music and text. Returning to the details of the piece, I propose that the style of String Quartet No. 1, when viewed through the lens of a Poetic Mingus, can be partially understood as a musical response to O'Hara's text.

Mingus's music is filled with thoughtful moments of text-setting.[80] One moving example is his treatment of the stanza "He knelt, his ear next his heart, thus / striking an attitude of insight. Ah! / his heart ached like Niagara Falls!". Leading up to this climactic passage (measures 94-100) the singer slowly voices, "his ear next his heart," and the strings come together in rare rhythmic clarity. The sustained dissonance and paused motion of measure 95 marks the import of the moment. From there, the strings move in rhythmic unison through a chromatic line, foreshadowing the pathos of the final line of the stanza. The strings return to their rhythmic chaos until the singer lands on "ached." Here, they ascend chromatically once again, the cellos dropping out as the viola and violin play a fragile melody, thinning further until just the violin remains under the

[80] Mingus certainly paid close attention to the poem and the vocal line he wrote for it. In an interview shortly after the piece's composition he said, "That's one thing I did write down and memorize, though: the word part, the slurring, legato thing that went through the melody that the cello and violins and all were playing. I sang that, didn't play it, couldn't play it." Goodman, *Mingus Speaks*, 56.

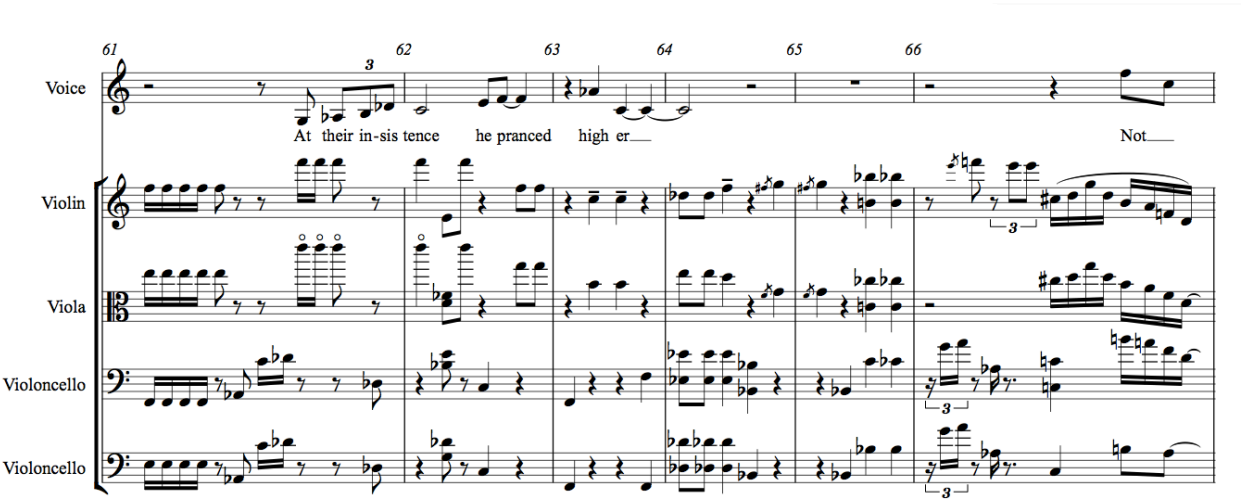


Example 1.6 Measures 94-114, String Quartet No. 1

singer. With this passage, Mingus offers a tender and poignant reading of the poetry's "his heart ached like Niagara Falls."

The narrative of the poem builds to a final stanza, and in that passage Mingus's music suggests a larger-scale reading of O'Hara's verse. The young naïf, having followed the audience's orders to "prance higher," notices that their demands have corrupted his freedom. The poem closes with the climactic "'What have you done?' he screamed, 'I was / not like this when you came!' 'Alas,' / they sighed, 'you were not like us.'"

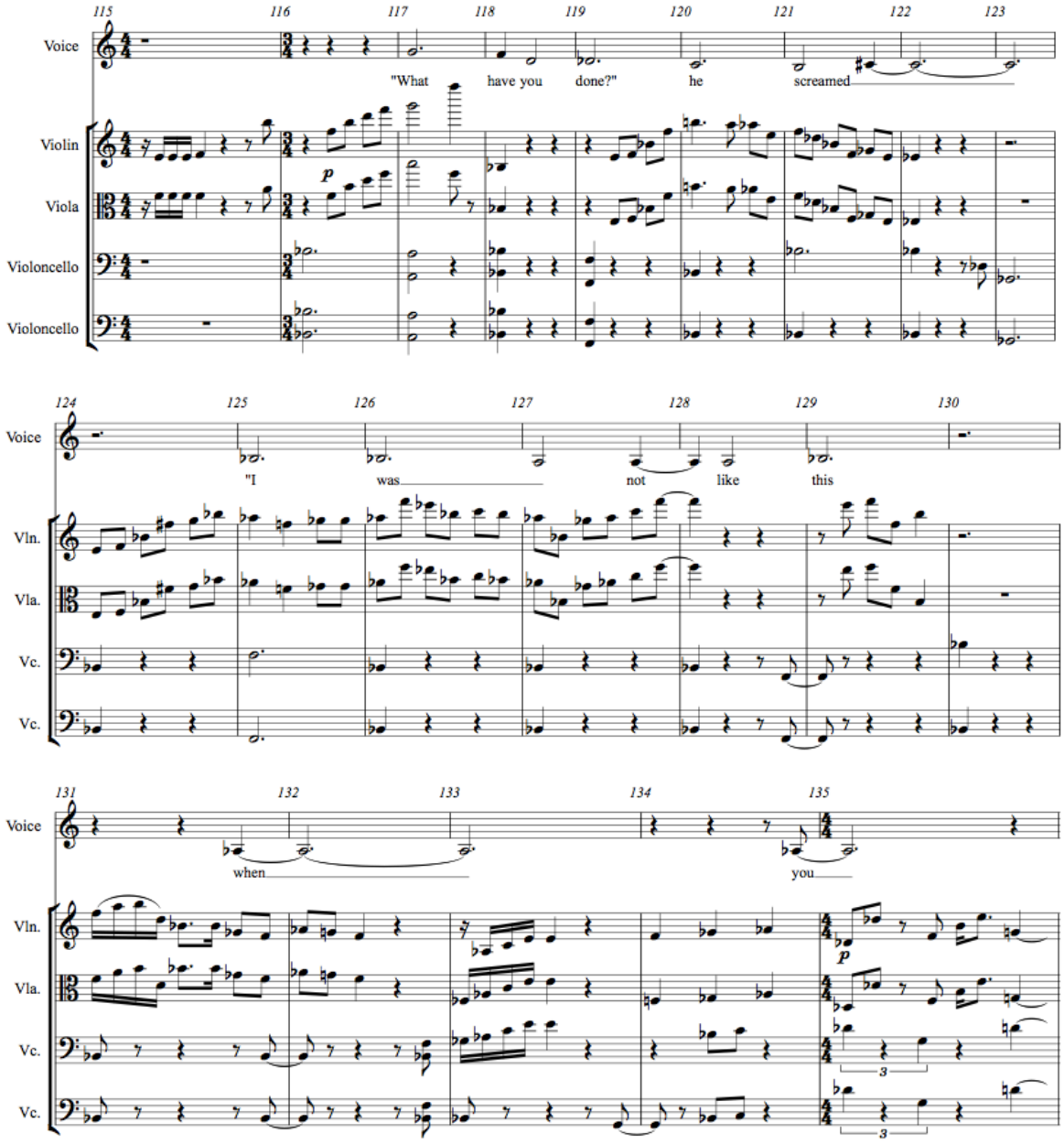
At the naif's cry, out of rhythmic instability emerges a sinister waltz. It is not the first instance of three-quarter time in the piece; earlier, on the poetic line "at their insistence he pranced higher," Mingus writes four measures of dissonant oom-pah-pah, illustrating the naif's performance.



Example 1.7 Measures 61-66, String Quartet No. 1

At the closing stanza, beginning with measure 116, the cellos stomp out the downbeats, while the violin and viola turn above them in a dissonant melody. The vocal part falls in step, reinforcing the rhythm. This clearest articulation of meter in the work gives the

impression of a mechanical dance. Thirteen measures in, the cellos begin a metrical unraveling, anticipating the downbeat by an eighth note. Over the next seven measures the seams of the dance continue to split as rhythmic instability returns.



Example 1.8 Measures 115-135, String Quartet No. 1

Comparing O'Hara's poem with Mingus's earlier piece of the same name, parallel themes emerge. In Mingus's "The Clown," from 1957, an audience's reaction drives a performer to increasingly self-destructive measures in order to earn accolades. The audience functions as a threatening force. Looking back to O'Hara's "The Clown," we can see a similar narrative. The poem's protagonist reacts to the praises of his ever-watching "them." By the end he recognizes that his movements are now controlled by their desires rather than the pastoral explorations that opened the poem. [81]

Mingus's approach to rhythm in "String Quartet No. 1" highlights this theme of threatening audience control. In the midst of a disorienting rhythmic landscape he suddenly turns to a rigid three quarter time, with all members of the ensemble falling into lock step. As O'Hara's naif recognizes how his viewers have corrupted him, Mingus gives us a mechanized dance, suggesting the performer's loss of agency when faced with the demands of the audience. O'Hara's disillusioned naïf turns into another iteration of Mingus's tragic clown character in a moment of brutal rhythmic control.

This striking instance of text setting suggests that Mingus reached outside his usual stylistic domain at least in part as a response to O'Hara's poetry. Too quick of a dismissal of "String Quartet No. 1" as a stylistic experiment due to a prestigious commission would miss seeing the poetic interpretation at work in Mingus's setting. Certainly, the opportunity offered by the commission shaped the piece to no small extent; if nothing else, even just the instrumentation could be considered a direct reaction to the environment of the work's genesis.

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[81] In addition to this thematic similarity there is (at least) one musical one as well: all three of Mingus's clown-themed pieces feature three-quarter time prominently.

Conclusion

Multiplicity and contradiction are necessarily a part of any study of the life and music of Charles Mingus. From the multiple personalities of his memoir to his many styles and approaches to composition, Mingus evades simple categorization. As Nichole Rustin has written, what this speaks to is not Mingus, necessarily, but those trying to categorize him. "He was not claiming to have 'changed' styles. Rather his artistic and intellectual interests were broader than the narrow definition of jazz with which the mainstream public could identify. Since jazz music had always been, as Ellington described, 'beyond category,' the simplification of his music into 'jazz' was evidence to Mingus (and many black musicians) of how black men were policed artistically, economically, and racially."[82]

In this chapter I have looked in detail at two of Mingus's texted works to interrogate what text was for Mingus and how he navigated the particular challenges of bringing poetry into jazz. In the case of "Scenes in the City," I argued that Mingus created a unique structure for the coexistence of improvisation and text through his use of plastic form. The pre-composed materials provided musical environments for the narrative, while the openness necessitated a listening and improvising ensemble. The text cued the musicians, and at times the musicians cued the text, but all the performers remained responsive. In my examination of the style of String Quartet No. 1, a doubleness emerges that reflects Mingus's racialized world. The piece's modernism is both a bid for, and an undermining of, the prestige of the high art world, a privileged zone often denied to African American artists. But it also reflects his deep attention to

[82] Rustin, "Mingus Fingers," 118.

O'Hara's poetry, and suggests the need to think of Mingus's lifelong engagement with poetry as central to his artistic project. If String Quartet No. 1 defies explanation, it is because Mingus himself lived and performed resistance to categorization.

Both pieces analyzed in this chapter show the hand of a composer skillfully working with both music and poetry. Mingus's thoughtful engagement with text revises an understanding of jazz poetry intersection as an exclusively poet-driven format, with disinterested musicians. The poetic Mingus offers just one among many counterexamples to this racially inflected reception. Moreover, in his work with text, Mingus shows that meaningful connection between text and music in jazz poetry intersection is not always a matter of collaboration; that closeness between the mediums may emerge from the creative practice of a single artist.

CHAPTER 2
VIJAY IYER AND MIKE LADD IN CONVERSATION: COLLABORATIVE TEXT AND MUSIC INTERACTION IN "COLOR OF MY CIRCUMFERENCE I"

Over the past ten years, pianist Vijay Iyer and poet Mike Ladd have collaborated on a trilogy of large-scale works that combine Iyer's intricate, high-concept music with Ladd's rich verse. During their decade of collaboration, the two artists have developed a deeply intertwined creative process. The works that emerged from this practice show a nuanced and multi-faceted relationship between music and text, in which the two forms interact both formally and expressively.

Improvisation and collaboration fundamentally shape the intersection of music and word in the Iyer/Ladd works, and in this chapter I propose that the metaphor of conversation offers insights into the relationship between music and text in these pieces. The single interpreter framework of Word and Music Studies described in this dissertation's introduction cannot account for the complexity and multi-directionality of the relationships in these pieces. Through their collaboration, Iyer and Ladd negotiate the processes of composition and improvisation to bring about compelling interaction between the media. The artistic exchange takes place both in the moment of performance and throughout the period of composition. Ingrid Monson's study of conversation as a model for improvisational interaction deeply informs this chapter as I turn her theory onto the intersection between arts.

Iyer and Ladd have created three evening-length works that tackle weighty political topics and thwart genre categorization. Iyer and Ladd pull from jazz, hip hop, spoken word, and conceptual art, melding their influences into intricate and powerful

performances. In this chapter I begin an evaluation of the relationship between music and word in these works through the detailed analysis of one example, "The Color of My Circumference I" from their first project, *In What Language*.

The Artists – Vijay Iyer and Mike Ladd

Vijay Iyer has emerged recently as one of the foremost pianists on the jazz scene and his compositional activity is gaining increasing prominence. Born in 1971 to Indian immigrant parents, Iyer was raised in Rochester NY. He studied Western classical violin throughout his childhood, but is mostly self-taught on piano. As an undergraduate at Yale University he majored in math and physics, finishing the degree at age 20. Iyer then began graduate studies in physics at University of California at Berkeley, but found himself drawn increasingly to music. Combining his interests, he crafted a multidisciplinary program of study in music cognition, writing his doctoral thesis on the embodied cognition of rhythm in African and African American music.

Iyer began performing professionally during his doctoral studies, and his career as a performer has grown steadily, with a few sudden rises along the way. The jazz press has celebrated the albums he has made with his eponymous trio, especially his 2009 *Historicity* and 2012's *Accelerando*. He has collaborated widely with other jazz musicians, plays regularly at the first-tier jazz clubs of New York, and tours widely. He received a 2013 MacArthur Fellowship and joined the faculty of the Harvard University Department of Music in the beginning of 2014.

Despite—or perhaps because of—this institutional and critical validation, Iyer's position within the jazz scene is controversial. In the wake of the announcement of the

MacArthur Fellowship, several prominent musicians reacted publicly, on social media, discussing whether Iyer's acclaim is deserved.[1] But fracture within the jazz community is nothing new, and the debates say more about the politics of genre and institutions in jazz, a topic I will discuss in chapter four, than they do about Iyer's music.

Much of the reception of Iyer's work has focused on the intricacies of his rhythmic approach and the influence of his South Asian heritage on his musical language. His wide-ranging compositional excursions are often overlooked. Iyer seeks out collaborators from across the artistic spectrum, and often speaks of the richness that these collaborations bring to his creative experience. In 2012 he composed a piece for the Bang on a Can ensemble, commissioned by the Japan Society, and wrote for Yo-Ya Ma's Silk Road Ensemble. He embraces hip hop and has collaborated with DJ Spooky and Das Racist. He also works regularly with experimental ensembles like Burnt Sugar and has participated in "Butch" Morris's Conductions. His most recent release, *Mutations,* features compositions for piano and string quartet

In person, Iyer evinces the keen intellect and unbounded curiosity suggested by his biography. Iyer has been generous with his time, and patient with my questions and requests for material. He is thoughtful, careful in his word choice, and focused in conversation. In preparation for this chapter, I conducted an interview with Iyer at his Harlem home, and we have been in communication as follow-up questions have emerged.

Mike Ladd was born and raised in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In his undergraduate program at Hamphsire college he studied Black expatriates in the

[1] For a summary of this discussion, see Peter Hum, "On Vijay Iyer, Kurt Rosenwinkel, HuffPo, Greatness, Prizes and Hype," *Jazzblog from the Ottawa Citizen*, October 2, 2013, http://blogs.ottawacitizen.com/2013/10/02/on-vijay-iyer-kurt-rosenwinkel-huffpo-greatness-prizes-and-hype/.

nineteenth century. He earned an MA in poetry from Boston University, where he studied with Robert Pinsky and David Ferry. Ladd grew up in an academic landscape, raised by his mother Florence Ladd, a social psychologist who has worked as both professor and administrator at Harvard. His work defies genre, with experimentalism at the core of his approach. His underground hip hop albums layer influences from a wide range of musical styles—funk, punk, dub, experimental jazz, and bhangra, to name a few—with Ladd's high concept lyrics. His latest project is an "all-improvised transnational collaboration" with three musicians from generically diverse backgrounds, coalescing around experimental improvisation.[2] He is now based in Paris, where he teaches and performs. Ladd has a fluency in both academic and hip hop cultures, switching easily between them and melding their distinct jargons in his fast-paced conversational tone. Ladd exhibits this same fluidity in his racial self-presentation, described here by Iyer: "His mother is African American, his father was a white man who passed away long ago. So he has this strange quality of being able to be confused for almost any ethnicity in the world. He uses that as a way to connect with people, actually."[3]

Iyer and Ladd first met while attending the same shows, and later Iyer saw Ladd perform. "I saw him sitting in with this group…called Antipop Consortium. They're hip hop, I guess, you know… And then Mike was there with them on stage, in the corner with some very weird analogue synthesizer (laughs) from the 1970s…smoking a cigarette and making all these really weird sounds with echoes and noise and chaos out there

[2] "Ayler Records - Why Waste Time," Record label description, accessed June 26, 2013, http://www.ayler.com/sleeping-in-vilna-why-waste-time.html.
[3] Vijay Iyer, Interview by author, May 15, 2012.

(laughs)."[4] As the two got to know each other better, Iyer was intrigued by Ladd's artistic approach. Ladd is often described as a hip hop poet,[5] but Iyer describes his collaborator's lyrics as "literary. It just seemed to have all these pointers to other things that you don't usually hear in performative hip hop lyrics…It seemed grounded in literary traditions. He seemed to have a working knowledge of the craft of poetry and the history of poetry."[6] Iyer liked the "global sensibility" of Ladd's politicized subject matter. Iyer also admired Ladd's approach to combining text and music. "Its relationship to the music was more ambiguous, in just an interesting way…it just seemed to cut diagonally across the music. (laughs) Like it wasn't squared off in meter, I mean sometimes it was, but a lot of the time it was just sort of penetrating the space of music in a more…in a richer way, I felt."[7] Ladd was decidedly pithier in his description of the history of their relationship: "We click, we're friends. We clicked when we met years ago before we even started playing together."[8]

"This combination of words and music is something that we're both very accustomed to already," Ladd told me when we talked about their approaches to the projects. "I'd already been in punk rock bands, hip hop bands…and then I was entering into the poetry scene in '93 which in New York was very intentionally referencing the Black Arts movement of the late 60s and 70s. And the Nuyorican arts movement…That

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[4] Ibid.
[5] For a few examples of "hip hop poet" see: Peter Bacon, "Grand Pianoramax at the Hare & Hounds, Kinds Heath," *Birmingham Post*, March 17, 2009, http://www.birminghampost.co.uk/whats-on/music/grand-pianoramax-hare--hounds-3949062; Hua Hsu, "Invisible Cities, Invisible Men," *Village Voice*, May 6, 2003, http://www.villagevoice.com/2003-05-06/news/invisible-cities-invisible-men/; Alan Lockwood, "Dimensions in Music: Soft Power: Jazz Meets the Subcontinent," *Brooklyn Rail*, November 2, 2006, http://www.brooklynrail.org/2006/11/music/dimensions-in-music-soft-power-jazz-meet.
[6] Iyer, Interview by author.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Mike Ladd, Interview by author, by telephone, November 15, 2012.

already was an immediate marriage of text and music."[9] Iyer had played with Amiri Baraka's band from 2000-2004, and cited that experience as having primed him for his work with Ladd. "I remember Mike came and saw me play with him a few times, too. That was really helpful for our process. But Mike's been a lifelong admirer of Amiri Baraka, so it wasn't like any of that was news to him exactly, it just galvanized us, I think."[10]

The Trilogy

Through over a decade of collaborative work, Iyer and Ladd have produced three evening-length works. A recent review of the album version of their third piece calls the trilogy "a series of unclassifiable blends of music, theater and spoken word that paint a vivid oral history of post-9/11 America."[11] Another reviewer called the stage production of that work "dense, intense, provocative, and honorable."[12] Yet another review characterized the live performance of the second collaboration as "a blizzard of word, sound, image and movement…and somehow the results are not just galling, but gripping."[13] Finally, *The Boston Globe*'s Siddhartha Mitter called the first collaboration "a triumph of a genre that doesn't yet exist…It is aggressively ambitious yet unfailingly

[9] Ibid.
[10] Iyer, Interview by author.
[11] Chris Barton, "Review: 'Holding It Down' Awakens Us to Veterans' Dreams," *Pop and Hiss: The L.A. Times Music Blog*, September 10, 2013, http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/posts/la-et-ms-veterans-dreams-20130910,0,5918965.story.
[12] Ben Ratliff, "Sleepless in Kandahar Or Mosul, in Raw Verse," *The New York Times*, September 21, 2012, sec. C16.
[13] Nate Chinen, "Life During Wartime, in a News Media Bombardment," *The New York Times*, December 8, 2006, sec. Arts / Music, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/08/arts/music/08iyer.html.

accessible and deeply empathetic."[14] While clearly reflecting an admiration for the works, the vague language of these reviews reveals the difficulty of capturing the unique nature of the Iyer/Ladd pieces in a short description.[15] I face this same challenge here, in presenting an overview of the history and sonic worlds of these works.

All three projects feature highly political and current topical matter, and in each case Ladd gathered his material from extensive interviews and fieldwork. The first piece, *In What Language,* explores globalization through the experiences of people of color in the ecosystems of international airports. *Still Life with Commentator* darkly satirizes the 24-hour American news media of 2006. For the final work, *Holding it Down: The Veterans' Dreams Project*, Ladd interviewed veterans of color about their dreams, and wove their stories into the work's haunting landscape of self-medication, surrealistic humor, and PTSD. This final work is distinct from the others in that some of the interviewees became participants in the collaborations, contributing poems and performances to the piece.

Each of the large works has taken the form of both a live multi-media performance and a recording, and each was the result of a commission by an art institution in New York City. *In What Language* emerged from a 2003 commission by the Asia Society and was released that year on Pi Recording. The prestigious performance institution The Brooklyn Academy of Music commissioned *Still Life with*

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[14] Siddhartha Mitter, "Exhilarating Jazz, Spoken Word Take off in Airport Setting," *Boston.com*, March 28, 2005, http://www.boston.com/news/globe/living/articles/2005/03/28/exhilarating_jazz_spoken_word_take_off_in_airport_setting/.

[15] At least some of this vagueness is due to the genre-defying nature of Iyer and Ladd's works. I will be discussing genre as an aspect of these pieces (among other jazz and poetry intersections) in the final chapter of this dissertation.

Commentator, which was then released on Savoy Jazz in 2007. The last collaboration, *Holding it Down*, was commissioned to open the 2012-2013 season at The Harlem Stage at the Gatehouse and was released in September 2013 on Pi Recordings. The path through these venues and labels tells a story of genre, race, and hierarchy that I will discuss in the final chapter of this dissertation.

The three projects share many of the same personnel, particularly between the second two recordings. Guitarist Liberty Ellman appears on all three albums. Okkyung Lee, Guillermo E. Brown, and Pamela Z recorded for both *Still Life* and *Holding it Down*, and all three are known for their experimentalism. Latasha N. Nevada Diggs, who appeared on *In What Language*, contributed vocals for the live version of *Holding it Down,* in place of Pamela Z.

The three works share the same basic structure: a series of short pieces, generally between two and eight minutes, organized into a larger whole. In all three cases, some of the pieces from the live versions were trimmed for the recordings. The recordings clock in at about seventy minutes, near the maximum capacity for a single audio CD, and while I cannot comment on the length of the first two live performances, *Holding it Down* was about eighty minutes. Vocal and musical characteristics shift, sometimes dramatically, between the small pieces. The individual texts do not progress through a larger narrative, rather offering a variety of insights into overarching themes.

In general, the works take a fluid approach to the speech/song spectrum. *In What Language* contains all spoken text, but a fair amount of *Holding It Down* is sung. Although Iyer and Ladd have labeled their works “song cycle,” and “oratorio,” nothing in

Title	**Venue and Label**	**Personnel from recording**
In What Language	Venue: Asia Society Label: Pi Recordings (2003)	Latasha N. Nevada Diggs – voice, electronics Allison Easter – voice Ajay Naidu – voice Ambrose Akinmusire – trumpet Rudresh Mahanthappa – alto saxophone Dana Leong – cello, trombone, flugelbone **Liberty Ellman – guitar** Stephan Crump – bass Trevor Holder – drums
Still Life with Commentator	Venue: Brooklyn Academy of Music Label: Savoy (2007)	**Pamela Z – vocals, vocal textures, live electronic processing** Palina Jonsdottir – vocals **Guillermo E. Brown – vocals, electronic percussion, percussion** Masayasu Nakanishi – vocals **Liberty Ellman – guitar** **Okkyung Lee – cello**
Holding it Down: The Veteran's Dreams Project	Venue: The Harlem Stage Gatehouse Label: Pi Recordings (2013)	Maurice Decaul – vocals Lynn Hill – vocals **Pamela Z – vocals with live processing** **Guillermo E. Brown – vocals and effects** **Liberty Ellman – guitar** **Okkyung Lee – cello** Kassa Overall – drums

Table 2.1 Personnel in addition to Iyer and Ladd
(bold indicates a person who is on more than one recording)

any of the three works resembles a straightforward song of any type. In both live performance and recording, the sung material is often processed electronically. The spoken texts range in delivery as well, from prosaic personal narrative, to the energetic flow of an MC, and finally the slow pace and varied articulation of an academic poetry reading.

Iyer approaches this text from a remarkably wide range of styles. In all three works, he blends electronic with acoustic. As just one example of the breadth of stylistic variation, on the album version of *Holding it Down,* he follows a dense, noisy, electronically-processed track with a laid-back loping groove layered under a melody that recalls Chinese traditional music. Iyer certainly cannot be accused of the monotonous sound for which earlier jazz and poetry recordings have sometimes been criticized; but neither is the stylistic diversity an end in itself. In the following section, I look at the impact of Iyer and Ladd's creative process on their pieces, and particularly on the relationship between music and word.

Conversation as Text /Music Model – Iyer and Ladd's Creative Process

In the development of their projects, Iyer and Ladd maintained a singular focus on telling the stories they had collected.

> It really wasn't about us as players…I mean, there's a lot of playing in it. People take solos and there's a lot of improvisation. But… I had to kind of keep it in check in a way. I remember having to tell the horn players: this isn't about you grandstanding. (laughs) It has to be about, think about the story we're telling here. Basically they had to deprioritize their own musical fixations and think more

> about the energy of the stories that were being told and also just the energy of the moment we were in. And what this project was meant to represent.[16]

Iyer and Ladd's commitment to representing the stories of their interlocutors shaped, in part, the relationship between the music and the text. Iyer has given considerable thought to the narrative potential of music, and especially improvised music.[17] But when envisioning the role of his music in the trilogy, he sought to support the existing narrative rather than adding a layer. "The poetry could coexist with the music and penetrate it…the music was a frame for these characters. You know, like an environment for these characters to tell their stories. But then at crucial moments in the narrative the music would shift…it would seem to be this kind of static environment, but then suddenly it would turn or you know the color of it would change or the intensity or the rhythm. And internal rhythmic stuff would change, or something about it would develop as the story develops." [18]

To craft this relationship between Ladd's verse and Iyer's music, they used a creative process that Ladd characterizes as "embarrassingly simple. You know, I write something. He checks it out. He then comes back with a couple of rough sketches, tracks that are usually computer generated…I give him more, then he gives me more, I give him more, he gives me more."[19] As a performer/improviser/composer, Iyer inhabits a multidimensional musical identity similar to Mingus's. In his work with Ladd, he began from a composerly stance.

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[16] Iyer, Interview by author.
[17] As an example, see his essay Vijay Iyer, "Exploding the Narrative in Jazz Improvisation," in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 393–403.
[18] Iyer, Interview by author.
[19] Ladd, Interview by author.

> What I didn't want to do was start by jamming…it's not that I don't believe in improvisation, but you have to have a stimulus of some kind…even if it's the barest hint of a structure, just something to work with so that we can build something. Otherwise you're just reaching out into empty space and you start groping and then you just feel like, well that's good enough. Like, that was kind of cool. (laughs) It's not like it's actually something that you actually stand behind, it's just something that happened…Again, it's not that I don't trust improvisation, but I like, as a composer, to have an idea in place. And then you can improvise with the idea.[20]

From this initial structure, improvisation shaped the development of the projects, as Iyer described to me: "basically the ways in which these different energies manifest with the same structure is **because** of improvisation. Through improvisation we sort of settled on dynamic and textures and the way people would enter and leave the musical space…I guess I would say that a lot of it was arrived at through improvisational process, in terms of just building that stuff."[21] Thus improvisation affects aspects of the works that may appear to be strictly composed.[22]

The interactivity of improvisation is folded into Iyer and Ladd's collaborative compositional process. Improvisation occurs not just in the moment of performance, but throughout the timeline of the project. In their study on collaboration in twentieth century composition, composer Sam Hayden and psychologist Luke Windsor write that, "it may be that the traditional separation of performance and composition in Western art music

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[20] Iyer, Interview by author.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Untangling improvisation and composition is, of course, a complex prospect, as improvisation can be thought of as intrinsic to the composer's internal process of composition. These sources, among many others, have influenced my work: Alperson, "On Musical Improvisation"; Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950"; Luke O. Gillespie, "Literacy, Orality, and the Parry-Lord 'Formula': Improvisation and the Afro-American Jazz Tradition," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 22, no. 2 (December 1, 1991): 147–64.

may be a tacit limit on collaboration."[23] In Iyer and Ladd's artistic communities these distinctions matter less, performance and composition interweaving in the creative process.[24]

It is through their collaboration, a human relationship, that the interaction between music and word is constituted. Neither text nor music takes precedence in this process, according to Iyer. "We had to find that relationship. And that meant adjusting on all sides. And sometimes I'd write something and it'd just be wrong…And other times Mike was compelled after hearing the stuff to rewrite the poems."[25] Sometimes segments of music originally written for one poem or story would work better with another, and vice versa. Either person could initiate the compositional process for a particular story. "So it was a very organic process."[26] Each was subject to the other, and both were subject to the stories being told. Both Ladd and Iyer emphasized this repeatedly: the pieces were not about the music or the poetry, but about the stories. When they had something that resembled a relatively complete work, they brought the piece to the full ensemble. After hearing the work with live instruments and improvising musicians, they continued their revisions. Ladd characterized this final stage as when the work began "to take a lot of shape musically."[27] In short, their process is fundamentally collaborative, fluid, and responsive to the material and performers with which they work.

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[23] Sam Hayden and W. Luke Windsor, "Collaboration and the Composer: Case Studies from the End of the 20th Century," *Tempo: A Quarterly Review of Modern Music* 61, no. 240 (2007): 30.
[24] Windsor and Hayden write about composer/performer collaborations, which have a different set of challenges than poet/musician collaborations; however, the premise of the creative process as being limited by the concepts of performance and composition stand.
[25] Iyer, Interview by author.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ladd, Interview by author.

But "collaboration" can characterize a variety of processes. Psychologist Vera John-Steiner has typologized different types of creative collaborative work, describing the nature of the relationship between the contributors. Much texted music is created through what John-Steiner calls "complementarity collaboration," which is "based on complementary expertise, disciplinary knowledge, clear roles, and temperament."[28] The conventional word and music approach to studying texted music has grown out of a process in which there is a distinct composer and poet who work separately, through complementarity collaboration. The music is usually considered a reading of a static text, the composer offering an interpretation of the poem, and the poet's contribution is often subsumed in this single-interpreter framework.

Based on their descriptions of their creative processes and the outcomes of their collaborative work, I believe that Ladd and Iyer's process is better understood as "integrative collaboration." These relationships "require a prolonged period of committed activity. They thrive on dialogue, risk taking, and a shared vision. In some cases the participants construct a common set of beliefs, or ideology…Integrative partnerships are motivated by the desire to transform existing knowledge, thought style, or artistic approaches into new visions."[29] The work of these collaborations often leads to major innovations and new forms. The reviews quoted earlier make clear that Iyer and Ladd are indeed working innovatively, and perhaps this new form of text and music interaction warrants a different model for analysis.

Iyer and Ladd's creative process is not only considerably more interactive and fluid than one typically finds in texted music within the Western art music tradition, it

[28] Vera John-Steiner, *Creative Collaboration* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 198.
[29] Ibid., 203.

also stands out within examples of jazz and poetry intersection, particularly those with significant improvisation. In many of these works, and certainly in the infamous "beatsploitation" examples from the 1950s and early 1960s, the intersection was short-lived; improvisers were often given the daunting task of responding to poetry they encountered for the first time in the moment of performance.[30] If these intersections were the crossing of two narrow roads—a brief opening in which everything from chaos to synergy was possible—Iyer and Ladd's process instead resembles two parallel rivers. As they wind downstream, at some points converging only briefly, at others merging completely, each confluence mingles the waters and the rivers carry forward the trace of their interactions.

Much has been written on the resemblance between jazz improvisation and conversation and the metaphorical relationship that is often drawn between them. Paul Berliner's seminal *Thinking in Jazz* details the ways in which improvisers characterize their practice as conversational.[31] Ingrid Monson devotes an entire chapter in *Saying Something* to exploring the metaphor of jazz improvisation as conversation.[32] Yet when thinking about relationships between text and music in jazz and poetry intersection, the discourse has relied on a foundation built by the study of the Western art music tradition. If, as Monson argues, "meaningful theorizing about jazz improvisation at the level of the ensemble must take the interactive, collaborative context of musical invention as a point

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[30] Phil Ford evocatively characterizes "beatsploitation" as being "like the snapshots tourists would take on their trips to Greenwich Village in the late 1950s: exotica evocations of the vie de boheme," in his Phil Ford, "Ken Nordine, You're Getting Better: The Word Jazz Dot Masters. Hip-O-Select," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2, no. 01 (2008): 125–27.

[31] Berliner uses the conversational reference throughout, but for an example see page 192 of his *Thinking in Jazz : The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[32] Monson, *Saying Something*, 73–96.

of departure," perhaps this attention to process and human relationship might also lead to insights into the nature of text and music relationships in jazz and poetry intersection.

What I propose here is a model of text/music relationship that takes conversation as its defining metaphor. In conversation, the two participants relate to one another without necessarily saying the same thing; each contributes their own thread of content, yet these threads are always indivisible. Each media constitutes the other. They will not always agree: the conflict and misunderstanding that are a part of every conversation might also shape the text/music relationship. And just as the rhythm and style of our speech affects that used by our conversation partners, the rhythm and form in one art influences the other. Eavesdroppers hear a version of the conversation distinct from the interlocutors, their hearing fundamentally guided by the interaction that has taken place. The audience, listening in on improvised interactions between poetry and music, hears an expression distinct from the contributions of either artist, one that is always already shaped by the "interactive, collaborative context" of its invention.

I am not suggesting that the creative process *must* dictate analytical method. Rather, this model broadens the analytical frame to listen for the possibility of reciprocality. Further, I take as an imperative the Jazz Studies call to study the music through theories and methods that emerge from the musical practices of jazz, rather than those developed for/from other musics.

In the following analysis, I listen in on Iyer and Ladd's conversation for a brief two and half minutes—the first half of the opening track of *In What Language*.[33] I focus

[33] I believe that the conversational model of text/music relationship that I am suggesting here would apply equally well in the live performance context, but for practical reasons I will be working from the album version of this piece exclusively.

particularly on the interactions between the syntaxes of the two media, and how these junctions impact my hearing of the semantics of the work. As an eavesdropper, I make no direct claim about the artists' intentions, other than to point out what I know about how improvisation and composition played into shaping these structures. I am simply listening for the resonance of collaboration, and the possibility of conversation between poetry and music.

In What Language – Genesis and Cycle

In the first seconds of *In What Language,* restless solo piano arpeggiation swirls through elusive groupings. A low repeated pitch joins, articulating a rhythm that quickly feels familiar, but slips away with a hidden complexity. Within the arpeggiation, the pitches crawl stepwise, nearly imperceptibly, in one voice at a time, blurred by light pedaling. Stasis and motion: even with the frenetic *perpetuum mobile* this music gives the impression of standing still. After twenty seconds, a measured voice enters, speaking:

In the delicate distance
Of brown, I sit on a bus.

With the uneasy proximity
Of tan, I look out on Queens.

Gazing out the window of a moving bus, the nearby cityscape blurs by, details erased by the motion of travel. But distant points appear unmoving. Stasis and motion. In the opening moments of *In What Language*, Vijay Iyer makes audible this parallax. The musical and poetic evocation of travel establishes a major theme of the work. But, critically, the musical parallax offers a positionality, placing the listener in the body of the traveler and encouraging an empathic listening.

From this position, Iyer and Ladd launch their song cycle—seventeen tracks of music with spoken word that explore globalization through the experiences of people of color in international airports. When Vijay Iyer received his commission from the Asia Society, he carefully considered what kind of piece he would like to write, and how to relate to his sponsoring institution. In some ways, the Asia Society is an unlikely patron for the politically progressive Iyer. As he told me:

> [It] is this New York Institution on Park Avenue that was basically founded to uphold orientalism (laughs) on some level, so I thought… that my response to it would be, just to completely disrupt that narrative, and offer a different one that had to do with a different notion of community that wasn't even specific ethnicity. But more specific to a particular moment in history and a common predicament which had to do with being brown at the turn of the millennium in the West, or in these global centers.[34]

The phrase "In What Language" comes from Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi, and Iyer calls his story the "crystallization" of the project. Airport authorities in New York's JFK airport detained Panahi when he was en route from Hong Kong to Buenos Aires. When he refused to be fingerprinted and photographed—he was, after all, just passing through the airport and never attempted to enter the United States—they detained him overnight and eventually sent him back to Hong Kong. He remained handcuffed on the flight back to Hong Kong. Iyer relates more of the story: "And he says, I wanted to tell the people next to me I'm not a criminal. I'm just a man. I'm an Iranian man. But how can I say this? He says, in what language? Anyway, that became this resonant phrase. In what language can you assert your humanity in the face of ignorance and oppression?"[35]

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[34] Iyer, Interview by author.
[35] Ibid.

Reflecting on Panahi's experience eventually led to Iyer and Ladd focusing on the stories of people of color in international airports. Ladd conducted extensive fieldwork while preparing his poetry, interviewing people from all strata of the airport ecosystem, from janitors to business travellers. While clearly resonating with the intense cultural scrutiny on airports following the attacks on September 11, 2001, the genesis of their project predates that event.

The content of the piece is unquestionably political, as is typical of the Iyer/Ladd collaborations, and both artists contextualized the politics as related to their lived experience of race. As Ladd says, "This work is political as much as everything I am ever going to do is political even if it is just an album of whistling. This is just my understanding of politics. I am continuously asked whether I consider myself a political artist, and in fact I don't think of it in those terms. I consider myself someone who is always expressing my life in its entirety…This is a very old point, but if you have any shade that is not white it is difficult to extract politics from what you are doing."[36] Iyer frames it in much the same way: "I have always seen my work as politicized in a certain way. It is also very much about my life experiences transduced into this other medium. Not only are they representing my life experiences, they are literally my life experiences: the act of making music is my life experience. Within that is my perspective as a person of color in this country and that is utterly fundamental to everything I do and to every human interaction that I have in this culture."[37]

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[36] Nermeen Shaikh, "Interview with Vijay Iyer and Mike Ladd from AsiaSource," *Refuse and Resist*, accessed September 24, 2013, http://artists.refuseandresist.org/news9/news420.html.
[37] Ibid.

"The Color of My Circumference I"

I have chosen "The Color of My Circumference I" for analysis largely because its relative simplicity allows for a close examination of the conversational dynamics between Iyer and Ladd. Stripped down to just acoustic piano and spoken text, this opening track serves as a kind of distillation of *In What Language*. As an accessible example from the cycle, it provides a window into the more complex pieces. I will move through the different layers of the work, beginning with an introduction to the poetry and the music before turning an ear to their combination.

Ladd gleaned most of the narrative material of *In What Language* from his interviews. These tracks relay his reimaginings of his interlocutors' stories. But included within the work are four reflections by Ladd about his own experiences as a person of color in transit. These examples, each a numbered "Color of My Circumference," form a sub-cycle within the work. They are related poetically, of course, but also musically.

Formally, the poetry of "Color of My Circumference I" is straightforward: fourteen couplets and a single group of three lines after the tenth couplet. The majority of the lines have between seven and ten syllables, with a few outliers up to thirteen and down to four. There is no set rhyme scheme and no meter.

Within the form, Ladd plays with rhythm, stepping in and out of metrical senses. Iambs and anapests dominate, from the opening "In the delicate distance of brown" to the closing "Tada she is." The central question of the poem is entirely iambic: "Am I a catalogue of memories / a series of possessions?" This iambic lilt leads immediately into a series of anapests, with text that phases in meaning through prepositional permutations. ("Of a people, to a people, within a people") The third couplet's line-starting spondees

In the delicate distance
Of brown, I sit on a bus.

With (the) uneasy proximity
Of tan, I look out on Queens

Shade shift my way to JFK
Ride past INS possessing my access

In kind and card, swipe the coded
Stripe and my name drops in ones and zeroes

Somewhere a computer may know
Ladd is to Pratt as Cawthorne is to Willis is

To Pickett and on
What it won't show are the moments

Of love or lust that swirl
Through centuries and tans me here

Making me one more memento
Of a close-quartered world

All trinkets of time shrink space
A cluttered reflection of collections

Am I a catalogue of memories
A series of possessions?

Of an age within an age within an age (within an age)
Is a mirror to a mirror to a mirror (to a mirror)
Of a people to a people within a people

Each image, descending in view like seeing
One's history through the core of a spine

Stepping through the act
of self-appropriation

My mother relies on the old
Negro spirit of reinvention

"*I am a citizen of the world"* (she says)
Ta da she is

Figure 2.1 Full text of "The Color of My Circumference I," Mike Ladd

stand out in this context of iambs and anapests, lending emphasis and pairing them aurally. ("Shade shift my way to JFK / Ride past INS possessing my access") Proliferation of assonance and consonance give the poem a melodic quality. A striking instance of this musicality overlaps with the above-mentioned spondees. The broadness of the A sounds in "shade," "way," and "K" slow the pace, intensifying the spondee.

Ladd follows this broadening with a hissing consonance of S ("Ride past INS possessing my access"). But this is just one instance of many pairs: won't/show, reflection/collections, memories/series. Alliteration makes frequent appearances as well, first in the opening line and continuing throughout: kind/card, love/lust, trinkets/time.

I discuss the impact of these devices on the sound of "The Color of My Circumference I" later in my analysis, but my point here is to establish Ladd's craftsmanship. In his preparation of the lyrics, he took a decidedly literary approach. He told me, "It's always been my intent that the poetry can also stand alone. That you can read the text outside of the context of the music, away, outside the context of the performance and get just as much out of it as with the other two components."[38]

With its themes of transit, race, global awareness, and the (im)personal, the poem distills many of the ideas of the larger cycle. It interrogates identity in transit: what is this thing, exactly, that embarks on global journeying? What, from our identity, do we bring with us, and what do we leave behind? The opening image of the bus ushers the reader/listener into the suspended state of the transit-world. The "brown" and "tan" of the opening two couplets are at first ambiguous in their reference, but later in the poem Ladd

[38] Ladd, Interview by author. The "two components" Ladd references here are the music, of course, but also the video art that accompanied each of the live performances.

anchors that "tan" to his body: "What it won't show are the moments / Of love or lust that swirl / Through centuries and tans me here." As he leaves New York behind, Ladd takes race with him.

Ladd builds his opening poem on the disjunction between personal histories and the depersonalizing force of global mass transit, each of which he reflects on as an archive. In lines nine through eleven, Ladd's digitized identity encounters a one-dimensional archive of names, placing him in relation to other equally disembodied names. The lines evoke the rootless experience of travel, the contradiction of feeling both anonymous and heavily identified. Later, he asserts his body as an archive of the "moments / Of love or lust that swirl / Through centuries" through the image of the articulated length of a spine as a record of one's family narrative. Through this personal, bodily archive he affirmatively answers the central question of the poem: "Am I a catalogue of memories / A series of possessions?"

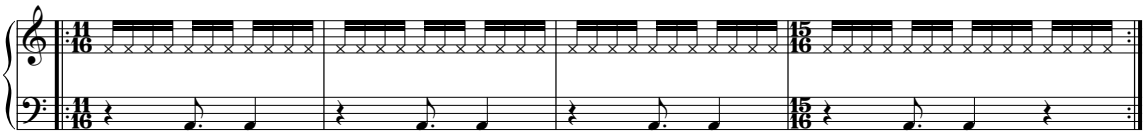
The final six lines of the poem turn the themes of family, race, and identity onto a self-determinative aphorism. Ladd invokes his mother's voice, her apparent power attributed to a stance learned from her family's cultural history. The questions of identity and archive are seemingly dispelled by Ladd's mother, as she speaks her own identity: "I am a citizen of the world."

The surface of Iyer's music for these first few minutes of *In What Language* is deceptively simple: solo piano, right hand with arpeggios moving through stepwise motion, left hand with a single pitch ostinato. The apparent stasis of this material belies its underlying complexity. As with much of Iyer's work, the nuance lives in the rhythm.

This rhythm is elusive. It is not that it is arrhythmic; to the contrary, it propels the piece forward. Two distinct pulses contribute to this drive—the bass ostinato and the highest pitch of the arpeggios—and their interrelation varies constantly. The phasing polyrhythm of "Color of My Circumference I" gives the piece its unsettled quality, and does significant work on the poetry.

Iyer builds his polyrhythm from a constant stream of sixteenth notes. In a nearly-complete perpetual motion, the flow of sixteenths is almost unbroken through the entire excerpt. Out of these articulations, Iyer builds an additive meter, which he uses in each of the four "Color of My Circumference" tracks. I will refer to this meter as the CoMC meter for the remainder of the discussion.

An entire cycle of the CoMC meter takes up 48 sixteenth notes, but this larger group clearly divides into three groups of eleven plus a group of fifteen. The groups of eleven subdivide into a four-three-four pattern, and the group of fifteen adds an extra four sixteenths. Whenever Iyer uses the CoMC meter on *In What Language*, the tempo is roughly the same: about 112 bpm to the quarter note. At this speed, the sixteenths blend into an uneven triple time additive meter. The first three groups parse relatively easily, but the hiccup of the final group obscures the intelligibility of the meter.[39]



Example 2.1 CoMC meter with ostinato

[39] This description of the meter is drawn from Iyer's own characterization of it during our conversation. Iyer, Interview by author.

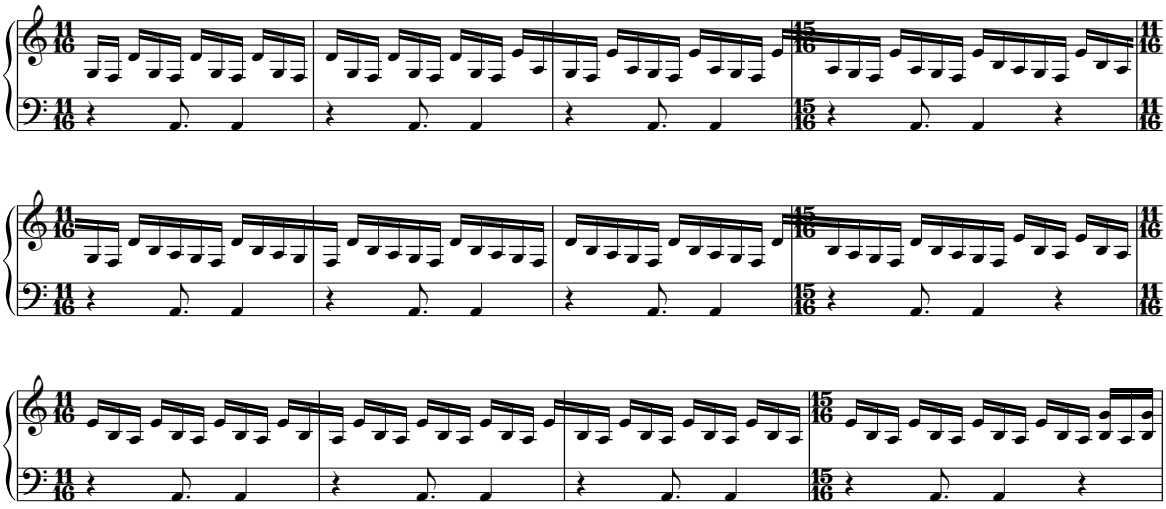
This whole forty-eight beat cycle can be reinterpreted straightforwardly as duple time. If one maintains a steady pulse built on groups of four subdivisions, a duple construct fits within the cyclical frame of the meter. But Iyer often masks this simpler meter, as he does in the opening track of CoMC. The complex additive meter shapes the rhythm until the band's entry [2:43] at which point the back beat makes hearing the duple pattern possible. Still, the additive meter is ever present, even in the second CoMC, when the electronic dance-beat instrumentation and strong back beat creates an expectation of a steady groove. While listening, I am constantly aware of the additive meter, but find my body moving to the duple pattern.

The later instances of the CoMC meter also clarify the additive meter with emphasis on the groupings, but in this first track Iyer further complicates his meter through elision. His left hand ostinato articulates only the second and third groupings. If the meter were four groups of eleven, a listener might still catch onto the uneven pulse relatively quickly; however the silent extra four beats at the end of the fourth group disorients any sense of regularity. It is a heartbeat with an occasional skip.

Over this bass line, Iyer layers his mutable arpeggios. These figurations phase against the already complex ostinato. Generally, Iyer plays his stacks from top to bottom, one pitch at a time, with dynamic emphasis on the top pitch.[40] The repetition of the top pitch forms another layer of pulse, cutting through the thick texture of the pedaled arpeggios. But Iyer is relatively strict about his top-to-bottom figuration, and as he adds and subtracts pitches from his stacks, this emergent pulse changes.

[40] Exceptions include a simultaneity texture that I will discuss later; there are also a few instances when Iyer breaks a strict top to bottom ordering in his arpeggio, but these are quite infrequent.

Although all of the stacks have between three and five pitches, Iyer moves constantly within this range. Rarely are there more than two or three stacks with the same number of pitches. The transcription below, from near the middle of the track, shows the fluctuation's impact on the emergent pulse. Compare the figuration of the stack on the second system with five pitches, to the next stack's three. The emergent pulse almost doubles from one to the next.



Example 2.2 Figuration against ostinato, CoMC cycles 12-14 [1:06-1:24]

It is vertiginous. The pulse is there just long enough to take form for the listener, then morphs suddenly into another. There are no transitions between these pulses, just turn after turn. And these shifts are layered above the already intricate meter.

Iyer's rhythmic structure for the piece, then, does complex work: it is propulsive without having a groove. And this suits the piece well. What better way to initiate a travel-themed work than with a rhythmic frame that drives constantly forward but offers

no comfort of rooted meter? Recalling Iyer's characterization of his music as the "environment" for Ladd's poetry, here he offers a churning, unsettled world for Ladd to inhabit.

Having considered the poetry and the music as more or less distinct objects, I listen now for their conversation; but this is an exchange not just between Iyer and Ladd, music and poetry. It is also a dialogue between structure and improvisation. To set up this discussion, I first clarify what aspects of the piece are precomposed and which are improvised. As described above, Iyer's rhythmic structure is completely fixed, but his pitch content is left to the moment of performance. Certainly, he had some plan for the texture and general pitch-world, but the details of the delivery are improvised. Ladd's poetry was fully composed, but his delivery—and, critically, the placement against the music—is improvised. The placement of the text against the music is particularly rich for analysis, partly because it is a facet of the performance over which neither Ladd nor Iyer have complete control.

The goal of this analysis is multiple. First, I aim to show that expressive connection between music and poetry is possible in the presence of improvisation. In doing so, I am speaking against decades of dismissive criticism that hears the link between improvised music and poetry as shallow. I also explore the metaphor of conversation as it applies primarily to form and texture. And along the way, I offer my reading of "The Color of My Circumference I," based on these listenings.

Figure 2.2 presents a transcription of the first two and a half minutes of "The Color of My Circumference I" that I will refer to often throughout this analysis. I have reduced Iyer's arpeggiation to pitch stacks, and have overlaid this with the rhythmic

cycles and the text. Pitch stack numbers appear under the system for reference. The brackets above the staff indicate the rhythmic cycles, and they are numbered in boxed text for reference; note that in all but one case, the brackets extend slightly into the next measure. Iyer's chord changes correspond to the rhythmic cycle, but they are offset. He moves not at the downbeat, but during the four-beat extension of the rhythmic cycle. When there are two sets of verticalities within a single cycle, Iyer moves precisely on the third set of eleven beats.

The first twenty seconds of the track establishes a responsive relationship between Iyer and Ladd's performances. In the opening solo piano passage, Iyer changes pitch groupings every three seconds: two stacks per rhythmic cycle. Iyer maintains this three-second pattern for the first twenty-four seconds of the piece. But when Ladd enters with his text, Iyer maintains his stacks for a full six seconds, halving the harmonic rhythm. The slowing of the harmonic rhythm encourages the listener to turn their attention to the poetry. Without adjusting volume or texture, the musical content shifts to the background.

Iyer's specific pitch choices further mark Ladd's entrance. The range is quite narrow, defined by the reach of a relaxed right hand, and remains so for nearly the entire passage under consideration. Iyer moves with deliberate and slow motions, a glacial process under the active surface. It is an exercise in subtlety, wherein small motions have outsized impact. Iyer's first eight stacks, the entirety of the introductory section, all fit with the span of F3 to E4, excluding the left hand ostinato A2. Stacks three, five, and seven each bring the low end up to G3, but the pedaling and quick succession through the stacks keep the F aurally present throughout. At stack 9, Iyer narrows his stack, bringing

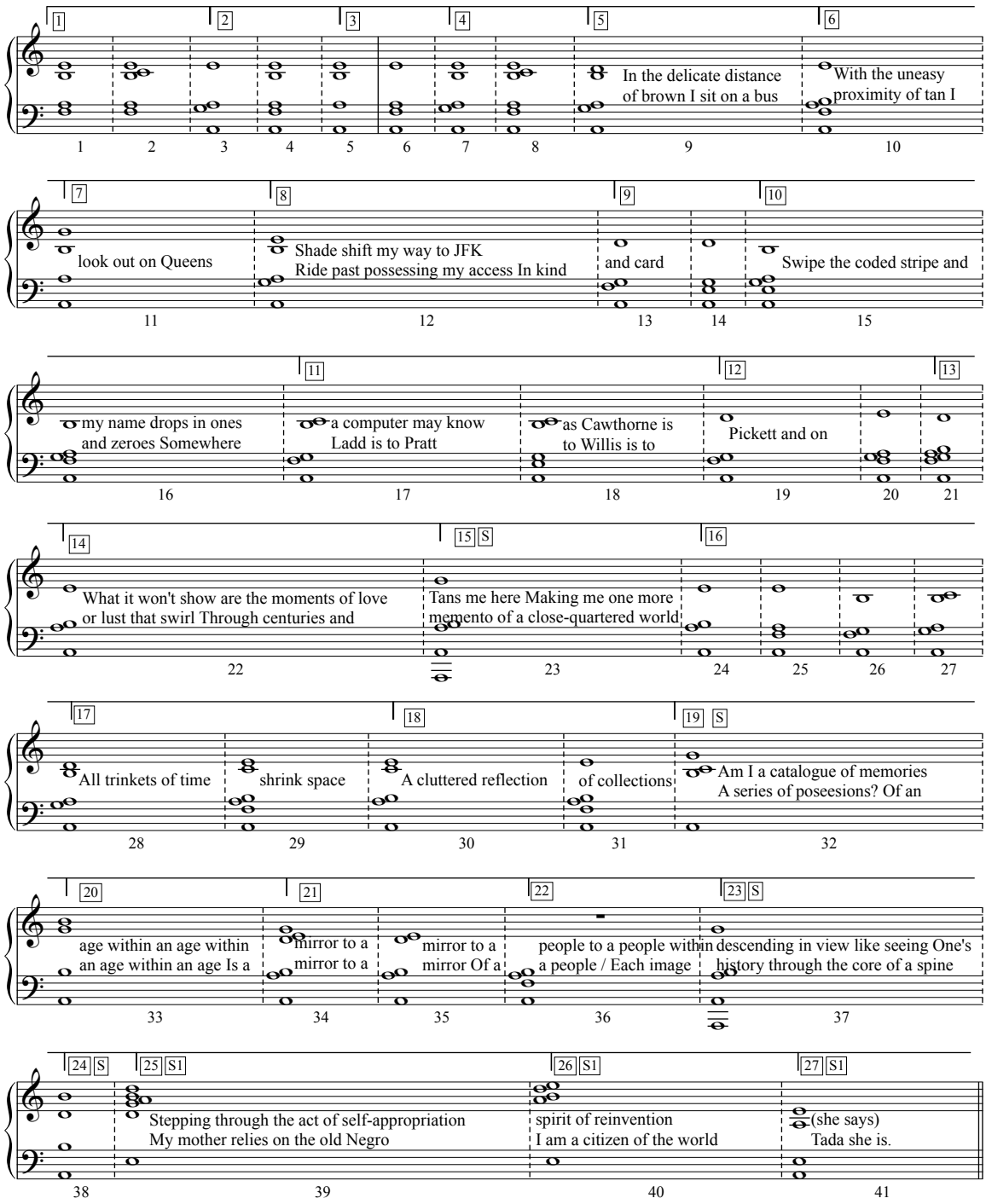


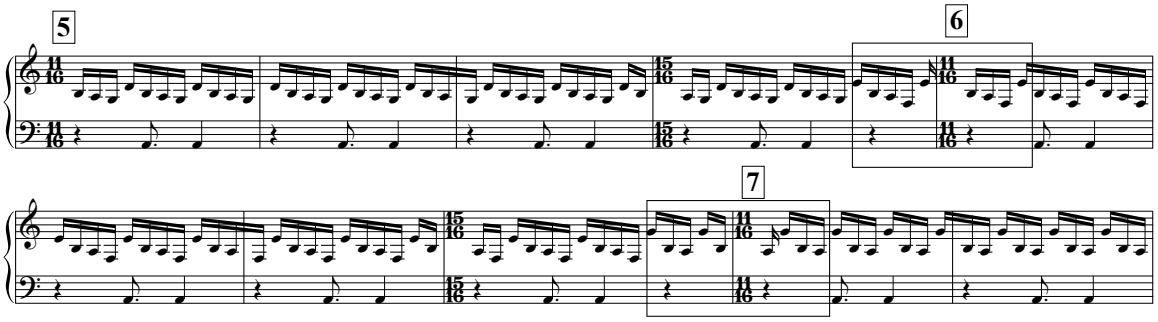
Figure 2.2 Transcription of pitch stacks and rhythmic cycles, CoMCI excerpt
Rhythmic cycles indicated by brackets, numbered in boxes
Pitch stack numbers indicated underneath staff

the bottom up to G3 and, more markedly, the top down to D4. After twenty-four seconds of repetitions of E4, this tiny range contraction is striking. With it, Iyer gives an aural bow of his head, a welcome to Ladd's voice.

Several improvised and composed parameters structure the performance of the music and text, and their interaction reflects the collaborative environment. The text has two composed structures: the couplets of the written poem, and the grammatical units within and across those couplets. Ladd distributes these in time through his improvised delivery, his pauses and clusters of spoken text forming another structure. Iyer contributes the composed structure of the rhythmic cycle and the improvised pitch material.

In the case of the text, these structures provide clear punctuation: the ends/starts of lines and grammatical structures, the entrance after a long breath. For the music, however, these boundaries are blurrier. As discussed above, Iyer's approach to the meter in this excerpt obscures the downbeat, articulating the second and third divisions of the meter with his low ostinato but avoiding the downbeat and the four-beat extension. The transition from one rhythmic cycle to another feels more like suspension than arrival. It is during this suspension that Iyer changes chords. The eight beats that span the final four of one cycle and the first four of the next form a kind of transition window.[41] Iyer changes chords, and then the metrical hiccup comes. Stability returns with the first bass articulation of the ostinato on the second group of the next rhythmic cycle.

[41] Iyer often begins the pitch change one or two subdivisions before what I'm calling the "transitional window," because of how the figuration works out.



Example 2.3 Transitional windows between rhythmic cycles 5, 6, and 7 [0:24-0:38]

If the arpeggios tumble forward as a river, these transitional windows are the curves. River bends are not tidy pivot points; the momentum of the water drives forward, even as the banks curve. Here, it sounds as though the arpeggios stretch the metrical fabric as the chords change, the forward drive of the previous chord echoing in the seemingly delayed start of the next rhythmic cycle. Rather than the neat periods and commas of the text's punctuation, these musical formal demarcations have a longer duration.

Figure 2.3 gives an overview of how these different structural elements intersect in the recording. The numbers on the left represent Iyer's rhythmic cycles; the text following that number is spoken within that cycle. Bold and underlined words mark

1
2
3
4
5 **In** the delicate distance Of brown, I sit on a bus.
6 **With** (the) uneasy proximity Of tan, I look out on
7 Queens **Shade** shift my
8 way to JFK Ride past INS possessing my access **In** kind and card,
9
10 swipe the coded Stripe and my name drops in ones and zeroes **Somewhere** a computer
11 may know Ladd is to Pratt as Cawthorne is to Willis is **To** Pickett and
12 on
13
14 What it won't show are the moments **Of** love or lust that swirl Through centuries and tans
15 me here **Making** me one more memento Of a close-quartered world
16
17 **All** trinkets of time shrink space
18 A cluttered reflection of collections
19 **Am** I a catalogue of memories A series of possessions? **Of** an age
20 within an age within an age (within an age) Is a mirror
21 to a mirror to a mirror (to a mirror) Of a people
22 to a people within a people **Each** image,
23 descending in view like seeing One's history through the core of a spine
24
25 **Stepping** through the act of self-appropriation **My** mother relies on the old Negro
26 spirit of reinvention "***I** am a citizen of the world"*
27 (she says) Ta da she is

Bold = start of couplet
Underline = start of second line (and third line in the single instance of a three line group)
Highlight = text inside transitional window

Figure 2.3 Distribution of poetry across rhythmic cycles

start of the first and second lines of a couplet, respectively. Finally, the shaded passages fall within the transitional windows described above.

Ladd and Iyer created these structures during their collaborative compositional process, but the interrelation of them was largely in Ladd's hands as he delivered his poetry for the recording. Clearly his performance determined the ways in which the poetry's structural elements related, but he also placed them against the musical elements.

Ladd's first entry aligns his poetry within the musical structure. After four full cycles of Iyer's solo piano, Ladd speaks his opening words just after the start of the fifth cycle. Many of his entrances come at this position, bouncing off the downbeat the way a jazz instrumentalist might. Within that cycle he speaks both lines of the first couplet, finishing before the transitional window begins. He pauses for a breath as Iyer's music takes a curve. When he reenters, it is again shortly after the downbeat of the cycle. He reads the second couplet, with "I look out on Queens" falling in the transitional window. Ladd then pauses for nearly an entire cycle.

There is a clarity in the formal overlap in this passage. Within the poetry, grammar and line breaks align. Ladd's performance highlights the simplicity of this passage: one complete thought per couplet, with a family resemblance between the two. Ladd's placement of the lines within the musical form draws attention to the structures, serving as an introduction to the structural parameters of the piece. Musical and poetic boundaries line up, each emphasizing the other.

When Ingrid Monson interviewed improvising musicians, she noticed that nearly all of them emphasized "the importance of listening in good ensemble playing. Listening in an active sense…It is a type of listening much like that required of participants in a

conversation, who have to pay attention to what is transpiring if they expect to say things that make sense to the other participants."[42] In addition to introducing the formal elements, Ladd and Iyer's first interaction foregrounds listening; it is a display of how each hears and responds to the other. Their attentive alignment suggests that the audience orient their own listening towards the interactivity of Iyer and Ladd, music and word.

Although Ladd's delivery may be the most prominent factor in how the formal structures interrelate, Iyer can push against the alignment, as an example from later in the track demonstrates. In cycles 17 and 18, Ladd delivers his text within the rhythmic cycles again, now at half pace. Ladd opens the passage [1:37] with "all trinkets of time shrink space" followed by a long pause for the transitional window, and then "a cluttered reflection of collections." It might appear, judging by Figure 2.3, that this passage would sound even clearer than the one discussed above, with more space surrounding each clause. But Ladd's placement is not the only factor here; Iyer's music subverts Ladd's clarity. By this point in the piece, Iyer has broken down his stack-per-cycle approach, phasing in and out of it improvisationally. In cycle 16, his stacks dissolve. While I have transcribed the cycle as having four stacks, the boundaries between them are not nearly as discrete as earlier examples, blurred by shifting figuration.[43] He continues this into cycle 17, changing stacks halfway through Ladd's line. The sense of stable cycles separated by transitional windows is gone. While Ladd places his lines carefully within the rhythmic cycle, Iyer complicates the structure with his improvised pitch movements.

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[42] Monson, *Saying Something*, 84.

[43] This texture change makes clear the ultimate shortcoming of transcription as a reliable tool for creating analysis, and certainly for reading it. I have provided track timings throughout and I hope that readers will listen for themselves.

Ladd's performance of the first two couplets is simplified by their preexisting alignment of lines and grammar. Each of the first four lines tidily contains an entire clause, and they fit squarely within the musical structure. But in the third couplet, Ladd's poetry breaks this pattern. Line five forms a complete clause ("Shade shift my way to JFK") but in lines six and seven Ladd creates a longer passage through enjambment: "Ride past INS possessing my access / In kind and card." Recall, too, that this section contains the broadening effects of long A assonance and S consonance. But Ladd unites the passage by exploiting the transitional window. Instead of waiting to enter after the downbeat of the cycle, he anticipates it, jumping in at the start of the transitional window [0:41] speaking "shade" at the same moment Iyer changes pitch stacks. This allows him more time to stretch out his lines, and just his "and card" trails into the next transitional window.

Iyer described Ladd as intensely musical, as someone who has "an ear for what's happening. He's not someone who's like, 'oh this is in 11/16.' I mean he doesn't know that stuff or deal with it at all, but he can feel it though."[44] Clearly, Ladd is attuned to Iyer's musical structures, and hears their boundaries. In his improvised performance he exploits their flexibility to play off of his own structures. Iyer contributes to the formal dialogue by improvisationally alternately strengthening and undermining his own structural parameters.

Figure 2.3 offers a view into Ladd's distribution of text in time. Note the clusters and spaces, entire cycles left text-free throughout the excerpt. One challenge facing successful combination of music and spoken word is what Iyer calls the "abundance,

[44] Iyer, Interview by author.

maybe hyperabundance of text in these projects."[45] Text flows by at a speed that challenges intelligibility, much less the contemplation often required for poetry appreciation and comprehension.[46] But Ladd mitigates this challenge by using his "golden rule" for improvisation: "give space. Give lots and lots of space."[47] Figure 2.3 captures visually Ladd's use of space in "The Color of My Circumference I."

But these pauses in the poetry are not empty, of course; they teem with Iyer's arpeggios. By giving space, Ladd participates in the conversational practice of turn taking. Ingrid Monson discusses turn taking as key to the metaphor of jazz improvisation as conversation. She draws on the work of sociolinguist Marjorie Goodwin, who "observed that during turn taking, individuals display their own interpretation of the talk in which they participate."[48] Ladd himself describes it as a social dynamic: "the trick just becomes… everyone already being comfortable enough that they can live in those blank spaces and live in them well. So that what people are hearing is comfortable space and not a place where people are trying to be too polite and so they're not stepping on each other or the opposite, where one person's stepping on everything cause he or she feels that they have to carry the whole thing."[49] Ladd's stepping back makes space for Iyer; looking at the transcription of the excerpt, notice that Iyer often increases the harmonic rhythm during Ladd's breaks.

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[45] Ibid.
[46] Hip hop is an obvious point of reference here, and I take up textual hyperabundance and genre in the final chapter of this dissertation.
[47] Ladd, Interview by author.
[48] Monson, *Saying Something*, 82.
[49] Ladd, Interview by author.

Above, I described how clarity and obfuscation emerge from the combination of distinct structural parameters. Now I will explore them as more general constructs and their impact on the conversation, using the content of cycles 10-14 as an example.

This passage [0:54] begins with a blurring. The text, from "Swipe the coded / Stripe" through "To Pickett and on" forms the longest unbroken segment of text yet. Ladd speaks his text across two cycles without pause, and without connecting either his lines or his grammar to the musical structure. Iyer moves through pitch stacks more quickly, changing every three seconds instead of every six. Iyer continues the passage's obfuscation after Ladd finishes his long stream of text. Most stacks in the piece have three or four pitch members in the right hand, but in stacks 21 and 22 Iyer uses five. His pedaling becomes heavier, furthering the blurring effect. In stack 22, Iyer brings the top pitch down a whole step, but maintains the bottom pitch. The tiny range contraction means that Iyer now fits five pitches within the span of a major sixth—four whole steps topped with a minor third. This nearly scalar figure, pedaled and at speed, obfuscates the individual pitches. Iyer's opening arpeggio has contracted to a smear of sound.

Clarity arrives during the transition to cycle 14 [1:17]. Iyer reduces his stack to three pitches, bounded by a perfect fifth and containing a perfect fourth. He lightens the pedal during this transition, laying off it nearly entirely during cycle 14. Iyer sustains this stack for the duration of cycle 14. The previous five cycles all had two stacks, and after changing pitch groups every three seconds for nearly forty seconds, the six seconds of clarion stasis sound surprisingly, and reassuringly, long. After allowing the disorientation of the previous section to dissipate, Ladd enters, bouncing off the downbeat as he did in the track's opening lines.

In this performance of clouding and clearing I hear aspects of the poetry's themes. Through the blurred section, Ladd speaks of the depersonalizing force of mass transit. His identity becomes a matter of his name, incorporated into a web of other names, individuality blurred. The clearing asserts the power of a personal family narrative against this deindividuation. It is not the string of names that defines us, but the "moments / of love or lust that swirl / Through centuries."

I do not know the details of whether these blurring/clarity contrasts were improvised or composed, nor do I consider that a particularly important question to answer here. What I hear is the resonance of dialogue, the exchange of ideas and interpretations that is built into Iyer and Ladd's process. It is their conversation, both in the moment of performance and in the years leading up to it, that create these rich moments of intersection between music and word.

Ladd and Iyer demonstrate their reciprocal responsivity in what I call the echo passage [1:52-2:10]. The text for this passage, lines 21-23, is in many ways unlike the rest of the poem. As noted in the earlier poetry analysis, the rhythm is anapestic. Ladd avoids repetition in the rest of the poem, but here he exploits it with a trance-like effect. The otherwise strict couplet form fractures into the poem's only group of three lines. And in the written form, Ladd sets off the passage even further through italics.

In his performance of these lines, Ladd aligns his repetitions with Iyer's rhythmic cycle. The presence of the left hand ostinato has been, until this point, the strongest rhythmic component of the performance, and at line 21 the rhythm finally makes its way into the poetry. Each of Ladd's repeated nouns—age, mirror, and people—lands along

with Iyer's ostinato. Ladd's placement is inexact, likely intentionally so to avoid breaking the flow of the poetry's delivery. But the alignment is unmistakable.

Ladd deviates from the written form of the poem in this passage to bring his poetry and Iyer's music into full chorus. Referring back to Example 2.1, notice that the ostinato has four articulates of the double-beat pattern per cycle. In print, each noun is repeated three times, punctuated by shifting prepositions. But in performance, Ladd adds an iteration of the nouns to the first two sections of the section, tagging on "within an age" and "to a mirror" to lines 21 and 22, respectively. The deviation shows Ladd's attentiveness to the musical structure: by adding a repetition of "age" and "mirror," Ladd positions his verse within Iyer's cycle while maintaining the tie between the nouns and the ostinato. "Age" and "mirror" each fill an entire cycle.

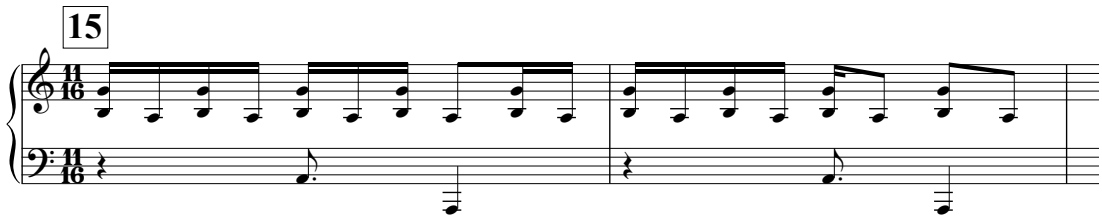
In the third cycle of the passage, Ladd keeps to the written poetry, repeating "people" three times and pausing for the final ostinato iteration. But during the nearly twenty seconds of chorus the repeating nouns and the ostinato have mixed their waters. Though Iyer's final ostinato articulation of the passage is now unaccompanied by the poetry, the nouns still echo, as they do for the remainder of the track.

Iyer's musical approach to the passage brackets it, serving as a kind of aural italics. In the cycles immediately preceding and following it, Iyer alters the texture from the strict arpeggios to one that includes some simultaneities. These textural changes, which I will discuss more below, frame the arpeggiation of the echo passage. The pitch choices in the section further set off these cycles as a group. Iyer gradually turns downward in simulated inversional motion, removing the highest pitch (or two) when he moves from one stack to the next, and replacing it with another pitch at the bottom. This

is the only instance of this kind of movement in the entire piece, and again it marks the passage as distinct from the rest of the poem.

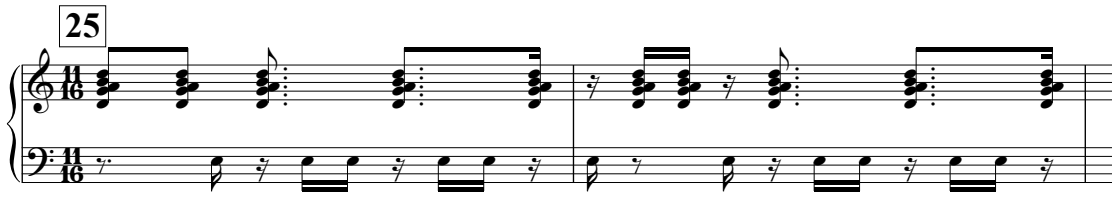
Iyer and Ladd communally create these italics. They come from Ladd's attention to the framing power of Iyer's cycles, and from Iyer's recognition of the support he can offer Ladd's poetic structure. Together, interactively, they arrive at this moment of subtle bracketing.

At several points in the track, Iyer's arpeggios rupture into simultaneities. These textural changes last for the duration of the rhythmic cycle in which they occur, and I have marked these cycles as S and S^1 on Figure 2.1. Recall that in most of the track, Iyer arpeggiates the stacks from top to bottom, one pitch at a time, against a single pitch ostinato in the bass. Each of the S stacks is made up of three pitches. Iyer groups the top two as a simultaneity, and alternates this pair with the other pitch, as transcribed in Example 2.4. Unlike the fully-arpeggiated passages, Iyer breaks the strict sixteenth-note articulation, creating rhythmic interest along with the texture change.



Example 2.4 S texture, rhythmic cycle 15, CoMCI [1:24]

S^1 takes this idea further. In these cycles Iyer groups the entire right hand and alternates it against the left hand, which breaks the ostinato pattern.



Example 2.5 S[1] texture, rhythmic cycle 25, CoMCI [2:24]

What is the impact of this textural variation? In the subtle soundscape of "The Color of My Circumference I" these small changes in texture stand out. Their resemblance to one another is clearly audible, drawing an interpretive thread. It is in these improvised turns of texture that I hear the music's most potent impact on the poetic content.

The first instance of S texture immediately follows the blur/clarity passage analyzed above, and arrives on Ladd's enunciation of the word "Tans" [1:24]. Here, Ladd reflects the earth tones of his opening lines onto his own raced body; the family narrative that resists the depersonalization process is also made visible through his skin. Iyer's texture change underlines the word "Tan," pointing the listener toward the racial theme of the cycle. The top of the stack leaps from an E4 to a G4, a high point reached only once before in the track.[50] The G is especially foregrounded by the S texture, ringing out more frequently through the cycle than in the earlier arpeggiated appearance. Iyer further marks the passage by adding a low octave to his ostinato, alternating between the A2 drone pitch and the new A1. This moment, which is not at all emphasized by its placement in the structure of the poem, finds a spotlight in Iyer and Ladd's improvised

[50] The stacks that contain these Gs, stack 11 and stack 24, are identical; however the textural difference masks their pitch relationship.

performance. The import of the passage is further underscored by Iyer's return to the lower, denser, muddier texture in stack 24, immediately following Ladd's closing of line 16. It is as though Ladd's assertion punches through the blurry anonymity of travel, a moment of stability in an otherwise unsettled landscape.

The next instance of S texture [1:47] comes at the central questions of the poem: "Am I a catalogue of memories / A series of possessions?" Iyer's pitch choices here resemble those of the previous S passage; the high note is G4 and the lower two pitches oscillate stepwise. The ostinato does not drop an octave in this case. Iyer lands directly on the downbeat of the cycle with the open fifth that starts the S texture. He collapses the transitional window, changing pitch and rhythmic cycle in the same moment. This alignment happens only once in the piece, and Iyer marks it further with his textural modification.

The arrival of the third and final S texture [2:11] draws a thematic link between the bodily awareness of the first example and the metaphysical questions of the second. It arrives immediately after the echo passage with precisely the same pitch content as the first instance, including the plummeting A1 addition to the ostinato. The text now makes explicit the centrality of the body to the poem's imagery: "Each image descending in view like seeing / One's history through the core of a spine." Having seen his body as a carrier of his history in the first passage, Ladd turns to metaphysical questions. Who are we in relation to our histories? The imagery of the spine as a repository of one's history connects the first two passages. Metaphysics, here, are physical, located in the raced body. And it is Iyer's texture that draws out this interpretive link.

Throughout the entirety of what I have described above, Iyer has maintained the unwavering presence of the ostinato. At the very opening of the track, Iyer plays a fleeting E2 before landing on the ostinato pitch, hinting at movement to come. By two minutes and twenty seconds into the track, the low A has taken on a permanence. But with Ladd's final lines comes a fundamental turn in the poetic tone, a move from object to agent. The poem establishes a self that is constituted by faceless intelligence systems and by family history and race. But by way of Ladd's mother and the "old / Negro spirit of reinvention," the closing lines assert a new possibility: a self proclaimed. "*I am a citizen of the world"* / Ta da she is."

At this climactic moment of the track [2:24] Iyer reinvents his ostinato as a conversation between his previously independent hands. The low A leaps up to E3, and in the S^1 texture this E dances with the right hand's chord. After two minutes of darkness and disorientation, here Iyer brings clarity and brightness. There is no more conflict between the rhythmic ostinato and the shifting subdivisions of the arpeggiation: there are just two hands, joining in bright rhythmic play. And when Iyer returns to the lower register for the closing "Ta da she is," it is shaped by this reinvention, Iyer's two hands now in concert as he ushers in the other musicians for the instrumental portion of the track and opens the door for the remainder of the album.

This analysis is still an incomplete account of the many ways that text and music intersect, converse, and shape each other in this excerpt. Iyer and Ladd's work richly rewards close listening. But the relationship between music and text that I have outlined above is not one that is accounted for by Word and Music Studies. No single interpreter

framework can contain the multidirectionality of this work. Iyer and Ladd's collaborative process has infused their piece with a fundamentally conversational stance: an exchange between Iyer and Ladd, music and word, rhythm and pitch, right hand and left hand, improvisation and composition. As an eavesdropper on this conversation, the analyst's job is not all that different than in previous models; but we listen differently to conversation than to monologue, open to the many paths of agreement and conflict.

Ultimately, a model of text and music as conversation listens for listening. It takes as a given that the music and the text, the musicians and the poets, interact attentively with one another. In improvisation and collaborative practices, the artists weave together their contributions, no single individual in full control of the outcome. I started out in my analysis asking what is possible in terms of text and music relationship in the context of improvisation. As it turns out, the answer is: quite a lot. While there is plenty of complexity in both poetic and musical material here, what sets Ladd and Iyer apart from many unsuccessful attempts at improvised music and poetry is their commitment to hearing the contribution of the other. With open ears, conversation begins.

CHAPTER 3
"FLYING THROUGH PORTHOLE OF HER SHIPWRECK:" JAYNE CORTEZ AND FEMINIST JAZZ POETRY PERFORMANCE

Is it too late to reconstruct your song blues song sister tell me
Is it too late for the mother tongue of your womanself to insurrect
-Jayne Cortez, "Grinding Vibrato"

Black Arts poet Jayne Cortez recorded the majority of her poetry with music, starting in 1974 and continuing until her death in 2012. She worked steadily with a band formed solely to provide music for her poetry. Unlike the individual projects by jazz composers discussed in the first two chapters, here we have a career-length body of work by a poet in collaboration with a stable group of musicians. Each of the first three chapters in this dissertation focuses on a single figure, and Cortez is unique among them on two fronts: she is a woman and she is a poet. With Charles Mingus and Vijay Iyer I asked, in part, how do jazz composers/performers approach the combination of music and word? Here the central concern shifts. Instead I ask how Cortez, as a female poet performing with jazz, relates to the conventional role for women and text in jazz: the singer.

Cortez's jazz poetry performance indexes that of the historical jazz singer; she is an African American woman performing in a texted medium, fronting an all-male instrumental ensemble playing jazz and blues. One of the tasks of this chapter is to consider the relationship of jazz poetry performance to the gendered history of the singer. I layer this history with Cortez's own construction, through her praise poetry, of the legacy of the jazz and blues singers.

Cortez takes on the female jazz singer's legacy within the misogynistic context of the Black Arts movement, and in examining her jazz poetry performance I listen for the resonance of feminism. The details of how Cortez relates to her bandmates reflect her particular stream of feminism, affecting the musicopoetics and her approach to poetry as sounded performance. I close by returning to Cortez's personal construction of the singer, suggesting how her performances and broader career revise the role of the jazz singer.

Biography

Cortez was born in 1934 and grew up in Arizona and Los Angeles. She attended performing arts high school and her parents were avid jazz fans and record collectors. At age 20, she married Ornette Coleman and the two artists had one son together. That son, Denardo Coleman, would grow up to become a drummer and collaborate with both of his parents. Coleman and Cortez divorced in 1964, after ten years of marriage. Cortez was highly politically active, and spent time in Mississippi working on voter registration in the 1960s. At other points she worked as a factory worker in the garment industry. She eventually moved to New York City and became a canonical figure of the Black Arts movement. In 1972 she produced her first recording of her poetry read to music, and she continued with ten other recordings, the last of which was recorded in 2004. Most of these were made with her own band, The Firespitters. Cortez also published her poetry in written format, producing twelve books over her career. She released nearly all of her

books and recordings through her own company, Bola Press. She worked as a poet both inside and outside the academy. She died in December of 2012.[1]

Cortez rarely speaks of her marriage to Coleman. While respecting her wish to distance herself from her famous ex-husband, it seems important to note that the two artists were married during some of Coleman's most innovative years, during which he moved from a bebop framework to his harmolodic free jazz. As Aldon Nielsen has observed, "Whatever problems may have surrounded the marriage and subsequent divorce of these two artists, their early participation in communities of avant-garde black artists as a couple was surely a formative experience for their later works."[2] Even after the divorce, Cortez continued contact with many members of the jazz community, personally and professionally.

Cortez's approach to performing her text with music remained relatively stable throughout her career. The bulk of this work was with her band, The Firespitters, the core members of which also served as sidemen with Ornette Coleman. On a few occasions, Cortez recorded with a solo acoustic bassist instead of the full band. Cortez and her musicians developed a general musical environment for the poems in advance of the recording sessions, and built on that framework improvisationally in the studio and in live performance. Stylistically, the music draws heavily on jazz blended with blues and afro-pop.

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[1] For a more complete biographical sketch, see D. H Melhem, *Heroism in the New Black Poetry: Introductions & Interviews* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 181–2.
[2] Nielsen, *Black Chant*, 1997, 222.

Cortez's Jazz Singer

Aspects of Cortez's performances resemble those of the classic blues and jazz singers. Most obviously, she uses her voice and performs a text. She is an African American woman fronting an (almost always) all-male instrumental ensemble playing jazz and blues based music. At times she delivers her poetry so rhythmically and pitched as to sound sung. Yet she is not, in important ways, a singer. She intones her texts melodically, but she speaks. Her abstract, unpredictable, surrealistic poems do not resemble the popular song texts found in most jazz-related song. Critically, she is the author of the texts, and the band is built around supporting the delivery of this material.

Black Arts poets employed jazz poetry performance perhaps even more than the Beats. Tony Bolden, who has written extensively on Cortez, observes,

> Black Arts poets, who were attuned to the impact of Malcolm X and James Brown on black audiences, realized that the sermon and song/shout could be utilized to create a popular people's poetry. In other words, rather than envisioning their work primarily as reading material, poets attempted to incarnate - that is *become* - the black performer and thereby blur the distinction between poetry and song by using the voice as an instrument.[3]

As Cortez incarnated as a performer within the gender politics around Black Power, she did not inhabit the persona of Malcolm X or James Brown. Instead, Cortez tropes on the legacies of black female jazz and blues vocalists.

Cortez's performance is fundamentally grounded in that of the female jazz and blues singers, through both the history of their work and her own construction of that legacy. Before exploring Cortez's personal construction of the singer, I review a few

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[3] Bolden's statement sets up a number of distinctions (poetry/song, voice/instrument) to which I will return later. Tony Bolden, "All the Birds Sing Bass: The Revolutionary Blues of Jayne Cortez," *African American Review* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 62.

salient aspects of the historical jazz singer, laying the groundwork for Cortez's understanding of their legacy and her own performative relationship to it. Unquestionably, most jazz singers are women and most jazz instrumentalists are men.[4] These women's positions in jazz have been contingent, their performances circumscribed by their voices, their texts, their bodies, and their gender. That position entails two features I will discuss in detail: the hierarchy of instruments and voices in jazz, and the female body in performance.

In her dissertation on the club Cafe Society, Monica Hairston carefully untangles some of the strands around women, singing, bodies, and race in jazz. Her discussion of female performers in New York City in the 1930s and 1940s brings precision to the interaction of body and gender. "In terms of the gendered divisions of labor in jazz spaces, (black) women have traditionally been limited to roles that emphasize sexuality, physical attractiveness, and the body—singing and dancing in particular because they result directly from the body with no recourse to or mastery of the technology of instruments."[5] Hairston supports this assertion with, among other things, a quoted passage from a "general interest article" from the period, entitled "It's Not the Voice but the Beauty that Counts." "In every nightclub there are girl singers - canaries, as they are known to the trade. … Outside the club, on the sidewalks, are tripod stands with huge pictures of the girls…Singing is a visual matter on 52nd Street. There are no contraltos

[4] Lara Pellegrinelli, who has studied jazz singers within jazz culture extensively, notes that "at multi-artist performances and master classes, male singers tend to number proximately one in ten." Lara Pellegrinelli, "The Song Is Who? Locating Singers on the Jazz Scene" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2005), 95.
[5] Monica Hairston, "The Wrong Place for the Right People? Cafe Society, Jazz, and Gender, 1938--1947" (PhD diss., New York University, 2009), 176.

and altos and sopranos. There are blonds and brunettes and redheads…How well they sing is not important. They are paid according to their following."[6]

In performance, jazz women - and the singers in particular - were inescapably on display as objects of desire. This position linked them to an increasingly taboo (for jazz insiders) view of jazz as a money-making venture. As Hairston writes, "performance practices that draw explicit attention to the body came to be understood as oppositional to 'jazz as art.' These practices, associated with concepts of 'jazz as entertainment,' and 'jazz as commerce,' although adopted by many, were mapped onto the always already 'to-be-looked-at' bodies of jazz women."[7] To be sure, many of the women within this system benefitted from it and revised it from within, and Hairston points to the many ways in which these performers' labors carved out new generic ground. Yet in the increasingly highbrow space of jazz (or at least the space as defined by the music's mostly white critics) there was no room for these women performers and their "always already to-be-looked-at" bodies.

Women's objectified bodies laid bare a consumer-oriented aspect of jazz, uncomfortable for those seeking a highbrow space for the genre; but for some, the mere presence of a voice is enough to suggest a consumerist angle. As Lara Pellegrinelli notes, "most insiders view the music as a predominantly instrumental form, which indicates a hierarchical division between singers and instrumentalists."[8] In her ethnography of jazz singers, for which she also interviewed many instrumentalists, Pellegrinelli documented a discourse of stark divide between vocal and instrumental musicians. "Because

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[6] As quoted in: Ibid., 178.
[7] Ibid., 180.
[8] Pellegrinelli, "The Song Is Who?," 2.

relationships between singers and instrumentalists constitute social relationships, the oppositional categories 'voice' and 'instrument' construct and maintain relations of power between these two groups, sometimes barring singers from full participation in jazz culture based on supposedly inborn traits."[9] Singers, and by extension many of the women in jazz, are certainly granted little creative agency in jazz discourse, and the voice/instrument hierarchy almost certainly impacts their participation in jazz creative processes, though this has yet to be studied.[10]

The hierarchizing and its resultant power dynamic are complicated by brow politics in jazz. Both Pellegrinelli and Barry Keith Grant have pointed toward the opposition between text and jazz's highbrow art status. Grant, writing about the practice of setting lyrics to existing instrumental jazz passages (known as vocalese) links this conflict to the historical opposition between absolute and narrative music in the Western art music discourse.

> The very premise of vocalese, then, is a challenge to the traditional ideology of Western music, which is constructed as immaterial, the most 'pure' of the arts, thus transcendent, capable of speaking directly to the emotions or the soul. But words, in providing denotation, 'pollute' the 'purity' of music, like lead shoes preventing it from rising above the prosaic; words hold onto music by, to paraphrase Roland Barthes, translating it into impoverished linguistic categories.[11]

Reporting from her ethnography, Pellegrinelli writes that "as insiders generally see it, jazz singing is considered less sophisticated because it is representational; it

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[9] Ibid., 77.

[10] This hierarchy is also informed by, and in turn informs, a gendering of language in jazz and music more broadly speaking. Pellegrinelli refers to a quote from Mozart in which he designates poetry as "the obedient daughter of music" in opera. She notes that "In a number of these 'marriages' between text and music, text itself is feminized as the subservient partner, much as it is in jazz." Ibid., 209.

[11] Barry Keith Grant, "Purple Passages or Fiestas in Blue?: Notes Toward an Aesthetic of Vocalese," *Popular Music and Society* 18, no. 1 (1994): 128.

contains semantic meaning…In short, text creates conflict with those who defend jazz as a kind of elite highbrow music."[12]

It is crucial to note that these observations apply to only a narrow segment of jazz's consumer base, and that most people buying records were as likely, if not likelier, to buy those with singers than without.[13] As the marketplace shifted away from jazz in the 1950s and 1960s, perhaps this very fact widened the gulf between instrumental and vocal jazz. Singers had access to commercial success and their association with more popular music might have been perceived to taint the high art status of jazz. And the stakes of jazz's status shift are high, as Scott DeVeaux has noted. "If at one time jazz could be supported by the marketplace, or attributed to a nebulous (and idealized) vision of folk creativity, that time has long passed. Only by acquiring the prestige, the 'cultural capital' (in Pierre Bourdieu's phrase) of an artistic tradition can the music hope to be heard, and its practitioners receive the support commensurate with their training and accomplishments."[14] In this context, singers—and by extension, women in jazz—are tolerated as a necessary way to expand the jazz audience, but not included in the insiders' preferred construction of jazz.

Black Women Performers in Cortez's Poetry

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[12] Pellegrinelli, "The Song Is Who?," 208–9.

[13] This sales domination by vocalists continues. A quick look through the Billboard sales chart for March 1, 2014 shows that out of the top twenty-five albums, only five have fewer than two tracks featuring vocalists, and fourteen albums are headlined by vocalists, while six have either a fair amount of singing or are headling by singer/intrumentalists like Harry Conick Jr. or Robert Glasper. "Billboard Jazz Albums Chart, week of March 1, 2014," Text, *Billboard*, accessed February 21, 2014, http://www.billboard.com/charts/jazz-albums.

[14] Scott DeVeaux, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography," *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 3 (1991): 526.

The historical construction of the jazz singer certainly influenced Cortez, but a closer look at Cortez's poetry reveals her personal reception of the singers' legacies. She wrote frequently of these performing women, and placed her poems for them in the African praise poem tradition. But "praise" should not be read simply in this context; Cortez's poetry probes the complexity of these performers' lives. I hear the poems not as renderings of historical figures, aiming for verisimilitude, but as Cortez's individual reading of the legacy of the black female performer.

Scholars have suggested Billie Holiday as the likely subject of "Grinding Vibrato," Cortez's most pointed and lengthy critique of a black female performer. While the "Blues Lady" of the opening line goes unnamed, the poem's themes of drugs, beauty, corruption, and exploitation certainly make Holiday a possible subject. Yet the themes apply just as easily to many of the other famous jazz and blues singers.

Blues Lady
With the beaded face
Painted lips
And hair smeared
In the oil of texas[15]

Physical beauty on display is central to the poem, with Cortez's refrain "You were looking good and sounding beautiful." In this phrase, "beautiful" lands doubly—first as a straightforward compliment of singing, but also as another reference to the performing body. Was the sound beautiful or did it sound like it came from a beautiful body? The "Blues Lady" is gilded for her performance, her beauty adorned (or perhaps masked) by her uniform. But almost immediately, this display of body and beauty turns dangerous for

[15] Jayne Cortez, *Jazz Fan Looks Back* (Brooklyn, NY: Hanging Loose Press, 2002), 52.

the "Blues Lady," who was "looking good and sounding beautiful" only "until the horseman wanted your thunder / until the boa constrictor wanted your body."

But the Blue Lady's body has a performative purpose in Cortez's poem, in addition to her beauty. Cortez draws on imagery of anatomy when referring to the songstress's musical performance, with the lines "that copper maroon rattle resonator / shaking from your feet to your eyes." The lugubrious consonance of the first line makes for some of the most appealing sounds of the poem. Cortez saves her loveliest words for the singer's performance of music, not beauty.

Two metaphorically connected forces dismantle the singer: capitalism and drugs. Cortez paints the "Blues Lady" as an addict with "blue graffitied arms." The drugs here are predatory: "until syringes upright hyenas / barbwired your meat to their teeth." The references to addiction are direct, but they also serve as metaphors. In her interview with D.H. Melhem, Cortez calls out a general theme of her poetry as "ghetto life's 'parasitical affliction of capitalism, symbolized by drugs.'"[16] Unspecified violence to the body of the "Blues Lady" leaves "scabs the size of quarters / scabs the size of pennies / the size of the shape of you." Using coins to describe the wounds not only calls viscerally to mind the singer's suffering, but it also implicates money as another cause of her downfall. The scabs are to coins as a fiery cheek is to the hand that slapped it.

Ultimately, Cortez grants the "Blues Lady" agency in her own downfall, shifting the action from the corruptors to the Lady herself in the closing stanza.

> *Blues song lady who was looking good and sounding beautiful*
> *Until you gave away your thunder*
> *Until you gave up your spirit*

[16] Melhem, *Heroism in the New Black Poetry*, 183.

Until you barbwired you meat to teeth
And became the odor of hyenas
Uprooted woman with the embalmed face
Pall bearer lips
And hair matted in the mud of texas
How many ounces of revolution do you need
To fill the holes in your body
Or
Is it too late to get back your lightning
Is it too late to reconstruct your song blues song sister tell me
Is it too late for the mother tongue of your womanself to insurrect[17]

Even the hyenas of the drug addiction dissipate in this dramatic turn, becoming part of the "Blues Lady" herself. The beauty that opened the poem has been shrouded in neglect and death. Cortez turns the poem towards black nationalist politics, offering revolution as a possible savior. The reference verges on flippant, with a further allusion to drugs in the quantifying of the revolution in ounces, and the poem remains undecided on whether "revolution" is equipped to address the struggle of the "Blues Lady" and others like her.

Cortez paints a fraught view of the unnamed Blues Lady's legacy. She is responsible for her own fate; Cortez does not write an unequivocal victimhood. Instead, "Grinding Vibrato" offers the Blues Lady as a cautionary tale. Life as a performing (black) woman brings threats: drugs, capitalism, and the audience's desire. Cortez's "Blues Lady" succumbed to these forces, as did the beauty of both her body and her sound.

In "Jazz Fan Looks Back," Cortez places the singers alongside male instrumentalists in her celebratory listing of jazz greats. The poem careens through a roster of musicians, the brevity and vagueness hinting at the haze of memory implied by

[17] Cortez, *Jazz Fan Looks Back*, 52.

the title's "Looks Back." She links each musician with an icon of themselves, often a signature tune or style. "I crisscrossed with Monk / Wailed with Bud / Counted every star with Stitt."[18] The list format calls to mind the way jazz fandom has often taken on a collector's mentality, insider status performed through encyclopedic mastery of the field.[19] Cortez names four women singers in her poem: Sarah Vaughan, Billie Holiday, Dinah Washington, and Ella Fitzgerald. For Vaughan she writes the straightforward "Sang 'Don't Blame Me' with Sarah." Washington receives an evocation of her famously difficult vocal timbre, the strain so often audible in her voice: "Screamed in the range of Dinah." Cortez references Holiday's iconic white gardenia ("Wore a flower like Billie"), suggesting the adorned beauty she also describes in "Grinding Vibrato." Ella Fitzgerald receives the most extended treatment of anyone in the whirlwind poem. Each of the two stanzas closes with Cortez aligning herself with Fitzgerald, as she has with each jazz performer in the poem: "& scatted 'How High the Moon' with Ella Fitzgerald / as she blew roof off the Shrine Auditorium / Jazz at the Philharmonic." In the repetition of these lines that close the second stanza, Cortez changes only the title of the song, swapping in "Lady Be Good."

The treatment of the singers in this poem is too brief for any detailed insights, but it is worth noting that Cortez folds the vocalists in with the instrumentalists. The discursive divide between instrumentalists and vocalists does not apply to the reminiscence of this "Jazz Fan," nor is that truly a surprise: this distinction is one that applies less to fans than to critics, historians, and musicians. For Cortez, as for so many

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[18] Ibid., 54.
[19] For an insightful analysis of the collector's mentality, see Chapter 2 of Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics*.

jazz fans, the jazz singers were just as much a part of the jazz pantheon as the male instrumentalists that Cortez names.

Does it matter that Billie Holiday is the only performer metonymized by her appearance? On the one hand, her white gardenia was truly iconic, and in "looking back" the flower might best evoke Holiday. Yet Monk's porkpie hat also served this role for him and Cortez recalls him with a tune name. If the poem reveals anything about Cortez's view of jazz and blues singers, it is that their place among jazz greats is unassailable, and that Holiday's line may nod toward the gender challenges the women faced.

Perhaps her least conflicted praise poem, "Bumblebee, You Saw Big Mama," is devoted to Big Mama Thornton. In it, she portrays a fearless performer, transgressing social expectations of a black woman in her dynamic performance.[20] Thornton's adorned body appears in the first stanza, but rather than the "painted lips" of "Grinding Vibrato," Cortez offers Thornton's adornment as gender transgression:

> *You saw Big Mama Thornton*
> *In her cocktail dresses*
> *& Cut off boots*
> *& In her cowboy hat*
> *& Man's suit*
> *As she drummed &*
> *Hollered out*
> *The happy hour of her negritude*
>
> *Bumblebee*[21]

Cortez's Thornton faced some of the same challenges as the singer in "Grinding Vibrato," but Thornton does not succumb. In the final stanza, Cortez writes "You knew

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[20] See Jennifer Ryan's analysis of the poem in her dissertation: Jennifer Denise Ryan, "Writing a Third Language: A Genealogy of Feminist Jazz Poetics" (PhD diss., The University of Iowa, 2004), 160.
[21] Cortez, *Jazz Fan Looks Back*, 69.

why Big Mama / heated up the blues for Big Mama / to have the blues with you / after you stung her / & she chewed off your stinger."

In "You know," Cortez writes a light-hearted reflexive poem, describing a blues that she has the "terrible, terrible need to write,"—a blues that she calls "nice and long," a blues "without incidental music," a "significant blues," and perhaps most importantly, an "unsubmissive blues."[22] This last phrase becomes the title of her second album (her first recording with The Firespitters) on which she records "You Know." In the poem, she calls out to the legacies of Aretha Franklin and Big Mama Thornton, placing herself in a lineage of black women performers as she frames her own blues performance as an act of resistance.

Cortez's "So Many Feathers" offers a conflicted reading of Josephine Baker's career. Though not a singer, Baker was a prominent example of a performing black woman, and is a useful inclusion in this group. Cortez praises Baker's early political work: "this Josephine / breaking color bars in miami / this Josephine / mother of orphans / legion of honor / rosette of resistance." But immediately following these lines Cortez makes this praise contingent: "this Josephine before / splitting the solidarity of beautiful feathers." Later, Cortez directly criticizes Baker's decision to perform in South Africa during apartheid:

> *Josephine didn't you know about the torture chambers*
> *Made of black flesh and feathers*
> *Made by the death white boers in durban*
> *Josephine terror-woman of terrible beauty of such feathers*
> *I want to understand why dance*
> *The dance of the honorary white*
> *For the death white boers in Durban*[23]

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[22] Ibid., 35–6.
[23] Jayne Cortez, *Coagulations: New and Selected Poems* (Thunder's Mouth Press, 1984).

The poem probes the limitations of adornment and adoration, and the political responsibility of the performing artist. As Jennifer Ryan has helpful noted about the poem, "Baker's decision to mark her body with feathers to enhance her appeal as an entertainer removes her symbolic power from the realm of social signification. Her body is limited by white desire just as the black South African population and their land have been circumscribed."[24] Despite the social forces of oppression at work on Baker's body, Cortez holds her accountable for her political actions, just as she does the "Blues Lady" of "Grinding Vibrato."

In "Somewhere a Woman is Singing," Cortez envoices a singer at the Savoy Ballroom, the poem's refrain of "Savoy, Savoy" invoking the lyric of the jazz standard "Stompin' at the Savoy." The singer is virtuosic, powerful, and resilient. She sings in "five different scales at the same time" and "multiple time systems / mesmerizing and signifying to / all the stingrays bopping in the Savoy Ballroom."[25] She is skilled. Cortez captures the dynamism of a performance that drives a room full of dancers:

> *she is singing Savoy Savoy*
> *this energy's coming from me Savoy Savoy*
> *I'm sinking my soul in you Savoy Savoy*
> *Oh how my spirit dilates*
> *How my silence pulsates*
> *In between these faces in you Savoy*
> *Savoy Savoy Savoy*[26]

Cortez's singer did battle to arrive at this stage: "this woman / flying through porthole of her shipwreck." And her resistance is musical, against gendered expectations and nationalist politics: "this woman pushing back the romantic / overgrown mangrove of

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[24] Ryan, "Writing a Third Language," 154.
[25] Cortez, *Jazz Fan Looks Back*, 95.
[26] Ibid.

used songbooks / to step out with a saturday night coupe of riffs / everything lovely and sweet and lovely."

The sensual pleasure of performance oozes through "Somewhere a Woman is Singing," and is evident, too, in Cortez's recording of the poem with bassist Ron Carter. In it, Cortez performs with a gentleness to her voice, unheard in most of her recordings, full of "everything lovely and sweet and lovely." Her "Savoy Savoy," supported by Carter's recurring pair of double-stops, is voiced with wistful melodic tones. In the opening strophe, quoted above, she takes on the first person, Cortez performing the identity of singer, her sensitive interplay with Carter incarnating a performance of singer as collaborative musician.

Cortez's poetry offers a window into her personal construction of the jazz singer, reflecting some of the aspects of the historical jazz singer. The desire of white audiences and focus on bodies as objects pervade the poems, as does the corrupting force of capitalism. But ultimately, Cortez puts the responsibility and agency for managing these oppressions in the hands of the performers. In her reading, the historical figures are accountable for how they responded to their hardship and one way out of the metaphorical "shipwreck" was through musical performance. Cortez's focus in these poems is not the revision of circumstance, much as she certainly desired it, but rather the personal political responsibility of the artist.

Cortez and Feminism

Although it was politically progressive, the Black Arts movement was also problematically misogynistic. The Black Power movement and the Black Arts movement

were linked as "spiritual sisters," with the latter employing "theories of the black aesthetic to develop popular, yet political art forms such as music, theater, literature, and dance that tapped into America's black urban communities."[27] At its mildest, the Black Arts movement displayed masculinist tendencies, with poetry that expressed its revolutionary character through the metaphor of the phallus and male sexual power. In her insightful essay on black women poets and the Black Arts movement, Cherise Pollard writes that "for many of the male poets in [the seminal Black Arts movement anthology] *Black Fire*, the black male body is the site of warrior strength and the phallus is its ultimate weapon."[28] At its worst, the Black Nationalists and Black Arts movement performed unmitigated misogyny. As poet Ntozake Shange said, "I guess I've been in every black nationalist movement in the country, and I found that the flaw in the nationalists' dream was that they didn't treat women right."[29] Women and femininity were often seen as undermining Black Power's strength. Pollard summarizes: "Black Power theorists argued that capitalism and racism deprived black men of their manhood. Within this dynamic, powerlessness became associated with femininity and homosexuality."[30]

Within this movement, female poets pushed against the masculinism and misogyny through their own poetry. Pollard analyzes how Sonia Sanchez and Nikki Giovanni subverted the sexism of the movements and "paved the way for black feminist

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[27] Cherise Pollard, "Sexual Subversions, Political Inversions: Women's Poetry and the Politics of the Black Arts Movement," in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, ed. Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 173.
[28] Ibid., 176.
[29] As quoted in: Kimberly Nichele Brown, *Writing the Black Revolutionary Diva: Women's Subjectivity and the Decolonizing Text* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 179.
[30] Pollard, "Sexual Subversions, Political Inversions: Women's Poetry and the Politics of the Black Arts Movement," 176.

voices to be heard."[31] Kimberley N. Brown thoughtfully examines Cortez's particular feminism, which she categorizes as womanism. "Recognizing the scars they share, Cortez's methods seek to make black men aware of the widespread abuse of black women without making them defensive. Asking black men to take responsibility for their own actions, Cortez entreats black men to stop abusing black women…she insists that black men reject the stereotypes about women they have learned through their participation in patriarchy."[32] From this stance she "defines a space for black women beside and in connection with—not in opposition or subordination to—their black male counterparts."[33]

It is this particular feminism that shapes my hearing of Cortez's jazz and poetry performance—a feminism that fuses connections between Cortez and her collaborators. This coalition appears not just in the content of her work, but also in her performance strategies.

Aldon Nielsen has begun the work of reading Cortez's performance strategies as feminist reclamation, in his thoughtful analysis of her performance of "If the Drum is a Woman." The poem tropes on Duke Ellington's "A Drum is a Woman," opening with the lines:

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[31] Ibid., 183.
[32] Brown, *Writing the Black Revolutionary Diva*, 181.
[33] Ibid.,182; Brown's reading of Cortez's feminism contrasts with Karen Ford's in her book *Gender and the Poetics of Excess*. There, Ford sees Cortez's approach as generally more confrontational - using the style and mode of the male members of the Black Arts Movement to speak back against their misogyny. As she says in her chapter, "Cortez was deploying such excesses against misogynist men, that is, against the very sort of man whom these excesses formerly valorized." While I agree that Cortez uses the stylistics of the BAM to speak against misogyny, I do not see the kind of directly oppositional stance that Ford does. Further, of the confrontations that I do see, to my reading they seem more directed toward men in general, not at the Black Power movement. Karen Jackson Ford, *Gender and the Poetics of Excess Moments of Brocade* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 219.

If the drum is a woman
why are you pounding your drum into an insane
Babble
Why are you pistol whipping your drum at dawn
Why are you shooting through the head of your drum
And making a drum tragedy of drums[34]

In her characteristically direct and visceral language, Cortez tackles violence against women, but Nielsen hears particular significance in her mode of delivery. "What she attempts is a raid upon the aestheticization of the figure of woman and a return to the same metaphor, reclaimed, that served as the vehicle for that aestheticization. What she demands, and what she accomplishes on this recording, is a sweeping redefinition of the place of woman's voice in the communal creation and circulation of tropes."[35]

What Nielsen offers here is a reading of the performance of a domestic violence-themed poem as a feminist revision of the mode of performance. I propose a broadening of Nielsen's reading, and assert that Cortez's feminist reclamation extends to the entirety of her performed oeuvre. It is not (just) the content of the poetry that necessarily characterizes Cortez's poetry as a feminist reclamation; it is also the particulars of how she positions herself alongside and in collaboration with her bandmates.[36]

One of the band

Cortez and The Firespitters used the same basic creative process throughout their three decades of collaboration: Cortez crafted her poems for print before recording them,

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[34] Cortez, *Jazz Fan Looks Back*, 27.
[35] Nielsen, *Black Chant*, 1997, 227.
[36] Two caveats here: First, in saying this, it is not my intention to totalize Cortez's performance, reducing all of her rich performance to a single concern. Rather I see her feminism as an ever-present aspect of her performance, shaping the delivery of a broad range of content. Second, my focus on Cortez's performance is not meant to downplay her commitment to print culture. Although her output of recorded performances is extraordinary, spanning her career, she also put great care into the printed publication of her poetry.

and worked with the musicians to balance structure and openness in ways that worked for both the poetry and the music. In her interview with D.H. Melhem, she describes the challenges of the medium:

> The part that is hard is stretching the human voice. Everybody else in the group has another kind of voice, a musical instrument that's much louder than yours (laughing). That's the problem. How not to let the different pitch levels control your work. Most of the musicians who've played with me have all been musicians who play jazz. They are used to inventing off of different rhythm patterns and different sounds. So they relate to what I'm doing in the same way. They interject their own sounds and attitudes. I like working with music. It's a collective experiment. A collective composition.[37]

In this collectivity, Cortez puts herself next to—in cooperation with—her musicians. Without abandoning the expressive language of her poetry, she minimizes the differences between her mode of expression and that of the musicians. She allows a bracketed openness that creates a structured way for the music to impact her verse in improvisatory performance.

Cortez's feminist stance in the context of the Black Arts movement placed her next to, rather than in opposition to black men; it is a feminism of coalition. This stance resonates in her performance of jazz poetry. In this section, I offer details for how she minimizes the distinction between her (vocal, texted) performance and that of her collaborators. Her musical-but-not-music recitation interrogates two binaries: speech/song and language/non-linguistic sound. Cortez's performance underlines how the pairs are not binaries at all, but continuums along which she and The Firespitters can interact. As she moves closer to the instrumentalists on these continuums, she places

[37] Melhem, *Heroism in the New Black Poetry*, 204.

herself alongside them in performance, a member of an ensemble rather than set apart by her medium.

Cortez's musically-inflected recitation recalls a pervasive African and African American practice of blurring distinctions between speech and song. Further, this practice is already folded into the fabric of her musical collaborators' performance culture. As Thomas Brothers has noted, "African-American singing commonly features speech-like inflections; by extension, the same inflections may mark instrumental performance. The broader context for this practice is that of an actively marked continuum from speech to song. Speech may be musical (by 'musical,' here I mean a systematic use of precisely measured spectrums of pitch and time) and music may be speechlike (which is to say, a more casual organization of pitch and time)."[38]

In his extensive study of the practice of Dr. Watts hymn singing and its cultural resonance, William Dargan reads "speech rhythm" as a fundamental aspect of African American expressive culture, and traces its roots through the practice of "lining out" in hymn singing. "From time immemorial, singers of congregational songs and hymns had been utilizing poetic rhythm and portraiture sound in a much less precise and demanding rhythmic context. The genius of Charlie Parker, Ornette Coleman, and other masters of bebop and free-form jazz improvisation captured a comparable speechlike fluency on musical instruments instead of human voices."[39] As Cortez brings her vocal performance closer to music, that music has already been informed by speech.

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[38] Thomas Brothers, "Ideology and Aurality in the Vernacular Traditions of African-American Music (ca. 1890-1950)," *Black Music Research Journal* 17, no. 2 (1997): 173.
[39] Dargan, *Lining out the Word*, 217–8.

Aldon Nielsen calls Cortez "one of the more 'tonal' readers of poetry among contemporary artists."[40] Nielsen describes her general pitch contour as starting high and descending through the line, whether accompanied by musicians or not. This pitch profile could be applied to most other performers of poetry with music, but I hear Cortez's approach as considerably more varied. Instead, she uses pitch unexpectedly and innovatively, the contours taking on the variable shape of melodic performance without being actual melody.

The poem "Brooding" from *Unsubmissive Blues* offers a useful illustration of Cortez's use of pitch. The first four lines of the poem follow the high-to-low pattern described by Nielsen, but in the fifth line Cortez turns up at the end, though no question is indicated.[41] From that point forward, Cortez largely abandons the high-to-low contour. Although the start and endpoint often outline a high-to-low pattern, within those bounds Cortez leaps and slides, rupturing the line. Her refraining repetition of the word "brooding" showcases her creative use of pitch. Her first instance [1:01] perfectly matches Nielsen's description, smoothly and slowly descending in pitch through six repetitions of the word. After the next stanza, Cortez breaks her pitch curve into a zigzag [1:35], shifting between high and low on a generally descending line on each (of nine) repetitions of the word. She repeats this pattern of smooth followed by jagged in the third and fourth instances, though in each case the contour is exaggerated. In the third iteration [2:06], the pitch drop-off is steeper and sooner. In the fourth [2:42], the pitch difference between the highs and lows is dramatic, as Cortez pops into a sung pitch for the peaks.

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[40] Nielsen, *Black Chant*, 1997, 221.

[41] Cortez does not generally use punctuation in her poetry, but there is also nothing in the grammar or syntax to suggest a question here.

She follows a few of these dramatic spikes with a smooth descent. In the fifth and final iteration of the "brooding" refrain [3:22], Cortez dissolves the word with her pitch play; she starts with a zigzag that recalls the earlier refrains, but now the spikes occur within the word, broken down into syllables and bordering on unintelligibility as Cortez violently throws her voice around. Joe Daley, on tuba, takes notice of Cortez's pitch-play and joins her in several of these shapes.

Cortez experiments attentively with form and rhythm. With rhythm, much of the musicality of her performance already lives in the written poetry, but in performance Cortez places her poetic rhythm in careful relationship with the musical meter. In all three recorded versions of "In the Morning," Cortez frequently places the phrase "in the morning" so that "in the" becomes an anapestic upbeat and "morning" lands on the downbeat. Cortez lays her poetry thoughtfully across the musical form, improvising its placement and allowing the musical form to work on her poetry while aligning her own formal boundaries against the musical ones, a point to which I will return later. The attention to rhythm and form in her recitation moves her away from the realm of speech and, while perhaps not toward song, precisely, certainly towards the sphere of music in Brothers's characterization of it as "systematic use of precisely measured spectrums of pitch and time."[42]

Cortez's poetic style helps her attenuate one of the major distinctions between her expressive mode and that of her musicians: the semantic content of language. Her "supersurrealist" style yields hyperbolic imagery that does not easily resolve to semantic sense. Take, for example, these lines from "The Guitars I Used to Know,"

[42] Brothers, "Ideology and Aurality in the Vernacular Traditions of African-American Music (ca. 1890-1950)," 173.

Intoxicated paradoxinated coils
Indigenous fusionous realms
Collisional digital switches[43]

By pushing at the edges of linguistic sense, Cortez's poetry encourages listening for the surface of the words rather than their semantic meaning. As T.J. Anderson has observed about jazz poetry generally, "there are moments in the poetry when 'meaning' collapses and tonal and rhythmic qualities play a significant role in fashioning a successful text."[44] There is a rich discourse around the orality of jazz poetry, and the ways in which the tone and meter of that poetry aim to emulate—or at least riff on—the sounds of jazz.[45] But it is not this particular shift toward poetry's sound that operates here. Instead, Cortez thwarts expectations of semantic sense, her grammar suggesting intelligibility but her word choices resisting resolution as "meaning." Cortez is deploying nonsense, not necessarily as an avant-garde tactic of shock, but rather as a distinct approach to what is valuable in poetry, what Tony Bolden calls her "sound-based poetics."[46]

In stepping away from the denotative realm of language, Cortez brings herself closer to the modality of her musicians.[47] In some ways, this recalls a singer's move away from song lyrics into scat, a process that Brent Hayes Edwards has theorized as

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[43] Cortez, *Jazz Fan Looks Back*, 79.
[44] Thomas J. Anderson, "Notes to Make the Sound Come Right: Towards a Definition of Jazz Poetry" (State University of New York at Binghamton, 1998), 21.
[45] See, for example Anderson, "Notes to Make the Sound Come Right," 1998; Feinstein, *Jazz Poetry*; Bolden, *Afro-Blue*; L. L. Dickson, "'Keep It in the Head': Jazz Elements in Modern Black American Poetry," *MELUS* 10, no. 1 (April 1, 1983): 29–37; Robert Peter Gaspar, "Everyone and I Stopped Breathing: Jazz in American Poetry" (PhD diss., The University of Connecticut, 1992).
[46] Bolden, "All the Birds Sing Bass," 65.
[47] One caveat here: even in nonsense, language cannot fully shed its denotations, and I do not mean to imply that Cortez aims for this complete separation from linguistic meaning.

"dropping words."[48] For Edwards, the idea of scat syllables as "nonsense" overlooks the ways in which the non-linguistic use of language fragments still makes meaning. Edwards engages with Robert Walser and Susan McClary's criticism of Nattiez's work on musical semiotics, in which they problematize his idea of the 'neutral level of analytical discourse'[49] and suggest that musical meaning, due to social context, is 'contingent but never arbitrary.'[50] Edwards writes: "With regard to scat singing, in other words, one should be able to speak more specifically not just about syntax but about the contingency of particular rhetorical choices in black musical performance—since a legato phrase of soft-tongued phonemes ('La loo la loo lo') would seem to carry an altogether different range of significance than a sharp run of fricatives, occlusives, and open vowels ('Shoop be doop')."[51] Similarly, "intoxicated paradoxinated coils" may make little semantic sense, but it echoes with assonance and consonance, foregrounded by Cortez's move away from the semantic.

Cortez's use of refrain and repetition extends her emphasis on sound over meaning. In an interview with Sascha Feinstein she described her prolific use of refrain, and what she saw as its function in her poetry. "The refrain might be expected but what the refrain is relating to is unexpected…There are no exact ocean waves. The refrain is a device to add the next layer of sound, next metaphor, next transformation."[52] For a straightforward example of her refraining I return to "Grinding Vibrato." Its repeated line

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[48] Brent Hayes Edwards, "Louis Armstrong and the Syntax of Scat," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 3 (January 2002): 618.
[49] Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 156.
[50] This quotation comes from Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hannover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993), 28–9; Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
[51] Edwards, "Louis Armstrong and the Syntax of Scat," 623.
[52] Feinstein, *Ask Me Now*, 50.

"You were looking good and sounding beautiful," first heard near the opening of the poem, returns after the downfall of the blues woman, its past tense newly poignant.

But in other places, her refrains repeat with an insistance that triggers semantic satiation. In "Maintain Control" she returns frequently to the opening lines, "Where are you going / where have you been" followed by repetition of the phrase "maintain control." In her performance of this poem with music on the live album *Poetry and Music*, Cortez recites the poem with militaristic rhythmic precision. With the repetitive iteration of "maintain control" always in the same rhythmic delivery, the words phase out of sense and meld with the instrumental support for the poem, which in turn mirrors the rhythm of her speech.

More extreme versions of this semantic satiation come from two poems, "They Want the Oil," and "Expenditures Economic Love Song," both recorded in live performance for *Poetry and Music*.[53] Each of these pieces consists entirely of two lines, repeated numerous times, but Cortez takes divergent approaches to delivering her repetition. In "Expenditures Economic Love Song," Cortez delivers her two lines with the same precision as in "Maintain Control." She opens the track with an unaccompanied and slowly-spoken iteration of the lines, "Military spending huge profits and / death." Immediately following this introduction, The Firespitters jump in with an up-tempo repetitive accompaniment while Cortez launches into twenty-two repetitions of her two lines, each one with precisely the same rhythmic delivery. Cortez varies her pitch little, except for an occasional upward leap on the word "death,"—a display of what D.H.

[53] Based on reviews of Cortez's performances, it sounds like she returned frequently to these poems for her live performances, particularly "They Want the Oil."

Melhem calls her "ferocious humor."[54] It is a riff chorus that never breaks out into the rest of the tune, and with each repetition the words lose more of their semantic sense.

The phasing to nonsense happens even more quickly in "They Want the Oil." Both the music and Cortez's recitation are ametrical as Cortez repeats "They want the oil / but they don't want the people." She plays with pitch and rhythm, casting her voice around her spoken register and occasionally popping through into high sung pitches. The instrumentalists react and respond, conversing with her delivery as another member of a freely-improvising ensemble. By thirty seconds into the recording, Cortez has completely broken down the linguistic sense of the lines, speeding up her recitation and narrowing her pitch range into a drum roll of Ts and Bs and Ps. After a pause, she reenters and now inflects the lines with an absurd air, her singsong of mock outrage briefly recapturing the sense of the words before she dissolves them again.

Throughout Cortez's recordings—as well as in available video of her live performances—she practices these performance strategies, diminishing the distance between herself and the instrumentalists. If language is one of the primary barriers between poetry and music, then Cortez turns language into sound. If music's melody and rhythm are the distinction, she brings them into her own performance. What emerges is more opportunity for interaction, as Cortez places herself alongside her collaborators. As she describes it, in the film *Poetry in Motion*,

> It's sound, it's about sound. The sound of the poetry against the sound of the music. The way I work is, improvised or invented off the word, it's like the call and response pattern, which is an old African pattern. I am making statements, or I'm asking questions, and the music is responding to me, and I'm responding back to them, and we're listening to each other. Making not only comments on what

[54] Melhem, *Heroism in the New Black Poetry*, 193.

> you're doing, but extending that, taking it out and exploring the possibilities of the poetry and the music together.[55]

Improvisation

Cortez saw improvisation as integral to her creative process even before she met with her musicians. And as she told D. H. Melhem, "of course the work is improvisational before it is written on paper."[56] Similar to Mike Ladd's performance, described in chapter two, Cortez's text is fixed but her placement of it against the music is fluid. It is in her delivery that her improvisation lives. Cortez allows the music to work on her poetry, and her poetry to work on the music, improvising new meanings in each performance, all within a relatively fixed style. Through improvisation, Cortez finds another way to elide the differences between herself and her musicians, ceding control of the artistic outcome to a collaborative process.

For an example of improvisation at work in Cortez's performance, I turn to two recordings of her poem "In the Morning." The first is from *Unsubmissive Blues*, released in 1980, with a band that was not yet called The Firespitters but included the key members: drummer Denardo Coleman and guitarist Bern Nix. Also included is Joe Daley on tuba. Both Denardo Coleman and Bern Nix played extensively with Ornette Coleman, and their performances outside The Firespitters lean stylistically toward his famed free jazz. Joe Daley has worked extensively with members of the AACM. The second recording comes from her 1992 release, *Poetry and Music,* recorded live at the "Women in (E)Motion" festival in Bremen, Germany. Bern Nix and Denardo Coleman, now as

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[55] Ron Mann, *Poetry in Motion*, Documentary, 1982.
[56] Melhem, *Heroism in the New Black Poetry*, 204.

The Firespitters, also appear on this recording. Daley's tuba is replaced by Al McDowell on bass, another Ornette Coleman sideman. Charles Moffett Jr. joins on tenor saxophone.

The two recordings are remarkably similar, even though they are separated by more than a decade. Although one is from a studio session and the other from a live concert, this fact has little impact on my analysis other than offering convenient labels for the versions.[57] Similar to "Colloquial Dreams/ Scenes in the City," discussed in chapter one, the existence of these two versions offers a rare opportunity to listen for the impact of improvisation on the combination of music and word in jazz poetry performance.

Both recordings lope through a slow blues, with the relatively unelaborated harmony characteristic of a blues rather than jazz approach. Rhythmically and harmonically, the musicians maintain a fairly straightforward blues style, but some pitch and timbral material suggests the musicians' broader avant-garde orientation. Cortez delivers her poetry in basically the same manner in both recordings: melodically inflected without being sung, varying her rhythm and dynamics to emphasize the poetry. The live version is almost two and a half minutes shorter than the studio recording, reflecting Cortez's generally faster recitation.

Despite these core similarities, the recordings diverge in an important way: the alignment of Cortez's poetry within/against the musical blues form. Comparing the two recordings, what immediately strikes my ear is the impact that this layering has on the resonance of the poetry. Listening for this effect of improvisation, I analyze the way in

[57] One could certainly make some claims about the impact of the performance venue on the musicopoetics and/or the improvisation, but my argument is not focused on differences between live and studio recordings.

which Cortez allows the music to work on her poetry, and how she collaboratively moves within the musical form to shape her work.

A brief review of blues musical and lyric form is in order, with a caveat that these descriptions grossly overgeneralize the rich and varied practices of blues music and poetry. In sketching out the foundations of blues form here, I intend to draw attention to the ways in which the poetic and musical forms have conventionally interacted, establishing the ground against which Cortez signifies.

Blues lyrics typically use three lines per verse, with an AAB form. The two As are often elaborated with short pickup phrases, especially on the second statement, but are otherwise quite frequently strict repeats. The B line is generally longer, and comments on the A lines as elaboration or resolution, and typically rhymes.

In its most basic form, the twelve bar blues is made up of three segments of four measures each.[58] The first four measures have a harmonically static quality, often with a brief excursion to the subdominant in the second measure. The arrival of the subdominant in the fifth measure marks a harmonic shift, with a return to the tonic in measure seven. The final four measures are the most harmonically active, and propel the form back to the stasis of the first four measures. It is, of course, cyclical.

Typically, the AAB lyrical form is overlaid predictably with the twelve bar blues, with one line of the lyric form corresponding to four measures of the musical form. Each line of text usually occupies just two of the measures, leaving the second two measures for musical elaboration of the line. Blues singers nearly always divide each line of text in

[58] For a nuanced description of the early blues form, see Jeff Todd Titon, *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 141–143.

two, creating caesura by way of rest, intervallic leap, or a held note.[59] This combination of lyrical and musical patterns constitutes a kind of formulaic text music relationship in the most basic of blues. As Susan McClary writes, "if the first line throws out a proposition, the second mulls over it, and the third draws emphatic conclusions."[60] The harmonic form weaves into this contour, supporting the poetic form through stasis, elaboration, and resolution.

The seemingly infinite repetitions and revisions on this particular text and music combination have set up an expectation that shapes all hearings of the blues. Words sung or spoken within each four measure segment (including the pickup phrases) are expected to cohere as a line. Lyrics sung or spoken over the final four measures will be full of action compared to the first line and bring elaboration or resolution. These expectations are played upon within blues, and they are present in the composition, performance, and listening of any blues, not as a strict rule but as a normative framework.

I focus heavily on musical form in this analysis, largely because the form here indicates not just the harmonic progression and cycle of repetition, but also points to other aspects of the musical performance. In their recordings of "In the Morning," The Firespitters improvise largely within the expectations of slow blues, constantly emphasizing the blues form. They shift in texture and accompaniment style almost exclusively at formal boundaries, at the start of a new chorus, or at one of the four measure divisions. Denardo Coleman often underscores these boundaries with his drumming, building crescendos into new choruses and marking arrivals with his crash cymbals. Thus, the formal parameters here involve much more than the harmonic

[59] Ibid., 141.
[60] McClary, *Conventional Wisdom*, 40.

structure; it is also the shape of the music in texture, timbre, and dynamics. Because so much of The Firespitters' performances overlap with a generalized blues framework, I am able to use form as a kind of shorthand for their musical performance.

Two lines of Cortez's poetry, midway through the poem, provides a crisp example of how the improvised placement within the blues form impacts the delivery and, ultimately, the meaning of her poetry. In the middle of a passage filled with repetitions of the phrase "in the morning," Cortez elaborates with: "when the deep sea goes through a dog's bite / and you spit on the tip of your long knife." Rhythmically, her performance is nearly identical between the two recordings, offset in the meter by two beats. But variations in their placement against the form shift the lines' function within the poem.

In the live version [3:27] Cortez places the lines in the third and fourth measure, following a flurry of quickly enunciated text. Immediately after, she carefully times an "in the morning," with "morning" landing precisely on the downbeat. In this context, the two lines sound transitional, bridging elaborations of the morning imagery during two measure of typically low emphasis. In contrast, on the studio recording [5:01] Cortez delivers the lines over the final four measures of the blues form, placing them at the conventional point of resolution and arrival. As before, she closes with "in the morning," but here murmurs the phrase, an ornamental afterthought to the emphatically placed lines. Although her delivery of the lines is rhythmically the same, in one case they function transitionally and, in the other, as arrival.

The surrounding passage offers an example of how Cortez's delivery against the blues form emphasizes different stylistic elements of her poetry. Figure 3.1 shows the distribution against the form in the live version.

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3">I [3:20]
Morning
I said early in the morning
Way down in the morning
Before the sun passes by in the morning
Yeah when the deep sea goes through a dog’s bite and you spit on the tip of your long knife in the</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">IV
Morning in the morning I said when peroxide falls on a bed of broken glass and the</td><td>I
Sun rises like a polyester ball of menses in the morning gonna firedance in the petro</td></tr>
<tr><td>V
In the morning
Turn loose the blues</td><td>IV
In the funky jungle
In the morning</td><td>I
I said when you see the morning coming like a two-headed twister let it blow let it blow in the</td></tr>
</table>

Figure 3.1 Poetry distribution across blues form
“In the Morning,” live version, chorus 6

In the first four measures, Cortez moves swiftly through a series of elaborations, rhythmically delivering “in the morning” on each pass. At “when the deep sea goes through a dog’s bite,” she lowers her voice in both volume and pitch. As the band moves to the subdominant, Cortez returns to the phrase “in the morning” with renewed intensity. Her surrealistic imagery in the passage (“when peroxide falls on a bed of broken glass and the sun rises like a polyester ball of menses”) is downplayed, ornamentating the phrase “in the morning.” What emerges is an emphasis on the blues-oriented aspects of the poem—not just the content of the phrase “in the morning,” but its relentless repetition against the changing harmonic form. In the recording, Cortez focuses on repetition with difference, a core component of the blues and the African American expressive cultural practice of signifying.

I [4:37] morning gonna kill me a rooster		
IV in the morning early in the morning way down in the		**I** morning before the sun passes by in the morning
V when the deep sea goes through	**IV** a dog's bite and you spit on the tip of your	**I** long knife In the morning in the morning when peroxide falls on

I a bed of broken glass and the sun rises like a polyester ball of menses in the morning yeah gonna firedance in the petro in the morning		
IV turn loose the blues in the funky jungle in the morning		**I** I said when you see the morning coming like a two-headed twister
V let it blow let it blow	**IV** in the morning in the morning	**I** all swollen up like an ocean in the morning early in the morning

Figure 3.2 Poetry distribution across blues form
"In the Morning," studio version, choruses 7-8

The studio recording moves at a slower pace, allowing more time for absorbing Cortez's complex imagery. Two separate approaches characterize Cortez's formal placement in this passage. In chorus seven, Cortez tropes on a conventional AAB lyric. Cortez lands from the previous stanza with "morning" on the downbeat of a chorus, then waits until nearly the end of the first four measures to reenter. Her "gonna kill me a rooster" serves as a pickup to the elaboration passage, which Cortez spreads out over the second set of four measures. She closes with the highly rhythmic delivery of "when the deep sea" described above. The As are centered on an elaboration of "in the morning,"

first musical then poetic. The chorus finishes with lines that take the lyric in a new direction.

In the following chorus, Cortez stretches out her surrealism across the blues form. Her delivery of the lines does not take up more metrical time than in the live version, but they are formally more prominent, placed at the beginning of a chorus instead of being tucked into the middle. Cortez deemphasizes the phrase "in the morning" in her performance of this passage, lowering in both volume and pitch, and speaking the phrase quickly. This small change of placement shifts the focus to the surrealism in Cortez's poetry, downplaying the blues element that dominated the live version.

A passage from slightly earlier in the piece offers a further example of how Cortez opens her poetry to be shaped by the music. The poetry of this passage, in printed form, reads:

> *And masquerading in my horn like a river*
> *Eclipsed to these infantries of dentures of diving spears*
> *You enter broken mirrors through fragmented pipe spit*
> *You pull into a shadow ring of magic jelly*
> *You wear the sacrificial blood of nightfall*
> *You lift the ceiling with my tropical slush dance*
> *You slide and tremble with the reputation of an earthquake*

After the introductory two lines, the repetition of "you" followed by sensual imagery (broken mirrors and fragmented pipe spit possibly excepted) forms a kind of erotic riff chorus.[61] The construction of these lines appears throughout the poem, as in the opening stanza's "you come out in the middle of fish-scales / you bleed into gourds wrapped with red ants," but this passage contains the longest series of these phrases in the poem. The

[61] For an introduction to the idea of a riff chorus in poetry, see: Bolden, "All the Birds Sing Bass," 68.

passage is set off as a stanza in the printed version, suggesting their coherence as a unit, but what is the relationship of those first two lines to the riff chorus?

In the studio recording, Cortez begins the passage after an eight measure vamp, taking her time to frame the passage and (presumably) cueing the musicians that she's ready to continue.

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3">I [3:30]
And masquerading in my horn like a river
eclipsed to these infantries of dentures of diving spears</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">IV
you enter broken mirrors through fragmented
pipe spit</td><td>I
you pull into a shadow ring of magic jelly</td></tr>
<tr><td>V
you wear the sacrificial</td><td>IV
blood of nightfall</td><td>I
you lift the ceiling with my tropical slush dance</td></tr>
</table>

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3">I
you slide and tremble with the reputation of an
earthquake
and when i kick through walls
to shine like</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">IV
silver
when i shine like brass through crust in a</td><td>I
compound
when i shineshine</td></tr>
<tr><td>V
shine
you</td><td>IV
wail to me in the drum
call of a</td><td>I
black rooster
In the morningin the morningin the</td></tr>
</table>

Figure 3.3 Poetry distribution across blues form
"In the Morning," studio version, choruses 5-6

Cortez enters with a measured, calm delivery of the first two lines, filling the first four measures. She smooths her otherwise angular rhythm, "dentures of diving spears" taking on the triplet quality that characterizes much of the music. Framed by the silence and placed at the start of a chorus, these lines resonate weightily, forming the foundational image to which each of the "you" lines will refer.

From there, each "you" line takes up two measures, Cortez entering just after the downbeat, speaking unhurriedly and then pausing until the downbeat of the next two-measure section. It sounds unmistakably like a series of related lines, but the gap between them and the placement against the form undermines the impact of the riff chorus. Bern Nix plays active guitar lines and towards the end of chorus five, the musicians raise the intensity, building from the stasis of the opening vamp. The final "you" line crosses into chorus six, and Cortez delivers it with a marked difference, jumping off the strong guitar downbeat. She stretches out the vowel of "slide" and accentuates the jagged rhythm of "reputation of an earthquake" with pitch jumps in her voice. This line is distinct from the others, the riff chorus broken across two blues choruses. In her studio recording, then, Cortez emphasizes each image in her riff chorus at the expense of the unit.

In the live recording, Cortez once again places the first line of this passage after a long pause. This time, however, she begins near the end of a chorus, and speaks rapidly. She fits nearly the entire two lines into the final two measures of chorus three, just trailing across the downbeat with "diving spears." Instead of holding the prominent position that they did in the studio version, these opening lines now become a pickup, a flourish before the riff chorus rather than the grounding image.

I Morning in the morning		
IV		**I**
V	**IV**	**I [2:00]** And masquerading in my horn like a river Eclipsed to these infantry of dentures of

I Diving spears You enter broken mirrors through fragmented pipe spit You pull into the shadow ring of magic jelly You wear the sacrificial blood of nightfall You lift the		
IV ceiling with my tropical slush dance you slide and tremble with the reputation of an		**I** Earthquake And when I kick through walls to shine like silver when I shine like brass through
V Crust in a compound when I shine	**IV** Shine shine You wail to	**I** Me through drumcall of a black rooster in the morning in the morning in the morning

Figure 3.4 Poetry distribution across blues form
"In the Morning," live version, choruses 3-4

Cortez speaks each of the first four "you" lines with similar rhythm and pitch. She emphasizes the word "you" and chants most of the line on a monotone. In the first two instances she raises the pitch at the end of the line, intoning near the fifth and third scale degree. She drives into the next line, closing the set of three with a falling pitch, coming to a brief vocal cadence on "nightfall." The Firespitters create dramatic tension in the background, lowering their volume to make way for Cortez. The guitarist and bass player, having stepped to the fore in the previous chorus with more complex harmonies, revert to the most basic blues form, reiterating the tonic chord throughout the entire first four measures. Strumming in a steady articulation of the meter, their sudden stasis creates

tension. The saxophonist adds light background fills between Cortez's lines. Overall, the spotlight is decidedly on Cortez, framing her virtuosic moment.

In their live performance of these lines Cortez and The Firespitters not only bring out the metaphorical riff chorus, they create a literal one. In her rapid-fire delivery bound within a narrow section of the blues form, Cortez ties together the passage. The opening two lines become an upbeat, while she emphasizes the similarity of the "you" lines.

The two passages discussed above show Cortez opening her poetry to the music's influence. The impact of the improvisatory delivery has a subtle shaping force on the poetry, serving to highlight stylistic elements or emphasize certain passages. Critically, this is not a process over which either Cortez or her musicians have complete control—it happens collaboratively and improvisationally. Comparison of the two recordings of "In the Morning" demonstrates how the blues form's deeply ingrained conventions impacts the poetry. Along with Cortez's use of the speech/sound continuum and her phasing out of linguistic expression, her openness to improvisational shaping of her poetry demonstrates how she places herself next to her musicians, building a collaborative relationship.

Reclaiming the legacy

Cortez's collaborative stance reflects her feminism. In her political feminism she places herself beside the men in her community; in performance she positions herself in collaboration with her ensemble members, themselves often the very men addressed by her feminism. From this stance, Cortez acknowledges and revises the legacy of the women jazz singers, as imagined through her poetry. Although she cedes the control over

the final aesthetic object to an improvisatory and collaborative process, Cortez maintains a position of authority in two important ways: acting as bandleader and controlling the means of production. Further, the anatomical themes of her poetry revise the black female body in performance. In this way, Cortez pushes back the tropes of the jazz singer, carving out a feminist approach to her version of their performance.

Bandleaders in jazz serve as the ultimate authority in their creative projects. Cortez created an organizational procedure that integrates the collaborative work of her musicians while keeping her poetry unquestionably at the center of the projects. As Tony Bolden notes, "her band, The Firespitters, has a distinct sound, yet it is clear to listeners that the band has been structured around her voice and the rhythms of her poetry."[62] She maintains an improvisatory approach, but as she says, "the poetry is the focus."[63]

> *The voice of May*
> *Is the voice of Betty Carter*
> *Betty the bandleader in control*
> *Betty the mother of special melodies*
> *Betty the young girl singer with Hamp and Ray*
> *Betty pure Betty*
> *Independent Betty*[64]

In "Betty," Cortez offers tribute to the singer Betty Carter. In addition to her well-earned reputation as a vocalist, Carter is known for having controlled the management of her own career, eschewing the record companies that normally support a musician. Carter's biographer attributes some of her motivation for these choices as "a matter of black autonomy."[65]

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[62] Ibid., 64.
[63] Feinstein, *Ask Me Now*, 51.
[64] Cortez, *Jazz Fan Looks Back*, 100.
[65] William R. Bauer, *Open the Door: The Life and Music of Betty Carter* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 133.

Jazz musicians long resented their treatment by record companies and promoters. The problem was two-pronged; market forces constrained their artistic range and once the records were made, many musicians felt financially exploited by the division of profits. Some musicians (including Mingus, notably) formed their own record labels to maintain their independence. As Aldon Nielsen has noted, "Cortez realized early on that black artists would require full control over the production of their work if they were to escape the censorious mediations of white editing and of capitalist recording industry demands for certain modes of product."[66] For Cortez, this meant founding and maintaining her own press. Cortez's Bola Press released nearly all of her recordings and books.[67]

In controlling both the process of her artistic project and the means of its production, Cortez pushes back against the vision of jazz singer she portrays in her poems. Cortez's singers were often victimized by capitalism, their bodies and voices controlled and corrupted in the process, but in maintaining independence Cortez resisted this degradation. She held her singers responsible for the political work that their performances wrought, and as both bandleader and independently produced, Cortez controlled her own performance.

Cortez's treatment of the body in performance offers perhaps her most powerful revision. The centrality of the jazz singer's body in performance is, in part, literal: she is front and center on the bandstand, visible from top to bottom, unmasked by any

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[66] Nielsen, *Black Chant*, 1997, 221.

[67] Jennifer Ryan contextualizes Cortez's control over her publications within slam poetry. She draws on Maria Damon's work on slam, writing "Slam poets often self-publish and self-promote even after gaining a public reputation; they prefer to control the processes by which their work is disseminated." Ryan, "Writing a Third Language," 171.

instrument. In a context of suits and ties, she is sequined. In Cortez's reading, she is then objectified and commodified.

Confronting this history of performance, Cortez thrusts her own body into the spotlight in her performance. But instead of sequins and bare shoulders, Cortez gives the audience raw anatomical imagery. As she said in an interview with D.H. Melham, "I use dreams, the subconscious, the real objects, and I open up the body and use organs, and I sink them into words, and I ritualize them and fuse them into events."[68] Her poem "Opening Act" offers plentiful examples, as in the opening stanza's "fallopian teeth," or the later lines:

> *And detoxify whistles in your kidneys*
> *Salt dry curses in your eardrums*
> *And then laugh into the drunken gallbladders of the night*
> *You have to be rich in blood vessels to*
> *Bury that act in someone's mouth a 3 o'clock every morning*
> *So don't fuck with me*[69]

In "No Simple Explanations" Cortez's anatomical orientation also turns to the body's fluids, as in the lines:

> *Not for madness*
> *Reproducing itself through the uterus in the throat*
> *Not for sharks*
> *Having feeding frenzies in the middle of foreheads*
> *Not for*
> *Sentimental passwords of vomit splattering pages*
> *No simple explanations*[70]

Kimberley N. Brown has thoughtfully analyzed Cortez's anatomical imagery in her book. For Brown, Cortez's poetic use of flesh forces the audience to interrogate their own bodies, and to consider their bodies as political sites.

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[68] Melhem, *Heroism in the New Black Poetry*, 205.
[69] Cortez, *Jazz Fan Looks Back*, 21.
[70] Ibid., 41.

> Through a fusion of the metaphysical with the 'real' and by laying the innards of both the poem and the symbolic black flesh bare, Cortez not only wants to transform words into something unifying and revolutionary - she also seeks to transform her audience, awakening individuals to their decolonized selves as well as to their connection with both their local and global black communities…As poetic rituals of transformation, Cortez's poetry works on her reader like an initiation rite.[71]

Critically, this last sentence refers to Cortez's audience as a reader—Brown works exclusively from Cortez's printed works. Her argument is convincing when the imagined audience is a solitary individual, holding a book of poetry in a quiet room. From there, Cortez's lines of organs and flesh turn her audience inward.

But in her performance, and particularly in those with The Firespitters, it must be Cortez's own body that asserts itself in these flesh-filled lines. Framed by her backing musicians, either in person or in our imagination, intoning her words with her throat, lungs, and tongue, Cortez's body eclipses that of her listener. The flesh, then, works not just as a pointer to the audience's body as decolonized, but to Cortez's body, and particularly her body in performance, as political.

Cortez's body in performance is not the painted, feathered, beaded body of the jazz singer. It is organs, skin, and spittle—an empathetic body, not an objectified one. Female genitalia feature prominently in her anatomical metaphors, appearing as frequently in her verse as do the phalluses in other Black Arts poetry. In bringing her sexed body into a gendered context, Cortez claims a space for black women's bodies in performance as agential. Her body, heard through the audience's bodies, revises front-and-center as a position to see from, rather than only a place to be seen.

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[71] Brown, *Writing the Black Revolutionary Diva*, 155–6.

Conclusion

In her performance of jazz poetry, Cortez stepped into a gendered role in a misogynistic political context. From this position, she crafted a feminist performance. Her approach to combining her poetry with music elided many of the differences between her mode of performance and that of her bandmates, through her use of the speech/song continuum and her phasing from language to sound. She opened her performance to the music and musicians, their contribution shaping the aesthetic outcome of her artistic project. As a woman poet performing with an all-male ensemble, she took on the role of the female jazz singer, but revised the position, creating a collaborative relationship with her bandmates that reflects a coalition feminism. From that stance, she reclaims the jazz singer's performance, refashioning the relationship of the body and capitalism into an empowered position.

In her poetry, Cortez held the black women performers accountable for the political work of their careers. In her own work, she performs feminist action not only with the words that she crafted, but also in her method of performing that verse with music. If the confines of the role of jazz singer are gendered constraints, then Jayne Cortez was most definitely "flying through porthole of her shipwreck."

CHAPTER 4
A SCENE IN THE CITY?
JAZZ POETRY INTERSECTION IN NEW YORK CITY, 2012-2014

May 31, 2013 (Friday) 9:15pm, Tribeca Arts Center
Marty Ehrlich, "Cartographies of Flight"

Halfway through the evening I am finally realizing: Marty Ehrlich has thought a lot about poetry. It is intermission and many of the audience members have packed up their belongings, climbing out of the steeply raked auditorium. But my mind is running through the first half, and I am eager for more. As the forces reconvene, a man talks to the audience for a few minutes about The Lost Jazz Shrines series, and this piece's place within it. His language is a stiff blend of dated slang and institutional non-profit fundraiser. I note that the audience is overwhelmingly white and over fifty.

The musicians and two poets sit in a semi-circle in the performance space. It is an unlikely group: Nasheet Waits, drummer for Jason Moran's Bandwagon; Marc Ribot, downtown scene guitarist; two musicians unknown to me - James Zollar on trumpet and Michael Formanek - and of course Marty Ehrlich, the composer and multi-reedist for the evening. The program lists the movements of "Cartographies of Flight," each one a different configuration of musicians and poets, music and word. Ehrlich has constructed a virtual tour of jazz and poetry intersection, finding balance and variety. At times, the poets shout over a full ensemble, but often the musicians vamp atmospherically under the recitation. Alternating lines with individual musicians, the poets lead a call and response. A poem is read with no music. A piece is played with no poetry. The music is gutbucket then avant-garde, klezmer then ballad. I wonder whether Ehrlich arrived at variety as opportunity or necessity.

When I first moved to New York City in January of 2012, I began to watch local listings for jazz performances. I had been working on the topic of jazz and poetry intersection for many years, but had focused largely on recorded examples. Each week I became more amazed as I read the listings: jazz and poetry were regularly coming

together in performance. A practice that had appeared inert from Charlottesville was, in fact, quite active.

It was also quickly apparent that no cohesive movement or trend motivates these projects. The jazz scene is not experiencing another 1958 jazz-poetry fad. Even casual conversation with the musicians and poets revealed that they did not consider themselves to be connected to other texted jazz projects, nor were they even necessarily aware of the other jazz poetry intersection performances. Mentioning other such projects often brought quizzical responses, or a polite reply that acknowledged the artist without commenting on any relationship between their projects. There is not, it turns out, a jazz poetry scene in New York City.

And yet, prominent jazz musicians regularly engage in jazz and poetry intersection. Recently, generic fluidity has become normative within the jazz community. Developments in jazz's interaction with hip hop and experimentalism suggest a way of understanding the emergence of jazz poetry practice as ultimately a side effect of other currents in jazz, rather than an artistic movement in and of itself. These developments reflect jazz's shifting relationship with New York's broader cultural structures and institutions, and recent musical developments support generic mobility. But the cultural hierarchy ultimately pushes back, and jazz poetry projects are culturally and economically marginalized.[1]

Throughout this dissertation, I have touched on the entanglement of genre and race, and in this chapter, I explore this more fully. I contextualize jazz poetry's place within the broader jazz scene and aim to answer two questions. First, what developments

[1] In this chapter I use "jazz poetry" as shorthand, indicating the intersection of jazz and poetry, often but not always with the simultaneous performance of both.

in jazz have led to this flourishing yet diffuse jazz poetry practice? And second, what is the relationship between jazz poetry intersection and the broader cultural and economic landscape of New York City?

Much of my discussion of "scene" builds on Travis Jackson's work, in which he defines a "scene" as "a fluid space within which a variety of actors and institutions negotiate their relationships to each other and those outside their networks as well as the various legal structures that enable and constrain their activities."[2] These networks are ever shifting, responding to changes in the broader musical and artistic landscape, generational changes among musicians, economic factors, and innumerable other variables. As Jackson observes, "these actors and institutions form shifting alliances, negotiate the shifting boundaries of the scene—what can legitimately be considered jazz and who can legitimately be considered a participant in the scene … The jazz scene is therefore not a stable or neatly isolatable entity: its shape and constitution are constantly in flux."[3]

Close readings make up the bulk of this dissertation, but as Tamar Barzel writes about the downtown scene, "Close readings are necessary but not sufficient: the 'scene' resulted from real-time collaborations among composer-improvisers, and as such the scene had a collectively shaped character distinct from the sum of its parts."[4] Here, I analyze jazz poetry as an intersection of communities and cultural structures. Central to this discussion will be venue, one of the major constituting institutions of a scene.

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[2] Travis A. Jackson, *Blowin' the Blues Away: Performance and Meaning on the New York Jazz Scene* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 67.

[3] emphasis added Ibid., 67–8.

[4] Tamar Barzel, "The Praxis of Composition-Improvisation and the Poetics of Creative Kinship," in *Jazz/not Jazz: The Music and Its Boundaries*, 2012, 172.

Jackson establishes the importance of studying venues in his book, offering, as he puts it, a "focus not only on the people moving through and populating the scene, but also on the spaces and institutions they manipulate (and that manipulate them) in the process of making jazz."[5] Venues and other institutions play an important role in supporting (or not) the work of artists, wielding structural power in defining the boundaries of the scene.

Not only is the scene in constant flux, it is also multivalent. The view of the scene depends on where within it one stands. Disagreement about what constitutes the center and who is at the margin runs constantly through the jazz community. A drummer who one musician might call the "best drummer in New York City," elicits a "who is that guy?" from another.[6] The version of the scene offered here is necessarily my own, based on two years of concert attendance, press monitoring, conversations, and interviews.

Interspersed throughout this chapter are reflexive passages, pulled from my two years as participant/observer on the jazz scene. These fragments parallel the larger examination of the causes of jazz poetry's current flourishing and its cultural and economic marginalization. The vignettes' placement within the argument is intended to be both illustrative and evocative. I present them without explicatory framing, in part acknowledging my subjectivity in constructing the working version of the New York scene in this chapter. I am inspired here by Nathaniel Mackey's idea of the paracritical hinge, a type of writing that enables and permits "flow between statement and meta-statement, analysis and expressivity, criticism and performance, music and literature."[7] With this chapter's investment in "scene" as a unit of study, presenting the breadth of

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[5] Jackson, *Blowin' the Blues Away*, 70.

[6] Here I am paraphrasing my conversations with two different jazz musicians about a single drummer – conversations that were held on the same evening, no less.

[7] Mackey, "Paracritical Hinge," 371.

detail in the reflections emphasizes that jazz and poetry intersections are situated in intricate cultural events. Rather than totalizing a performance as a piece of evidence, these reflections provide points of dialogue with the argument, touching on the adjacent section as well as the chapter as a whole.

Still Life with Commentator and the Brooklyn Academy of Music

Early on in my research and as part of preparing for chapter two, I interviewed Vijay Iyer. During our conversation, he shared his experience of launching his second collaboration with Mike Ladd at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. His account of racialized genre policing echoed frustrations expressed by Mingus in his writings and suggested a pressing concern about genre, race, and artistic mobility. What had been a historical discourse, for me, was suddenly made present. The story serves a similar purpose in this chapter, establishing the stakes of the broader discussion to follow.

Still Life with Commentator was commissioned by, and premiered at, The Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), a long-running and prestigious performance venue located in Brooklyn's Fort Greene neighborhood. While its name might suggest a conservatory, it is rather a performance space for film, music, opera, dance, and theater. Its stated mission is "to be the home for adventurous artists, audiences, and ideas."[8] Recent performances have included a production of Henrik's Ibsen's *The Master Builder,* a performance by the Cambodian Royal Ballet, Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach,* and a collaboration between pop vocalist Erykha Badu and the Brooklyn Philharmonic.

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[8] BAM press release: http://www.bam.org/media/640282/BAM.org%20release_FINAL.pdf accessed 5/28/13

This list of performers/performances suggests a racially diverse and progressive approach. Advertisements for BAM around the city prominently feature brown bodies and faces, and artists of color appear frequently in the programing. But Vijay Iyer sees their inclusion as fundamentally contingent:

> There's this ongoing dynamic at BAM, if you look at the programming of BAM there's a lot of Europeans, a lot of white Americans, and then they'll have, like, Africans. You know, African dance and stuff. But they won't really have a lot of African Americans and Americans of color of any kind, actually. And this is true, not just of BAM, but across the United States. But they won't really, or basically if they're going to present people of color it'll be like: this is a jazz show. Or this is a…it's basically tagged by genre in a way that inhibits the mobility of the artist to do something different or innovative or whatever."[9]

As Fabian Holt writes in his study of genre in popular music, "Genre boundaries are contingent upon the social spaces in which they emerge and upon cultural practice, not just musical practice."[10] Those practices include "cultural values, rituals, practices, territories, traditions, and groups of people."[11] Race is central to the discourse of these practices, as it is in nearly every discussion of cultural practices in the United States.

Iyer and Ladd chose BAM for *Still Life* in part because of the institution's high art position. In response to my question about funding and the high art community's support (or absence thereof) for these kinds of projects, Ladd said: "In our case we were much less dictated by where we thought the money would be coming from than where we wanted to place this. And where we felt it deserved to be placed from a performative

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[9] Iyer, Interview by author.
[10] Holt, *Genre in Popular Music*, 14.
[11] Ibid., 19.

perspective, academic perspective, and just where we felt we, as people of color, belonged on an international stage, in an international context."[12]

Ladd and Iyer intentionally placed *Still Life* within a high art context, and billed the piece as an oratorio. During a conversation about influences on the work, Ladd pointedly referenced Philip Glass, situating the piece within BAM's established repertory, and explicitly drew a distinction between *Still Life* and the type of performance typical of the Nuyorican performance poetry scene, in which Ladd was also a prominent participant.

In the weeks leading up to the premiere of the work, BAM administration became concerned about the low ticket sales for the run. Iyer felt that BAM expected that because of Iyer and Ladd's identities and reputations, that they would attract a diverse audience, the "brown hordes" in Iyer's tongue-in-cheek formulation.[13] For whatever reason, this was not the case and BAM had trouble marketing the piece. While BAM is situated in Brooklyn, in an area populated largely by minorities, BAM's audience tends to be overwhelmingly white. Iyer highlights the strangeness of it in a pointed comment: "There's a BAM bus that goes from midtown Manhattan…you don't have to ride the subway, heaven forbid. Fucked up, isn't it?"[14]

Faced with low tickets sales, the people at BAM made a genre-bound decision: they asked Iyer and Ladd to retract the word "oratorio" from ads for the premiere. Iyer saw this as fundamentally a pragmatic move on the part of BAM, but one that reflected a racially-charged genre-bound resistance by BAM's audience. "They were just talking

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[12] Ladd, Interview by author.
[13] Iyer, Interview by author.
[14] Ibid.

about selling tickets. It wasn't about fuck you and your oratorio, it was really like this is causing a problem for *their* audiences, whoever those people are…basically, people don't want to buy tickets to something that's called an oratorio made by two brown guys. For whatever reason."[15]

Iyer and Ladd both felt that BAM's resistance to their preferred genre placement was racialized. Had it been a clearly jazz-oriented work with hip hop influences, they might have experienced an entirely different reception. But for Iyer and Ladd, the message, in stark terms, was that in the eyes of the BAM audience, oratorios belonged on the white side of the institution's programming—that is on the high art, classical side.

In the pages that follow, I tease apart the dense knot of cultural and economic threads that relate to the BAM premiere. The interview raised many more questions than it answered, questions that resonated through my attendance at jazz poetry performances. How did the venues shape the intersection? Where was the support for these projects coming from? How did these performers' jazz poetry performances relate to their non-poetic performances? And, perhaps most urgently, how were structures of genre and race shaping the way jazz poetry intersection functioned on the jazz scene and in the broader cultural landscape of New York City?

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[15] Ibid.

The Jazz Scene - New York City, 2014

Beginning to answer these questions about jazz poetry intersections requires a substantial side trip into the non-poetic rooms of the jazz scene. This detailed look at the scene lays the groundwork for a later discussion on the surge of jazz poetry performance. Summarizing the jazz scene is a task that could—and has—consume hundreds of pages. I offer a version of the jazz scene informed by my time as participant/observer, supplemented with press and criticism as well as recent scholarship, and focused on those facets most relevant to jazz poetry's place in the community.[16]

> *January 12, 2014 (Sunday) 12:15am - Judson Church*
> *Marc Ribot's Ceramic Dog, Winter Jazz Festival*
>
> *The audience sits cross-legged and sprawled through the main portion of the church. A standing semi-circle six or seven people deep line the back and sides of the room. Guitarist Mary Halvorson is sitting in with Ribot's trio, her normal hollow-body replaced with a Strat. The space booms with the double-guitars, equaled in volume by drummer Ches Smith's mountain of sound from his expanded kit. A few isolated but enthusiastic headbangers bring a final touch of rock. I consider leaving, ostensibly to protect my ears. I stay.*

Jazz venues are plentiful in New York City, and can be organized into a number of categories. First, there are the highest-prestige dedicated jazz clubs, at which musicians typically play a full week's run. Among these are the Village Vanguard, the Jazz Standard, Birdland, and Blue Note.[17] Jazz at Lincoln Center runs several performance spaces that are very high in prestige and ticket price. Second-tier clubs

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[16] My account is admittedly focused on live performances. For details on the recording industry as part of the scene, please see Jackson, *Blowin' the Blues Away*, 92–99.

[17] The performances spaces at Jazz at Lincoln Center also hold this prestige and price point, though the structure of those venues differs considerably.

typically have shorter runs and lower covers; current examples include Smalls Jazz Club and Fat Cat. Concert halls and galleries also often host jazz concerts. Town Hall and Carnegie Hall are two prominent examples, but many smaller venues offer a concert-style experience. These are often run by jazz-boosting non-profit organizations, such as the Jazz Gallery, which aims to nurture young professional jazz musicians.

Jazz also makes frequent appearances in venues—like Cornelia Street Café or Barbès—that host a variety of genres of music as well as other modes of performance like theater or spoken word. Roulette, in Brooklyn, hosts primarly experimental new music, including the avant-garde jazz-oriented Vision Festival. Le Poisson Rouge (in the space formerly occupied by the famed Village Gate) is another cross-genre venue, presenting everything from electro-acoustic music to rock. Many of the museums in the city offer occasional musical performances, and there are an overwhelming number of spaces that offer live jazz as accompaniment to food and drink.

January 9, 2014 (Friday) 9:30pm – Le Poisson Rouge
Revive Big Band, Winter Jazz Festival

Dr. Lonnie Smith has the whole room moving. The venerable Hammond player joins the Revive Big Band for their final few tunes. The room has been cleared of tables, and the energetic crowd makes full use of the dance space. Revive Big Band hits every tune hard, focusing on grooves and beats, playing with tightness and vitality. I'm not sure who I was expecting to lead an ensemble called "Revive Big Band," but Igmar Thomas is not it. Young, African-American, dressed in hip hop style, Thomas seems unsurprised by the audience's thrilled reactions. Again and again he announces his drummer's name, calling him the core of the band. The DJ who had been playing music before the set started comes down to rap with the band.

To establish the current stylistic traits of the jazz scene, I will be leaning on the January 2014 Winter Jazz Festival. For two "marathon" nights, between six and nine venues in Greenwich Village host an enormous number of jazz performances, and the 2014 event included three opening concerts on the three nights preceding the marathon nights. Now in its tenth year, the festival coincides with two important industry conferences in the city: the Association of Performing Arts Presenters and its jazz-specific branch, Jazz Connect. Winter Jazz Festival and the APAP have a mutually beneficial relationship - artists have the opportunity to play for a concentration of the industry members who can help forward their careers, and those industry members, in turn, can take in an enormous amount of music in a short time, catching up on the scene and scouting for rising stars. As the leader of the Revive Big Band told his audience at one of the opening concerts, "You want to hear us again, right? Well tell those people who can make that happen. And I think that (laughs) a few of them are here tonight." The lineup for the WJF serves well as a microcosm of the New York City jazz scene. As New York Times critic Nate Chinen wrote, the festival's "aesthetic tacks hard toward current ground conditions."[18]

January 11, 2014 (Saturday) 8:45pm – Groove
Jeff Ballard Trio, Winter Jazz Festival

"Yeah, that drummer was good, but wait until you hear this next guy." Overhearing this between sets, I decide to stick around. The long narrow room is packed with noisy, enthusiastic fans. Only knowing Ballard's work with Brad Mehldau, I am a

[18] Nate Chinen, "Celebrating Blue Note Records at Town Hall," *The New York Times*, January 9, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/10/arts/music/celebrating-blue-note-records-at-town-hall.html.

little perplexed by the crowd—young, white, almost exclusively male, they fit Nate Chinen's tongue-in-cheek "jazzbro" moniker.[19]

Ballard's playing clarifies all. Powerhouse but lithe, he locks into energetic grooves with his guitarist and tenor saxophonist bandmates. Unquestionably in the jazz mainstream, but with enough adventurous stylistic wanderings to avoid sounding like a repertory group.

Neoclassicism is the only branch of the jazz scene not well-represented at the Winter Jazz Festival. Emerging initially in the 1980s and 1990s, led by Wynton Marsalis and critic Stanley Crouch, the movement settled in at Jazz at Lincoln Center and is supported by some of the midtown jazz clubs that feature primarily the type of jazz indicated by the "traditionalists." Some speculate that the prescriptive and stylistically narrow approach of these men has galvanized the rest of jazz as more accepting of divergent styles.[20] Reflecting on the state of the avant-garde, Bill Shoemaker observed that, "when someone who is a demagogue, or who can be easily tarred as one, champions the mainstream, it only takes one user-friendly alternative like [Dave] Douglas for the mainstream median to be permanently moved."[21]

For decades, experimentalism held a boundary position within jazz; but as Shoemaker writes, "In 2000, the avant-garde is off the ropes. Avant-garde musicians are the recipients of genius grants and tenured university posts; they perform in the world's great concert halls; the recording industry that once ignored them and the media that once

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[19] Nate Chinen, "The Gig—Behold the Jazzbro," *JazzTimes*, July 18, 2013, http://jazztimes.com/articles/96825-the-gig-behold-the-jazzbro.

[20] More than perhaps anywhere else in jazz, the word "men" is accurate here. For some analysis on gender at Jazz at Lincoln Center, see Lara Pellegrinelli, "Dig Boy Dig: Jazz at Lincoln Center Breaks New Ground, but Where Are the Women?," *The Village Voice*, November 7, 2000, http://www.villagevoice.com/2000-11-07/news/dig-boy-dig/.

[21] Bill Shoemaker, "The Genres: Bill Shoemaker on Avant-Garde," *JazzTimes*, September 2000, http://jazztimes.com/articles/20296-the-genres-bill-shoemaker-on-avant-garde.

vilified them now court them." The core of mainstream jazz is shifting, partially in response to neoclassicism but also as a function of avant-gardism, the leading edge becoming folded into the stylistic vocabulary of a new generation.

January 10, 2014 (Friday) 8pm - NYU Law School Lounge
Ches Smith Trio, Winter Jazz Festival

The lounge has been cleared of most of the furniture, leaving just chandeliers, drapery, and portraits of white men on the walls. The audience mills, uncertain whether to sit or stand. The pianist Craig Taborn and violist Mat Maneri join the young drummer Ches Smith, all three known to swing toward the progressive end of the scene. The large room fills with a sizable crowd.

Smith's pieces flow from one to the next, a structure in place but not one governed by traditional jazz forms. Taborn plays on the inside the piano, Maneri bows Bergian lines and flourishes, Smith playing chimes, bells, and gongs, along with his kit. At times, something resembling a walking line ruptures through the atonal and ametrical texture, only to disappear moments later. Quirky grooves emerge, fade. The set ends with relentless intensification into an ear-shattering measured roll on the tom tom with erratic accents, finally evaporating in bells and harmonics.

January 11, 2014 (Saturday) 10pm - Judson Church
Henry Threadgill's "Ensemble Double-Up," Winter Jazz Festival

As the only ensemble to play more than one set at Winter Jazz Fest, Henry Threadgill's group fills the large sanctuary for both sets. But unlike the dance party I had just left at Groove, the air here is reverent. Threadgill is premiering a new piece, honoring his friend and colleague Lawrence "Butch" Morris, who had died the past year.

Threadgill doesn't play a note, sitting on a stool at the front of the stage, listening to the work unfold, occasionally jumping up to conduct a passage, a change in dynamic or ensemble or some other unknown vector. Jason Moran and David Virelles frame the stage on two pianos, their improvisations interlocking in

contemplative spirit. An admiring audience sits scattered on the floor, some sprawling prone. All listen intently, or perform intent listening. I think about Morris, about how I wish I had heard him perform, how many people I talk to cite him as a pivotal figure for their art. Threadgill brings his ensemble to a joyful, noisy, crashing close.

Several original members of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (or AACM) are still active in the New York City area, though their performances tend to be bracketed as lifetime achievement celebrations or other events honoring their increasingly past-tense contributions.[22] The later downtown scene, which was heavily influenced by the AACM and "their catholic approach to genre, their attention to African American music writ large, and their unorthodox fusions of composition with improvisation," also holds a continued prominence on the scene.[23]

But the experimental and avant-garde appears in the younger generations of musicians as well, under the stylistic label "progressive" jazz.[24] Here, the idea of the avant-garde as a true "advance guard" seems to have held true, the free jazz and other "out" work of the 1960s and 1970s having opened an aesthetic that is now integrated into the broader jazz frame. The younger musicians do not simply reproduce the style of the avant-garde, rather they have folded these techniques into a broader aesthetic that draws

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[22] The Vision Festival honors a foundational experimentalist on the opening night of each festival; in 2013 they recognized free jazz drummer Milford Graves. Friends of AACM founding member Joseph Jarmon hold an annual birthday celebration concert in his honor, in 2013 hosted at Shapeshifter Lab in Brooklyn. Muhal Richard Abrams, another AACM founder, has been honored nearly every year, and in 2013 he held an evening-length concert at Roulette, premiering a new composition.

[23] Barzel, "The Praxis of Composition-Improvisation and the Poetics of Creative Kinship," 177.; John Zorn maintains a strong hand in the scene through his artistic direction of The Stone, and Mary Ehrlich plays actively as both bandleader and sideman.

[24] In keeping with the practice of the majority of jazz criticism and scholarship, I am using avant-garde to refer to a group of musicians and an aesthetic that emerging from free jazz (or "the New Thing"), while I tend to use the word experimentalism to refer more to the artistic stance of the AACM and related organizations, as well as to the broader stance.

on the entire jazz tradition. Beyond this aesthetic inheritance, experimentalism as a stance also shapes the current scene, particularly at the fringe venues Roulette and The Stone.[25]

January 8, 2014 (Wednesday) 8pm - Town Hall
Robert Glasper and Jason Moran

"You go ahead now, Robert!" the person sitting next to me calls encouragingly to the stage, where Robert Glasper has just dug into a piano solo. At the 75th anniversary concert for Blue Note Records, the historic room is loose and happy. Glasper and Moran hold court from the stage, talking sneakers and record dates between thrilling piano duets. Moran's soulful modernism weaves into Glasper's Monk-infused R&B (or is it R&B infused Monk?). This night celebrates a classic jazz label, and yet seems unconcerned with genre. Eric Harland brings a hefty dose of hip hop to the drum kit, Ravi Coltrane spins virtuosic saxophone solos, and Bilal—a vocalist often featured on hip hop tracks—sings a breathtaking Body and Soul. In a performance of Ellington's phrase "beyond category," the whole of Town Hall was having a good time, taking what came next, be it boogie-woogie or neo-soul.

Hybridity practically defines jazz; its musicians have drawn stylistically from a wide range of musics throughout the genre's history. Particularly noticeable right now is the influence of hip hop, R&B, and rock. R&B makes its most obvious appearance in the records of vocalists like Gregory Porter and Robert Glasper, but instrumentalists also display the influence. Rock's presence in jazz is nothing new, dating back to the 1970s, but it has a continued vitality as it blends with the multitude other strains in current jazz. Much of it is related to the downtown scene, part continuation (Marc Ribot's Ceramic

[25] In his *Experimentalism Otherwise,* Benjamin Piekut usefully sums up the characteristics commonly associated with experimentalism, including: "fluid processes instead of static objects; antiteleological procedures instead of goal-driven works; new roles for composers, performers, and listeners instead of the hierarchies of traditional art music; notation as a set of actions rather than as a representation of sound…an ontology that foregrounds performance over writing…an expansion of the concept of music; an attenuation of intention; an openness to non-Western musics and philosophies; a mission to liberate sounds, stress timber and rhythm over melody, and explore different tuning systems; an avoidance of stylistic continuity; and a contempt for large orchestral forms and concert halls."

Dog ensemble) and part extension (Rudresh Mahanthappa's Gamak that blends rock sensibility with South Asian music and progressive jazz).

Encounters between hip hop and jazz have shaped both genres since the 1980s, particularly in drum technique and the jazz-rap fusions of the 1990s. But hip hop's biggest current influence on the jazz scene is a refocusing on rhythm and beatmaking. In an article about J Dilla's impact on jazz, Robert Glasper is quoted as saying, "we'll play a Dilla beat for literally an hour [in rehearsal], because it feels so good…I'd rather repeat something for 30 minutes than solo for 30 minutes. A lot of jazz musicians don't have that mentality, [but] my band loves just to make beats."[26] Other bands show the influence as well; take the unlikely example of The Bad Plus, a trio known more for their rock and classical influences than hip hop. But in "Seven Minute Mind," from their 2012 release *Made Possible*, the band digs into a repetitive groove with a strong backbeat suggestive of hip hop production.

January 11, 2014 (Saturday) 11:30pm - Le Poisson Rouge
Big Chief Donald Harrison & Congo Square Nation, Winter Jazz Festival

Coming down the stairs, I can hear that Harrison has a full room. It is towards the end of his set, and I squeeze into the packed, dancing crowd. Two Marti Gras Indians dance on stage while Harrison's band plays a rowdy version of "Iko Iko" mixed with west-African drumming. The crowd roars when he finishes, showing no signs of quieting as the musicians turn to leave the stage. Harrison grabs the microphone and says, "You all like the funk?" The crowd's "YEAH!" launches an encore. The band kicks in, and immediately the crowd's energy changes. Harrison's funk had a decidedly smooth orientation, and the audience deflates. After we

[26] Giovanni Russonello, "Why J Dilla May Be Jazz's Latest Great Innovator," *A Blog Supreme - from NPR Jazz*, February 7, 2013, http://www.npr.org/blogs/ablogsupreme/2013/02/07/171349007/why-j-dilla-may-be-jazzs-latest-great-innovator.

politely sway through the tune, the MC for the evening takes the mic, thanks Harrison, and says, "I guess New York just isn't that funky."

January 12, 2014 (Saturday) 11:15pm - Outside Judson Church
Winter Jazz Festival, between sets

I hover awkwardly near the entrance, scanning the program trying to decide what to do. I watch Threadgill take in accolades from friends.
An uncomfortable interaction upstairs had driven me outside. "So, how does someone like YOU get into Threadgill?"
A departing acquaintance gives me a quizzical look and a wave from afar as he leaves. Thinking back to the room upstairs, I move on to another venue, hoping for better luck there.

Stylistic approaches and venues may have shifted over the years, but one aspect of the scene seems nearly immovable: jazz remains an extremely homosocial space. The performers were exclusively male in the vast majority of performances I attend. Audiences tend to be male-dominant, especially in the downtown clubs that are less tourist-oriented. Although a man attending a show alone is common, in fact pervasive, unaccompanied women are rare. The homosociality of jazz has little direct impact on the argument of this chapter, and yet it has been an undercurrent throughout this ethnography.

Locating Jazz Poetry Intersection on the Scene

During the jazz poetry fad of the late 1950s, the trendy format took center stage on the jazz scene, featured at venues like the Half Note, the Five Spot, and the Village Vanguard. Poetry was, suddenly, unavoidable. Nearly as abruptly, the fad passed and

poetry has been peripheral, at best, ever since. But if not at central jazz venues, where does jazz poetry live now, and how does it relate to the broader scene?

Choosing which performances, works, and performers to include in my survey of jazz poetry in New York City has proven a slippery project. As in the rest of this dissertation, the specter of jazz's definition hovered around my choices. Did the performances themselves need to sound like jazz (whatever that means)? Take place in a jazz venue? Be identified as jazz by the participants? Involve artists who otherwise identify (or are identified by others) as jazz musicians?

The rubric for inclusion I settled on required simply that the performance have some connection to the jazz scene—either that the musician involved be known to me from the scene, that it take place at a jazz venue, or that the performance somehow identify itself as jazz. I am not claiming that the musical components of the works I have included are, in some way, stylistically definable as jazz.

Table 4.1 provides a list of selected performances considered in my discussion of jazz and poetry intersection in New York City. It is by no means comprehensive and completely ignores performances by part-time and amateur musicians. The majority of the pieces are from mid-2013 through early 2014, when I was most active in attending performances.

A glance through the table shows that many of the participating musicians have at least one foot in the core of jazz. Jason Moran, Vijay Iyer, and David Virelles are among the most well-respected pianists on the scene. Chris Potter and Gerald Clayton are each solidly within a mainstream conception of jazz style. Milford Graves, Marty Ehrlich, and

Primary Musician(s)	Poet	Piece/Event	Date	Venue
Edith Lettner	Steve Dalachinsky	*Dialogues*	February 4, 2014	Cornelia Street Café
Uri Caine, Theo Bleckman	Spoken word arist??	*Dichterliebe*	January 23, 2014	The Stone
William Parker	David Budbill		October 12, 2013	The Stone
Marty Ehrlich		"A Trumpet in the Morning	November 15, 2013	The Stone
Vijay Iyer	Teju Cole, Himanshu Suri	*Open City*	October 5, 2013	Monclair State University
Patrick Cornelius	A.A. Milne	*While We're Still Young*	December 14, 2013	Jazz Gallery
Muhal Richard Abrams		*Dialogue Social*	September 26, 2013	Roulette
Connie Crothers	Steve Dalachinsky	"Vocal-ease" at Vision Fest	June 14, 2013	Roulette
Milford Graves	Amiri Baraka	Vision Festival	June 12, 2013	Roulette
Andy Milne	John Moon		June 14, 2013	Jazz Gallery
Mary Ehrlich	E. Hunt, C. Bernstein	*Cartographies of Flight*	May 31, 2013	Tribeca Arts Center
Lawrence Hobgood	Robert Pinsky	POEMJAZZ	January 13, 2013	Le Poisson Rouge
Karl Berger	Ingrid Sertso	Improviser's Orchestra	December 7, 2013	El Taller
Chris Potter	Homer	*The Sirens*	February 6, 2013	Village Vanguard
David Virelles	Roman Diaz	Continuum	January 30, 2013	Village Vanguard
Roy Nathanson		Sotto Voce	January 11, 2013	The Bitter End
Roy Nathanson	Various	Stone Residency	September 2012	The Stone
Alexis Cuadrado	Federico Garcia Lorca	*A Lorca Soundscape*	February 21, 2013	92Y Tribeca
Laura Kapman, Jesse Norman	Langston Hughes	*Ask Your Mama*	March 23, 2013	Apollo Theater
Vijay Iyer	M. Ladd, M. Decaul, L. Hill	*Holding it Down*	September 19, 2012	The Harlem Stage
Jason Moran		*TRC vs. AACM*	May 10, 2012	The Whitney Museum
Jason Moran, Joan Jonas	Lorca		May 11, 2012	The Whitney Museum
Jason Moran	Kara Walker	*Improvisation with Mutually Assured Destruction*	May 11, 2012	The Whitney Museum
Jason Moran	Asali Solomon	*LIVE:TIME*	May 13, 2012	The Whitney Museum
Jason Moran + Trio 3	Oliver Lake	"Breakin' Glass"	2013	Intakt Records
Gerald Clayton	Carl Hancock Rux	"Life Forum"	2013	Concord Jazz
Sam Sadigursky	Various	*Words Project IV*	2013	New Amsterdam
Rome Neal	Various	Rome Neal's Banana Puddin'	Ongoing	Nuyorican Poets Cafe
John Hollenbeck	Kenneth Patchen	*What is Beautiful*	2011	Cuneiform Records

Table 4.1 Select Jazz and Poetry performances and recordings, 2012-2014

William Parker are all associated with the avant-garde, but with the shift of the core of jazz toward "out," these musicians are themselves included in the core.

Many of the listed musicians often play at top-tier clubs with their other projects, but when it comes to jazz poetry the performances tend to be at peripheral venues. The first-tier jazz clubs are noticeably absent from the list: only the Village Vanguard appears, and the projects there have had the most veiled relationship with the poetry. The Chris Potter project was inspired by The Odyssey, but no poetry was actually performed in the piece. David Virelles's run at the Village Vanguard featured poet/percussionist Roman Diaz. Diaz's role in the ensemble is complex; *New York Times* critic Ben Ratliff describes him as "a kind of drum-and-voice integrated hybrid: conga playing, chanting singing, rhythmic poetry." Diaz's poetry is in Spanish and Afro-Cuban languages and is, for much of the audience, more sonic than linguistic.

The Stone makes frequent appearances on the list, as does Roulette, both spaces associated with the avant-garde. Cornelia Street Cafe is a quirky member of the fringe venues—the preferred home of some well-known jazz players like John Hollenbeck, but also host to regular poetry readings and other artistic events. Perhaps most interesting is the smattering of spaces not necessarily on the jazz circuit at all: The Harlem Stage, Tribeca Arts Center, The Whitney Museum, and The Apollo Theater.

In the jazz poetry field, then, central musicians play at peripheral venues. The discourse of core and boundaries is not just an aesthetic one; it is also a structuring of power. Often these concepts map fairly straightforwardly, as Christopher Washburne describes in his work on Latin jazz: "I am conceiving of the center as a location of

empowerment, authority, and privileges (imagined and real) in terms of economics, nationalism, or cultural capital, while the periphery is a marginal location of a somewhat disempowered difference and alterity."[27] It is unclear, however, that Jason Moran's residency at the Whitney Biennial, for example, involves any kind of loss of power—cultural, economic, imagined, or real—a point I will take up again later in the chapter.

January 13, 2013 (Sunday) 10pm – Le Poisson Rouge
Robert Pinsky and Lawrence Hobgood

LPR draws a range of crowds, but from scanning the line at the door, it is clear I am in the right place: tote bags, tweed, sport coats. I am there to see poet Robert Pinsky with pianist Lawrence Hobgood, and the academic crowd has come out in force. Filing past the gruff bouncer, the line proceeds down the glam black stairwell. I watch as recognition and greetings passed between many of my fellow audience members. I wonder how Hobgood's playing with Pinksy will differ from what I'd seen him do as Kurt Elling's long-term accompanist. The two men take the stage, the meek applause of the small audience making for a lukewarm welcome. Pinsky announces that the performance is based on their recent recording, POEMJAZZ, and with a nod to Hobgood, starts in.

At first, I cringe. Hobgood's light, melodic playing and Pinsky's stilted delivery immediately remind me of Steve Allen playing with Jack Kerouac. But as they continue, I hear that Pinsky's words aren't stilted - they are rhythmic, and melodic. He is listening to Hobgood, and adjusting. At times humorous, at others rich with dense allusion, the poetry keeps the audience on its toes. Pinsky luxuriates in the varied textures of his verse, heightening the play of sound. Yes, Hobgood is background, but his is a sensitive, responsive background. The hour-long performance flies by, the audience applauding more vigorously at each interval.

On the cab ride home, I wonder about all the unrecorded performances in the clubs downtown in the 1950s, and whether I might have sold short the accomplishments of that era, judging live performances by their recorded simulacrum.

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[27] Christopher J. Washburne, "Latin Jazz, Afro-Latin Jazz, Afro-Cuban Jazz, Cubop, Caribbean Jazz, Jazz Latin, or Just...jazz: The Politics of Locating an Intercultural Music," in *Jazz/not Jazz: The Music and Its Boundaries*, 2012, 103.

Some current jazz poetry echoes the recordings of the late 1950s, in approach as well as the general sound-worlds of the works. In these cases the music falls squarely into the mainstream of jazz, stylistically reminiscent of the Beats-era music. The poet recites his verse, seemingly unaffected by the music, and the musicians take an accompanimental stance, mirroring the text/music dynamic of that first flood of recordings by Kenneth Patchen, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Jack Kerouac.

The Beats' use of jazz is often characterized as appropriative or even exploitative of African American expressive culture. John Gennari and Ingrid Monson, among others, have thoughtfully analyzed the figure of the white jazz fan/hipster/critic, and within that discourse jazz poetry can be understood in part as a bid for inclusion in jazz's hipness. [28] But jazz's cultural capital of cool has long faded; the majority of jazz listeners are now white, middle-class, and middle-aged, and the genre hardly carries the same indexed hipness that it once did. Yet jazz poetry persists. What drives this surprising volume of jazz poetry in New York City? Why, in 2014, is poetry such a presence on (or next to) the jazz scene? Broader trends in jazz, especially the influence of hip hop and experimentalism, can help explain the prevalence of these projects.

As discussed earlier, hip hop is a prominent musical influence on the scene, but in jazz poetry, hip hop's impact is even more direct. Rap is, among other things, an aestheticized use of spoken language. The heightened speech focuses attention on rhythm and rhyme, the play of the sound of language and the relation of this sound to a musical structure. Regardless of whether hip hop lyricism is poetry (a discussion that I am side-

[28] Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics*; Monson, "The Problem with White Hipness."

stepping entirely) the practice has unquestionably carved out a new space for aestheticized spoken language in expressive culture. Growing up in the "hip hop generation" meant being in a mass culture environment that not only listened for the rhythm and rhyme of spoken language, but did so as a musical practice.

June 14, 2013 (Friday) 9pm – Jazz Gallery at Salt Space
Andy Milne and DAPP Theory

I stand at the corner of 27th St and Broadway for several minutes, looking around for any sign of the venue. Finally I see an open, unmarked door, with a man sitting behind a small handwritten sign. "You here for the show?" Yes. "Take the elevator to the fifth floor." On the fifth floor I find a fairly small white room, enough seating for roughly seventy people in rows of folding chairs. Jazz-themed paintings adorn the walls. A few other audience members stream in. The crowd is sparse, young, and friendly. We greet DAPP Theory warmly, as Milne sits at the piano, his ensemble of multi-reedist, bass, and drums settle into their places. Poet John Moon stands to the side of the stage.

Milne's group tears energetically through his compositions, complex multi-part structures with a deep groove orientation, layered with inventive melody. The audience bobs along, hooting their appreciation. Midway through nearly every tune, Moon steps to the front. With the flow on an MC, he races through abstract lyrics. The band doesn't back off their intensity, but finds vamps that support Moon, treating the rhythm of his voice like an instrumental soloist, responding and coaxing. The free-styling sound is familiar, full of rhymes both internal and line ending, but the content of the poetry has me shaking my head. Even at the outer edges of hip hop I have not heard lyrics that are so blatantly abstract.

I speak briefly with Milne and Moon on my way out, the crowd is so small it would have been awkward not to say hello. Moon characterizes his lyrics as "ninety percent improvised," built on some basic imagery he pre-planned for each tune. I buy a CD and headed for the train, eager to compare.

Today's younger generation of jazz performers grew up with hip hop as a prominent part of mass expressive culture, and many of the musicians I have spoken with (formally and informally) listened as fans. Generations of jazz musicians have been fans of poetry, or poets themselves, but this is the first group to have aestheticized spoken word as part of their musical vocabulary.[29] I believe that this generational shift has led to some of the increasingly creative and nuanced use of spoken word in jazz and poetry intersection. As the hip hop generation matriculates into the jazz mainstream, so too does a new kind of listening for the artistic potential of poetry in musical performance.

The aesthetics that emerged from experimentalist practices in and alongside the jazz community have had broad music-stylistic resonance, but experimentalism as an artistic stance has had a more specific impact on jazz and poetry intersection. As Benjamin Piekut wrote, "To explain what experimentalism has been, one must attend to its fabrication through a network of discourses, practices, and institutions. This formation is the result of the combined labor of scholars, composers, critics, journalists, patrons, performers, venues, and the durative effects of discourses of race, gender, nation, and class. The continuing performance of this network—and not an experimental 'ethos' or 'spirit'—explains the extension of experimentalism through time."[30] Part of that network's work has been in crossing, if not breaking down, boundaries between artistic

[29] A case could be made here for the talking blues as an exception to this assertion; however, not a single musician I have spoken with has cited the talking blues as something they have listened to, much less an influence on their work.

[30] Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 7.

modalities. Musicians often collaborate with artists or experiment with other modalities themselves.[31]

Just as today's young jazz musicians grew up with hip hop in their ears, experimentalist intermedia work has been ever-present for them. To include poetry in one's performance is to engage in an established (if fringe) practice, not to break new ground. There is a precedent for this kind of work, and that is largely thanks to the experimentalists.

> *June 12, 2013 - Roulette, 10pm*
> *NY HeArt Ensemble, Vision Festival 18*
>
> *Amiri Baraka is performing: "At the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, there is a railroad made of human bones." Stooped at the microphone, his recitation is as vivid and cutting as ever, his "oom boom ba boom" resonating through the lofty room. Milford Graves, the honoree of the evening, accompanies him on his drums, an oft-performed dialogue. The room is electric with energy, filled with veterans from the Black Arts movement and fans of the avant-garde, young and old. The night has a reunion feel - Roswell Rudd joins the performance to appreciative whoops, thanking Graves for influencing him back in 1963. They end with a roaring "Play Dat," Baraka yelling the poem's refrain over the full ensemble.*

The older generation not only influences today's younger musicians by their artistic example, they also offer direct mentorship. Apprenticeship relationships have a long history in jazz, helping younger musicians learn both musical skills and the pragmatics of navigating the scene.[32] As the experimentalists become the scene's elders, they pass their ideas and ideologies on to the next generation. Henry Threadgill, founding member of the AACM, has had a particularly powerful mentoring presence among the

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[31] For a useful analysis of intermedia work among jazz experimentalists, see: Steinbeck, "Intermusicality, Humor, and Cultural Critique in the Art Ensemble of Chicago's 'A Jackson in Your House.'"

[32] For a detailed description of this, see Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz : The Infinite Art of Improvisation*, 38–41.

musicians on my list of jazz and poetry performers. Vijay Iyer, Jason Moran, and David Virelles have all worked with Threadgill, and Moran and Virelles performed with his ensemble at the most recent Winter Jazz Festival. During Virelles's run at the Village Vanguard in 2013, Threadgill made a one-set appearance.

Genre policing within a racial discourse has always been a part of jazz, but the groundbreaking work of the AACM and similar organizations has helped establish a more fluid relationship between jazz and the cultural hierarchy of New York City. The discursive shift of jazz from popular to art music has many facets, but experimentalism's contribution is particularly pertinent to jazz and poetry intersection.

In Chicago, the AACM's founding members created the group from a standpoint of fundamental hybridity and generic mobility. George Lewis quotes member Lester Bowie on the matter: "We're free to express ourselves in any so-called idiom, to draw from any source, to deny any limitation. We weren't restricted to bebop, free jazz, Dixieland, theater or poetry. We could put it all together. We could sequence it any way we felt like it. It was entirely up to us."[33] Members quickly found that the genre mobility they embraced was best served by a concert music performance organization. "Production values for the early events were guided by the goal of creating 'an atmosphere conducive to serious music,' including concert-style seating, the printing and distribution of advertising, attempts to obtain appearances on radio, advance ticket sales, and overall stage and venue management."[34] One of the AACM's fundamental challenges to conventional constructions of both the jazz and art music worlds came from the

[33] George E. Lewis, "Experimental Music in Black and White: The AACM in New York, 1970-1985," in *Uptown Conversation :The New Jazz Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 51.
[34] Ibid., 56.

privileging of the collective over the individual. "'The organization' as it was commonly called, constituted the foundation of an 'atmosphere' that was crucial to the nurturing of creative difference within collectivity."[35]

When various AACM members moved to New York City, seeking the culturally rich opportunities the city offered, they encountered the many boundaries at the intersections of genre and race that the city's various critics, musicians, and audiences had erected. While the city's white experimental "downtown" artists were easily afforded the reverence of the press, the black experimentalists were often restricted by generic limitations, informed by assumptions about what race meant about their music. They were either assumed to be a part of a jazz tradition or criticized for **not** being a part of the jazz tradition. As in Chicago, they sought out performance spaces more suited to their work, but found it difficult. Lewis notes, "the supposed obligation to perform in clubs began to appear as a kind of unwanted surveillance of the black creative body."[36] AACM members also faced criticism for their usage of styles and ideas from Western art music, heard as a rejection of their African American cultural "roots" and/or aspirational appropriation. But to the musicians, this was a non-issue, and the European tradition offered just one more type of music to draw upon. As Lewis writes,

> For these musicians pan-European contemporary music was not a distant, disembodied influence, nor was it something to be feared, avoided, or worshipped. Rather, musicians articulated participation across genres, as well as exchanges of musical methods. Advancing a notion of hybridity and mobility across and through media, traditions, and materials meant not only the freedom to

[35] Ibid., 58.
[36] Ibid., 69.

> draw from a potentially infinite number of musical sources but also the freedom to explore a diverse array of infrastructures and modes of presentation.[37]

The inclusion of "media" in this description by Lewis is especially pertinent, as it points to AACM members' frequent embrace of text, both poetry and prose, in their works. In addition to their cross-generic mobility they moved across the arts with ease, without even necessarily acknowledging that a boundary was being transgressed. Text lay on a fluid spectrum of sound that included music, easing the text/music divide. Collectivity also contributed to the prevalence of texted projects; when poets were included in the collective, they were simply another member to make art with, rather than some distant collaborator with whom negotiations would be needed.

Overall, the AACM's cultural work problematized the established understanding of divisions within New York City's art world(s). As Lewis notes about changes at the venue The Kitchen under his direction, "The new hybridity reflected in the Kitchen's programming was part of an emerging challenge to journalistic, critical, social, and historical discourses that presented as entirely natural the musical separation of black and white, low and high, uptown and downtown, popular and serious, 'Music' and 'Riffs.'"[38] The AACM's groundbreaking work has been underrepresented in the critical and cultural discourse, and despite the challenges they brought to the barriers, many of them still stand. Still, the group's work has subtly shifted the understandings of what spaces there are for artists of color working in experimental modes in New York City. As George Lewis writes, "The example of the AACM has been central to the coming canonization

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[37] Ibid., 67.

[38] Ibid., 81. The Village Voice's review columns were titled "Music" for the art music reviews and "Riffs" for jazz.

not of a new musical aesthetic with defined borders but of a new kind of musician who works across genres with fluidity, grace, discernment, and trenchancy. After nearly forty years of a living AACM presence, the significance of what these new musicians have done up to now, as well as what they might create in the future is only now beginning to be understood."[39]

Many of the musicians from Table 4.1 qualify as this new type of musician, perhaps especially Jason Moran and Vijay Iyer. But nearly all of the musicians have benefitted from a more fluid cultural hierarchy and less focus on restrictive genre categories. For one, the identity of composer-improviser is now pervasive. Perhaps more than ever, the scene is made up of "casual connections and confrontations" not only among musical worlds but across artistic spheres.[40]

These connections and confrontations emerge from intersections of communities, a matter Vijay Iyer has spoken about repeatedly. In an interview for the *New York Times* blog India Ink he said, "People think of it as a genre but for the community of artists there's really no such thing. That's sort of been my experience working with elders from that heritage and from that history. But it's always been a space for collaboration and creation that is irrespective of marketplace notions of genre."[41] And in another essay he wrote, "We don't play 'in a genre'; we play in the context of others, and we find ways to play with each other."[42]

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[39] Ibid., 91.
[40] Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise*, 5.
[41] Visi Tilak, "A Conversation With: Jazz Pianist Vijay Iyer," *India Ink from The New York Times*, October 31, 2013, http://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/10/31/a-conversation-with-jazz-pianist-vijay-iyer/.
[42] Vijay Iyer, "New York Stories," *Red Bull Music Academy Magazine*, May 16, 2013, http://www.redbullmusicacademy.com/magazine/new-york-stories-vijay-iyer.

September 19, 2012 (Wednesday) 7:30pm - Harlem Stage at the Gatehouse
Vijay Iyer and Mike Ladd, "Holding it Down"

I chat with my seat mate—she is a choreographer who has presented works at the Gatehouse. She calls it a powerful but challenging space. As the lights dim, several official-looking people come up front. For fifteen minutes we hear about The Harlem Stage, the upcoming season, the education events; we are encouraged to donate and invited to a wine and cheese reception after the performance. I skim the program, noting the inclusion of the printed poetry.
Iyer, Ladd, and their ensemble take the stage and Iyer opens the piece with a low tremolo, setting a sombre tone for the performance. For the next hour and a half, we listen to Ladd's reflections on the dreams of veterans of color returning from war. The poetry flits in and out of narrative and Ladd shifts his delivery from soft-spoken to raucous. The music is groove-based, but challenging. Two veterans join the ensemble on the stage, performing their own poems, bringing flesh to the memories of war. It is moving, troubling, and beautiful.
After the rousing applause, the audience shuffles out for the reception. Mingling, I learn that many of the other attendees are season ticket holders at Harlem Stage, not necessarily jazz fans, but supporters of the mission of the organization. The reception has a formal but community-minded feel.

Supporting Jazz Poetry Intersection

Artists have to make rent, too, and jazz poetry does not fare well in the entertainment economy of the mainstream jazz clubs, nor do the recordings of these projects sell in high numbers. As Marty Ehrlich told me, about his own piece, "It's not exactly commercial." This is not a new situation for jazz musicians pushing against generic conventions. Following bebop's rise, musicians struggled to make a living in club culture, as detailed here Scott DeVeaux: "jazz performance was pushed to the periphery of the music industry. Jazz nightclubs, springing up like mushrooms in major cities (and vanishing just as rapidly), functioned as sudden surrogates for the concert hall, lacking

the social prestige and economic subsidy that automatically accrues to the European art tradition."[43] Bernard Gendron sees the beboppers' relationship with cultural hierarchy as an early postmodern turn. He frames the relationship between musicians and established institutions as fundamentally different from other challenges to high/low transgressions:

> Deciphering the transition from modernism to postmodernism in high/low engagements requires a significant shift in focus and perhaps methodology. In modernism such crossings of the divide took place along many registers, in music and critical discourse, of course, but also along institutional frontiers (the artistic cabaret, Le Boeuf sur le Toit) and in the slumming and secondary aesthetic practices of artist-bohemians. In contrast, for the post-modern turn, discourse was necessarily the dominant medium in enabling popular music initially to connect with, and appropriate, avant-garde concepts and practices…In the mid-1940s, jazz did not yet posses sufficient cultural credentials to draw high art into joint institutional ventures (e.g. a jazz club/art gallery), nor given its cultural vulnerability was it necessarily desirable for it to do so. And what could it have meant for bebop musicians to generate secondary aesthetic practices by 'slumming' in high-cultural haunts?"[44]

May 11, 2012 (Friday) 6:30pm - Whitney Museum of American Art
Jason Moran and Joan Jonas

The cavernous main room on the fourth floor of the Whitney Museum of American Art is filled with black folding chairs, a large stage at the inside wall. I don't recognize anyone in the audience, but feel like I should. It is a remarkably mixed crowd - an even blend of ages and races. Fashion is on display. On the stage is Jason Moran with his Bandwagon and, behind a table of little instruments, Joan Jonas. A jittery video of fields, skies, plays on a large backdrop. Moran improvises, seemingly responding to the rhythm of the video's cuts. Jonas and Moran play off each other. Jonas reads two poems by Federico Garcia Lorca. Moran and the Bandwagon tiptoe around the poetry.

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[43] Scott DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 444.
[44] Bernard Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 122.

One way to read the jazz and poetry intersection in New York City is as a secondary aesthetic practice for both the musicians and poets involved. But thanks in part to the "jazz as America's classical music" movement and the boundary-transgressing work of the experimentalists, there are now opportunities for this work to live in the city. Jazz now unquestionably has the "sufficient cultural credentials" to collaborate with the high art institutions of the city. Many of the examples of jazz poetry intersection I attended were supported by major cultural organizations. Each of Vijay Iyer and Mike Ladd's pieces has had an institutional supporter. Jason Moran's residency at the Whitney Biennial included several examples of jazz and poetry intersection. Chamber Music America supported the projects of Alexis Cuadrado and Patrick Cornelius. Marty Ehrlich's "Cartographies of Flight" was a commission by the Lost Jazz Shrines series supposed by the Tribeca Performing Arts Center. And John Hollenbeck's record *What is Beautiful*, setting poems by Kenneth Patchen, was commissioned by the University of Rochester. Commissions and residencies have provided a less commercially-policed space for jazz and poetry intersection.

But commissions often come with high-stakes performances, with an expectation of polish, not process. John Zorn's venue The Stone fills this gap, offering an experimentalism-friendly space for artists to workshop ideas. Zorn was a core member of the downtown scene, which Tamar Barzel describes as being "intent on creating original work that stood alone, aspiring to explore new ideas in the absence of the epistemological

constraints and possibilities delineated by style."[45] This practice lives on at The Stone, and Table 4.1 shows the venue's importance to jazz poetry in New York City.

The Stone is neither a convenient nor a particularly comfortable venue. While most current jazz clubs cluster in Manhattan's West Village, The Stone is farther east, in the Alphabet City neighborhood, near the Lower East Side home of the 1980s downtown scene. It is a half-mile walk from the nearest subway station. On the corner of Avenue C and Second St, the ground floor venue is barely marked - a small "THE STONE" lettered on the glass entrance door. Inside, the venue is spartan; black painted floor, hanging black curtain covering the old storefront windows, white walls, black folding chairs, and a single bathroom accessible only by walking through the performance space. Black and white photographs of past artists decorate the walls. In summers, the heat can become unbearable, and in winters the single hissing radiator barely warms the space. There are no food or drinks available. John Zorn founded the venue in 2005, and serves as its artistic director. With Zorn's own association with the downtown scene of the 1980s, it is no surprise that the venue bills itself as "dedicated to the EXPERIMENTAL and AVANT-GARDE."[46]

The administration of The Stone also sets it apart from other venues on the jazz scene. It maintains a not-for-profit status, with all revenue going to the performers. The entrance fee is low—fifteen dollars per set—and it is hard to imagine that the musicians find much financial reward at the venue. Zorn hosts an annual "Improv Week" benefit, during which many of the artists who appear regularly at the venue offer their time and

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[45] Barzel, "The Praxis of Composition-Improvisation and the Poetics of Creative Kinship," 177.
[46] "The Stone," accessed February 9, 2014, http://thestonenyc.com/.

all of the proceeds go towards running the venue. There are also a series of live recordings that contribute to financial upkeep, sold only through the Tzadik label.

Programming at the venue is selected by guest curators, who typically have a one-week tenure. Almost always this curator will appear on each set, but beyond this the parameters are open. Many musicians use The Stone to workshop new ideas, ensembles, or materials. Sometimes this means that each set features a new group of musicians and different material. Other times, as in the January 2014 residencies of Steve Lehman and Rudresh Mahanthappa, curators will use the time to delve more deeply into a group or repertory, featuring one or two groups for the entire week—a public woodshed, if you will.

January 23, 2014 (Tuesday) 10pm - The Stone
Uri Caine and Theo Bleckmann

I huddle at the radiator, trying to warm my hands between sets. When I first arrived that evening, Uri Caine called out "Thank you for coming!" There was just one other audience member. It was the first night of Caine's week of curation at The Stone. Outside, snow whipped around the corner of the building, with a wind that cut through cloth. Despite the blizzard, the audience eventually filled to a surprising near-capacity crowd. Caine, visibly surprised, shook his head and thanked the "diehards." In this collegial space Caine and his band of six launched into a noisy, loose arrangement of Rhapsody in Blue, opening a set of exploratory Gershwin, featuring singers Theo Bleckmann and Barbara Walker.

In the hour between sets, the volunteer door attendant mops the black painted floor, sloppy from all the tracked-in snow, while the few remaining audience members talk awkwardly amongst themselves. Caine braves the blizzard in search of coffee, while the chatty man in the pinstriped suit who sat next to me went off in search of a bottle of wine to sip surreptitiously. The volunteer, with the help of the musicians, resets the performance area, arranging it for the intimate ensemble of the second set. I check my twitter feed and see that Bleckmann called the

atmosphere "cozy." The artists prepare to begin and I reluctantly leave the radiator. I imagine the musicians' view: seven or eight audience members, all wearing coats, gloves, scarves, and hats.

The program is Dichterliebe. Caine sits at the piano (in an overcoat), Bleckmann stands at a microphone next to a table of electronics, and to his left sits spoken-word artist Julie Patton, with a music stand in front of her. Caine and Bleckmann open with an intimate reading of "Im wünderschönen Monat Mai" that closely resembles an art song delivery. Bleckmann, I hadn't realized until that opening song, is a native German speaker - he conveys every nuance of every word, with his own particular blend of sentimentality and irony.

They proceed through the cycle, each song bringing a new treatment. In many, Caine carves out improvisatory passages, inserting a blues fragment or diverting the entirety of the song down an improvised path. Bleckmann finds a sweetly swinging scat vocable of "da-daaaah-da-dum-dada-daaaah-yah" replacing all the poetry of what I later identify as "Ich will meine Seele tauchen," wordlessly conveying sentimental melancholy while Caine stretches against the written score. For the most saccharine moments, Bleckmann switches to English, sometimes in direct translation, sometimes in hilarious approximation, as in the song in which he simply repeats "I love you," over and over. Bleckmann adds looping and reverb sparingly. On occasion he sings through a voice distorter, transforming his warm and vulnerable voice into the harsh timbre of an early recording, especially shocking in the militaristically performed "Im Rhein, im heiligen Strome."

Patton sits silently for the majority of the evening, but when she joins the effect is transfixing. Close to the microphone, she murmurs poetry, her voice a melodic counterpoint. Words pop through the texture, thematically connecting her poetry to what Bleckmann sings, but much of her verse is obscured. She skitters around the Lieder, filling in and embellishing where starkness had been. Moaning wordlessly or whispering feverishly through her text, she casts an uneasy supernatural sound across the evening, underlining Caine and Bleckmann's irony.

And yet, I am earnestly touched, thrilled at hearing this old favorite in this transformative treatment. As they finish "Die alten, bösen Lieder," I immediately wish to hear the cycle again. Heartened, upon speaking to Bleckmann, that they will perform it again soon (though Caine warns me, "it's different every time with

Theo,") I step out into the snow. For three days I sing to myself, "da-daaaah-da-dummm-dada-daaaaah-yah."

Conclusion

In this chapter I have suggested some relationships between jazz poetry performance and the broader jazz scene in New York City, proposing that the stylistic and generational shifts toward hip hop and experimentalism have paved the way for the prevalence of jazz poetry performance. Although there is newfound stylistic mobility regarding poetic performance in jazz, these works and practices have yet to find a comfortable home on the scene. Musicians who otherwise occupy a core position in the community shift to the margins for their jazz poetry performance. These performances are supported by fringe venues and high art institutions

But, as Iyer and Ladd experienced with the Brooklyn Academy of Music, interactions with these institutions trigger a heightened set of negotiation of race, genre, and cultural hierarchy. Despite all the changes in the jazz scene and New York's broader cultural hierarchy, Ladd and Iyer ultimately faced similar constraints as earlier generations who pushed against the boundaries of jazz. Benjamin Piekut describes the quandary as being "caught…in the space between the entertainment economy of mainstream jazz and the racially policed borders of established and experimental institutions of high culture."[47]

While the core of jazz has unquestionably shifted toward an aesthetic that is inclusive of the avant-garde, there is still little space within the jazz scene for the multi-

[47] Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise*, 106.

modal work of artists who take experimentalism as a stance. Even while hip hop's aestheticization of spoken language and the avant-garde's intermedia work have primed the scene for increasingly creative interplay between improvised music and spoken word, constructions of genre and race restrict the ways in which these projects can be supported and presented.

Jazz poetry in New York City, as outlined in this chapter, is largely a fringe phenomenon. And yet these works suggest important expansions in how musicians in the mainstream of jazz frame their artistic projects. Fluid multi-modality characterizes much jazz poetry intersection on the scene. Earlier, I suggested that jazz poetry can be considered a secondary aesthetic practice of the musicians, but in doing so I participate to some extent in the very policing discussed towards the end of this chapter. What's at stake in labeling the run at a midtown club primary and an experimental collaboration at The Stone secondary? This ordering reiterates the historically racialized boundaries of the scene and draws artificial distinctions within artistic practices. If jazz poetry has a home in New York City, it is in the teeming conflict between the fluidity of creative practice and the constraints of cultural categorization.

APPENDIX A
SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY OF JAZZ POETRY INTERSECTION

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