Kinds of Blue

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When he was interviewed in 1995, veteran trumpeter and flugelhornist Joe Wilder was asked what made him such a compelling ballad player. In response, Wilder, whose résumé included gigs with Lionel Hampton, Dizzy Gillespie, Count Basie, and Lucky Millinder, recalled going to jam sessions in his native Philadelphia as an up-and-coming young jazz musician as an up-and-coming young jazz musician where “[t]hey used to say, ‘Tell a story.’ . . . And that’s basically what I try to do. That’s the way I try to think” (122). Wilder’s succinct summary of the art of jazz improvisation is neither singular nor extraordinary: musicians, critics, and musicologists all resort consistently and recurrently to language metaphors when they discuss the art of jazz. Solos ‘tell a story,’ performances are ‘musical conversations,’ and youngsters are admonished to ‘say something’ with their instruments instead of just playing flurries of notes. In fact, the two most in-depth studies to date of jazz improvisation, Paul Berliner’s *Thinking in Jazz* and Ingrid Monson’s appropriately titled *Saying Something*, are organized around the two major tropes of storytelling and language acquisition:

**So What?**

But jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile.

POET LANGSTON HUGHES in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” 1926

And it’s going to take a long time before Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie disappear. The strains of that are going to be around for a long time. And they should be. It’s part of life.

BASSIST RAY BROWN to critic Ira Gitler, 2000

When he was interviewed in 1995, veteran trumpeter and flugelhornist Joe Wilder was asked what made him such a compelling ballad player. In response, Wilder, whose résumé included gigs with Lionel Hampton, Dizzy Gillespie, Count Basie, and Lucky Millinder, recalled going to jam sessions in his native Philadelphia as an up-and-coming young jazz musician as an up-and-coming young jazz musician where “[t]hey used to say, ‘Tell a story.’ . . . And that’s basically what I try to do. That’s the way I try to think” (122). Wilder’s succinct summary of the art of jazz improvisation is neither singular nor extraordinary: musicians, critics, and musicologists all resort consistently and recurrently to language metaphors when they discuss the art of jazz. Solos ‘tell a story,’ performances are ‘musical conversations,’ and youngsters are admonished to ‘say something’ with their instruments instead of just playing flurries of notes. In fact, the two most in-depth studies to date of jazz improvisation, Paul Berliner’s *Thinking in Jazz* and Ingrid Monson’s appropriately titled *Saying Something*, are organized around the two major tropes of storytelling and language acquisition:
Ultimately . . . youngsters must also learn various skills associated with the overriding aesthetic principles that guide the activities of advanced artists. These involve mastery over expressivity, over the shaping and pacing of ideas, and over any referential meanings that musical patterns have acquired in the jazz tradition. Improvisers illuminate these principles with perhaps the richest of their language metaphors, storytelling, whose multilayered meanings have been passed from generation to generation within the jazz community since its earliest days. (Berliner 200–201)

Virtually every single jazz instrumentalist at one point or another has likened the art of improvisation to the art of storytelling. Even a drummer like Roy Haynes, for instance, will say, “I like . . . to tell a musical story according to how I feel” (qtd. in Monson, Saying 86).1

Thus, it appears that jazz can offer heretofore untapped opportunities for the critical analysis of African American literature. But while there is a substantial body of jazz criticism of poetry, African American prose narrative has not drawn nearly as much critical attention, despite renewed interest over the past few years.2 In fact, literary critic Lloyd W. Brown even proclaims that “[a]s a European import, the novel can never compete with jazz or the blues as a peculiarly American medium rooted in the history and ethnic experiences of America,” while Brown’s colleague Alan Munton intones categorically that “[j]azz and fiction should be kept separate” (L. W. Brown 60; Munton 251). And to some extent, Brown and Munton are right: Hughes, Ellison, Baldwin, and Baraka notwithstanding, there has been a consistent trend in African American literary criticism and theory to privilege the blues, rather than jazz, as a defining “matrix” of black American literary production (Baker 3). Critics like Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Houston Baker, and others have proffered critiques that draw on the vernacular folk culture of the rural black South. Perhaps this is so because a blues critique can lend itself much more easily to a mythology of ‘pure’ and ‘undiluted’ origin, to a discourse of authentic blackness. Furthermore, the vast majority of blues are sung, and their lyrics therefore provide unmediated access for textual analysis, whereas jazz is primarily an instrumental music. Finally, the jazz critic is always confronted, too, with the music’s inherent hybridity—after all, jazz is paradoxically both, at once a distinct black American art form and ‘world music.’ Pianist McCoy Tyner inadvertently highlights this paradox when he says that “[t]his music, even though it’s universal, moves only as far as black people move in this country” (qtd. in McFarlane 41; emphasis added). The dialectic tension between specifi-
ty and universality, between racial identity and cultural production, between tradition and appropriation, is comparatively heightened in jazz. For jazz, bebop veteran Dexter Gordon averred, is also “the great octopus; it’ll do anything, it’ll use anything” (qtd. in Gerard 37). Thus, a critical jazz aesthetic of African American literature poses certain challenges that a blues critique can eschew—and one may be tempted to ask, with Miles Davis, so what?

Even so, the question is a compelling one: what do we stand to gain if we read African American narrative to the tune of jazz? What new perspectives on literary meaning and textual analysis can a literary-critical jazz aesthetic provide? When Gates argues that texts in the African American literary tradition “speak” to each other, surely prose texts can speak to music, too—or vice versa—especially if it is a music which, though mostly instrumental, relies so much on the tropes of language acquisition and storytelling (Figures 236–52; Signifying 239–40, 256). In fact, when trombonist and musicologist George Lewis points out that one crucial aspect of jazz “is the notion of the importance of personal narrative, of ‘telling your own story,’” he is describing, unintentionally, the African American literary tradition, too (117). Therefore, the present study seeks to illuminate not how African American authors write about jazz, but how African American narratives are jazz—in other words, how they attempt to wrest beautiful art from the terrors of American history, to improvise a meaningful narrative of freedom over the dissonant sound clusters of the American experience.

Such an interdisciplinary approach does indeed pose certain challenges, perhaps most formidably among them: what is jazz? I shall refrain from exploring the thorny issue of what constitutes jazz—not least because jazz is jazz precisely because it eludes empirical definition to some degree. The literature on the subject is immense, and there are almost as many views on what is and is not jazz as there are books. It cannot be my aim here to rewrite or even reinterpret jazz music and jazz history, as my focus is primarily on literary jazz. However, for the purposes of the present study, jazz can be loosely defined as an art form pioneered and developed by African Americans that seeks to integrate freedom with structure, spontaneity with forethought, individual expression with collective interplay, West African musical residuals with certain European concepts and instruments. What Lawrence Kramer says of music in general is, I think, particularly relevant for jazz, because jazz must be understood as communicative action and therefore as embedded in a continuous texture of psychological, social, and cultural relations.
Music—and in this it is no different from more explicitly semantic modes such as narration and visual depiction—means not primarily by what it says but by the way it models the symbolization of experience. . . . Musical meaning is understood, both in practice and in analytical reflection, not by translating music as a virtual utterance or depiction, but by grasping the dynamic relations between musical experience and its contexts. (7; emphasis added)

More crucial than a detailed definition of jazz music, if such a thing were possible at all, is therefore the realization that any literary-critical practice aspiring to be useful must always also heed the history of the music. Critiques of literary jazz must avail themselves not only of the structural characteristics of the music, but also of the history of the (predominantly) African American musicians who invented, shaped, and innovated it.

Secondly, I use the term aesthetic not in the sense of a pat template or theory of literary jazz; this would be, as I hope to demonstrate in the following chapters, itself antithetical to the jazz aesthetic. For the most part, jazz has always been an unruly art form, much too fluid, much too subversive to fit neatly into determinate grids or fixed categories. “They tried to fool you / Now I got to school you / About jazz, about jazz,” as Sun Ra warned us so memorably of any normative critiques—and Sun Ra’s recordings are definitely a better source to learn more about this music called jazz than this present study (qtd. in Lock 25). By aesthetic I simply mean the various and sometimes even antithetical ways in which black American narratives avail themselves of certain characteristics and aspects of jazz music. And while Albert Murray would perhaps cringe at being quoted in the same chorus, as it were, as Sun Ra, my critical practice nevertheless takes to heart what Stomping the Blues has to say about (literary) critical theory and African American music:

For art is always a matter of idiomatic stylization, it transcends both time and place. Thus criticism, the most elementary obligation of which is to increase the accessibility of aesthetic presentation, is primarily a matter of coming to terms with such special peculiarities as may be involved in a given process of stylization. What counts in a work of art, which after all must achieve such universality as it can through the particulars of the experience most native to it, is not the degree to which it conforms to theories, formulas, and rules that are best regarded as being, like Aristotle’s Poetics, generalizations after the fact, but how adequately it fulfills the requirements of the circumstances for which it was
created. . . . [T]he most fundamental prerequisite for mediating between the work of art and the audience, spectators, or readers, as the case may be, is not reverence for the so-called classics but rather an understanding of what is being stylized plus an accurate insight into how it is being stylized. (196)

The present study attempts to be such a mediation, intending to make more accessible how African American novels, short stories, and autobiographies avail themselves of a literary jazz aesthetic.

For similar reasons, the tricky differentiation between jazz and blues—between the jazz text and the blues text—is one that I suspect detracts from our understanding of the interface between black literature and music, rather than contributing to it. The two idioms are different, to be sure, but at the same time the blues is also the main tributary to jazz, making it almost impossible to draw clearly delineated, separate categories. To Murray, jazz is mostly an “extension, elaboration, and refinement of blues-break riffing and improvisation,” and I therefore agree with Gayl Jones’s literary distinction (A. Murray 63):

[T]he jazz text is generally more complex and sophisticated than blues text in its harmonies, rhythms, and surface structure. . . . Jazz text is stronger in its accents; its vocabulary and syntax are often more convoluted and ambiguous than blues. It is often more difficult to read than a blues text, tending to abstractions over concreteness of detail. It shares with a blues text a sense of extemporaneity in its fluid rhythmic design and syncopated understructure, its sound and meaning systems, its rejection of duality. Jazz tends to have a faster pace and tempo than a blues text. (200)

Overall, blues tends to be a guitar-based vocal music over certain chordal patterns, whereas jazz tends to be a horn-based instrumental music extending and amending the harmonic and rhythmic language of the blues. Thus, a literary jazz aesthetic is not necessarily completely different from a blues aesthetic; rather, the jazz aesthetic can offer a complementary way of interpreting African American narrative.

“Tell a story,” Joe Wilder was admonished as a youngster. Given the prominence of the trope of storytelling in jazz discourse, it seems appropriate to begin an examination of the jazz aesthetic in African American narrative with the story of a jazz musician; and given the pertinence of the trope of language acquisition, it seems also appropriate to start with
the story of a pioneer of early jazz. Sidney Bechet’s autobiography, Treat It Gentle, delineates a (literary) jazz aesthetic that furnishes some of the key patterns and concepts for the interpretation of African American prose fiction. Analyzing the text and contexts especially of Bechet’s fictional account of his grandfather as well as his famous recording of “Summertime,” I argue that Bechet the storyteller in the book uses the same improvisational strategies that Bechet the musician uses on stage. Rather than presenting an ‘inauthentic’ self, the book’s very refusal to separate clearly fact from fiction, written text from spoken word, story from music, history from myth, author from editor, creates a persona of Bechet that is the dynamic, unstable self of his (its) own story rather than the static, stable self of somebody else’s history. The text’s many hybridizations converge to turn the self from a narrated object of history into the narrating subject of story. The (literary) jazz aesthetic thus affords its practitioners a figurative space of temporary freedom that plays on and against the social, cultural, and racial binaries of the American landscape.

However, it should come as no surprise that the autobiography of a jazz musician is informed by a narrative jazz aesthetic. Thus, the question of what we stand to gain by reading African American narrative to the tune of jazz must necessarily be extended to prose fiction and to a work in which jazz music does not figure prominently at all. Ann Petry’s novel The Street is such a work, for its protagonist’s foray into the jazz world is quite accidental and seemingly ancillary. However, Lutie Johnson’s arresting rendition of the sentimental torch song “Darlin’” is located precisely in the middle of the narrative. Moreover, the scene’s strategic placement is crucial structurally because it accelerates the inevitability of Lutie’s eventual tragic downfall. The compelling central positioning of Lutie as a jazz artist suggests that jazz—after all, like narrative, another form of configuring time—plays a pivotal role as a structural device in The Street. My literary-critical analysis of Petry’s novel draws on that most unique element of jazz time, namely swing. Accompanied by an analysis of the book’s gender politics, I discuss how the element of swing informs not only Lutie’s renditions of the Mills Brothers’ 1934 “Swing It, Sister” and Lucky Millinder’s 1944 hit “Darlin’,” but the novel’s narrative structure as a whole.

Key passages in both The Street and Treat It Gentle point to another salient motif in African American jazz narrative, namely the linkage between jazz, power, and violence. First, I investigate the implications of this nexus in Langston Hughes’s short story “Bop.” Drawing on the oral histories of bebop pioneers Dizzy Gillespie, Dexter Gordon, and Budd
Johnson, as well as Jacques Attali’s theory of music and violence, my reading of “Bop” focuses on its seemingly nonsensical and blatantly fraudulent etymology of the term *bop* and the equally fictional explanation of the difference between rebop and bebop. The story’s imaginative and improvisational storytelling makes sense out of nonsense and in the process unmasks the power structure’s politics of implementing and maintaining what purports to be a sensible order—an order based on the systematic oppression of African Americans—for what it is: utterly unreasonable, brutally irrational. While the violence is only figurative in “Bop,” it erupts dramatically in Ralph Ellison’s “Cadillac Flambé.” Extending the discussion of sense and nonsense to the binary pair of noise and harmony, I show how the protagonist’s violent improvisation of noise, his ritual sacrifice, directly opposes and challenges the existing syntax of harmony orchestrated by a political system which condones the continued subjugation of Americans of African descent. Hughes’s and Ellison’s protagonists both lay claim to the right to make ostensibly meaningless noise, and in doing so, unmask the laws of ‘harmony’ according to which society is arranged as truly arbitrary themselves. The jazz aesthetic’s revision of the past that occurs, to varying degrees, in “Bop” and “Cadillac Flambé” is accompanied not only by the possibility of violence and revolution; it also contains a utopian impulse in its struggle towards that metaphorical place of freedom to which *Treat It Gentle* aspires. The futuristic premise of Amiri Baraka’s “Answers in Progress,” where blue space aliens in search of Art Blakey records land in New Jersey amidst the chaos and carnage of a nationwide black uprising, draws explicitly on the free jazz of Sun Ra and Albert Ayler. This, the last, selection in *Tales* departs deliberately from the conventions of storytelling—just as free jazz deliberately departed from the conventions of diatonic music. With the search for a more viable public and private self in the earlier stories now aborted, “Answers in Progress” consequently depicts a brutal, violent revolt against the (white) political system in a style that revolts against conventional prose, too. The bloody uprising is juxtaposed with the utopian vision of a harmonious future after the emergence of a new race, a new *black* race.

Finally, in the last chapter I discuss some of the ramifications of the previous chapters for critical practice and return to the jazz aesthetic’s negotiation of authenticity and hybridity. A comparison of two novels, both of which bear the title *Jazz*, clarifies some of the challenges and opportunities in reading African American narrative to the tune of jazz. The first one, published in 1994, is Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*, set during the Harlem Renaissance. The second one was originally published in 1927, a
year after Morrison’s Violet Trace mutilates the face of a dead girl at a Harlem funeral. Also entitled Jazz, that novel’s plot is set in London and Paris and was written by Hans Janowitz, a German-speaking Jew born in Czechoslovakia. Despite the obvious and enormous differences between Morrison and Janowitz and their books, and despite the fact that each has a different understanding of jazz, both employ virtually identical narrative strategies to describe a world that has become jazz, as Janowitz put it. In theme, cast of characters, and setting, the two novels diverge dramatically, and yet, in their attempt to forge an aesthetic of literary jazz, they employ identical structural and stylistic devices. This, then, underscores the need for a critical practice that is not predicated primarily on either style and structure or history and sociology as most existing jazz critiques are. If the full potential of jazz aesthetics for the study of African American narrative is to be tapped, its critical analysis must incorporate not only a firm knowledge of the music’s technical aspects, but also an equally firm sense of the history of both the music and the people who have been creating it. Connecting Morrison’s novel to the jazz ritual of the cutting contest, specifically the legendary battles between Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray, shows that Morrison’s and Janowitz’s texts differ after all as each enacts a different aesthetic gesture in its attempt to merge words and music.

The conclusion elaborates on some of the issues raised by my comparative reading of Morrison and Janowitz. The jazz aesthetic is inextricably grounded in the black experience in America—and yet, at the same time, its inherent hybridity challenges the received binary pairs of white and black, the New World and the Old (both Europe and Africa, even Asia), oppression and freedom, authenticity and imitation, the individual and the collective, jazz and ‘non-jazz.’ A brief look at the interface between jazz and modernism and at some of the ways in which literary critics have (mis)appropriated the music of John Coltrane raises some pertinent points about literary-critical practice. It suggests that the ‘blackness’ of black culture, of both the music and the literature, in fact thrives on hybridity, harnessing the energies inherent in the tension-filled process of cultural production as well as simultaneously affirming the African American (literary) tradition. The jazz aesthetic appears to me a very viable way to describe and interrogate this ostensible paradox.

Lastly, a word on the musical examples analyzed and referenced herein. Roland Barthes once observed that “[i]f one examines the current practice of music criticism . . . one sees that the work (or its execution) is always translated into the poorest linguistic category: the adjective” (236). This, I believe, is the case in jazz even more so than in other
musics. “The variety of structures, moods, notational frameworks, and musical textures at work in the jazz archive defies the capacity of the linguistic terms we rely on to make sense of things,” notes Jim Merod, and my own experience, unfortunately, bears him out (7). This is a difficulty that I can mediate only to an extent. However, the musical selections discussed here were chosen because, I believe, they do illuminate an aspect of the literature, and I have tried to render these discussions accessible to readers without any prior knowledge of musical theory or jazz history. Jazz aficionados are notoriously combative, and surely some will find fault with, say, my omission of Cecil Taylor or my interpretation of “Summertime.” But again, the present study aims not to rewrite or summarize jazz history. It is first and foremost a literary-critical study, one that also probes the interplay between jazz music and literary narrative. I hope that the following chapters not only provide a few fresh insights into the interface between jazz and narrative—ideally, they also will encourage us to listen.