Kinds of Blue

Grandt, Jurgen E.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Grandt, Jurgen E.
Kinds of Blue: The Jazz Aesthetic in African American Narrative.
The Ohio State University Press, 2005.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/28300.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/28300

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1178241
The music called jazz,” insisted James Baldwin, began out of the necessity “not only to redeem a history unwritten and despised, but to checkmate the European notion of the world. For, until this hour, when we speak of history, we are speaking only of how Europe saw—and sees—the world” (“Of the Sorrow” 326). This certainly delineates Toni Morrison’s artistic endeavor, too. At the same time, jazz is also “an American language” where, as Sterling Brown contended, “the performer’s color does not matter”: “Of all the arts, jazz music is probably the most democratic. Mixed units of Negroes and whites have recorded for well over a decade, and most of their records are jazz classics” (24). And thus, the literary jazz of Toni Morrison and Hans Janowitz alerts us to the paradox that jazz music is both: a distinctly black American art form and ‘world music.’ The jazz aesthetic is inextricably grounded in the black experience in America—and yet, precisely because it challenges the received binary pairs of white and black, the New World and the Old (both Europe and Africa, even Asia), imitation and authenticity, jazz and ‘non-jazz,’ it is also by necessity a hybrid. As Nicholas Evans reminds us again, jazz “always involves race, nationalism, and related concerns because it heightens the audibility, palpability,
and even visibility of the cultural sameness and difference of whiteness and blackness” (18).

What the preceding chapters suggest is that authenticity and hybridity are not, in fact, mutually exclusive. ‘Authentic blackness’ actually thrives on hybridity: it harnesses the energies inherent in the tension-filled process of cultural production and its myriad possibilities while simultaneously affirming and extending, not diluting, the African American tradition. The jazz aesthetic appears a very viable way to describe and interrogate this ostensible paradox. But if, as David Wills posits, jazz is indeed “a music born of the impossibility of absolute racial definition,” it is certainly not impossible to situate jazz within a historical context (139). After all, the texts of Petry, Hughes, Ellison, Baraka, and Morrison all hearken back to their own Omar, and so literary-critical practice must always also be grounded in the history of jazz music and the people who have been making it. But, we remember, Sidney Bechet went to France, not to Africa, to be closer to Omar. Thus, it seems that a jazz critique of African American literature cannot help but be a hybrid, just as jazz itself was and is a hybrid, drawing on and transforming sources from outside the black American experience. To one young music student at Tuskegee who would soon switch from the trumpet to the typewriter, Ellington and Eliot swung to a very similar tune. Ralph Ellison later remembered how jazz had prepared him for his discovery of literary modernism:

Now, the jazz musician, the jazz soloist, is anything if not eclectic. He knows his rhythms; he knows the tradition of his form, so to speak, and he can draw upon an endless pattern of sounds which he recombines on the spur of the moment into a meaningful musical experience, if he’s successful. I had a sense that all of these references of Eliot’s, all of this snatching of phrases from the German, French, Sanskrit, and so on, were attuned to that type of American cultural expressiveness which one got in jazz and which one still gets in good jazz. (Going 520)

For Ellison, it was this reveling in eclectic fragmentation that linked jazz and modernism. His analogy, however, also alludes, if only faintly, to an important difference between the jazz aesthetic’s modernism and literary high modernism. In the jazz aesthetic, the modernist impulse to make it new is not limited to technique only and does not end with finding novel ways to syncopate narrative time. The jazz aesthetic is also aware of “tradition,” of a communal past whose meanings have not dis-
solved completely. In other words, the jazz aesthetic is modernism with a historical conscience.

Of course, “modernism with a historical conscience” is really just another paradox. And the term modernism has been just as hotly contested as the term jazz. To be sure, the mythical Omar, Lutie’s mental improvisations, Simple’s revisionist oral history, or the disembodied voice’s narrative flights of fancy in Morrison’s Jazz, all revolve around the key modernist themes of fragmentation, alienation, and epistemology. Even so, the modernism of Bechet, Petry, or Morrison does seem to swing to a different beat than Eliot—or, for that matter, Janowitz—after all. According to Craig Werner, Afro-modernism recognizes

Afro-American expressive practices as intricate adjustments to a world fragmented by the communal experience of slavery and racial oppression. . . . [T]he central problem confronted by Afro-American culture closely resembles that confronted by mainstream modernism: the alienated individual experiences a profound sense of psychological and cultural dislocation in a world characterized by an accelerating rate of change; he or she subsequently attempts to regain some sense of coherence. The primary difference between Afro- and Euro-American responses to this dilemma can be seen in the tendency of many Euro-American modernists to experience their situation as individual and, to some extent, ahistorical, while Afro-American modernists generally perceive a communal dilemma deriving from historical and political forces. (186–87)

Thus, Afro-modernism also acknowledges what Werner calls the “the practical imperatives of mythological awareness”—or what Bechet simply calls “Omar” (134). As Edward Pavlić seconds, “African American modernist quests are grounded in a distinct historical experience of modernity in which increasingly refined, rigid, and oppressive identity logics of racial segregation played a central role” (83). The “liberation from history” Hugh Kenner has identified as an aspiration of much of (white) American modernism is, in the jazz aesthetic, not only impossible, but perhaps even undesirable (218).

But, again, Bechet resurrected the African slave Omar at the Vieux Colombier in Paris, and he summoned the spirit of authentic New Orleans jazz by quoting a Verdi opera. The octopus-like nature of the jazz aesthetic is related to what Pavlić sees as the “disruptive improvisations” of African American literary modernisms because jazz history,
too, is after all replete with just such disruptions (10). To Gary Giddins, for instance, the ultimate modernist disruption occurred with the bebop era:

Jazz modernists . . . of the era immediately following World War II ignored the traditional repertory, and when they did pay homage to the ancients (ragtimers and New Orleans-style players), whatever regard they may have felt was often soured by condescension. Modernism, after all, was a rallying point, and a political movement—a transformation of mere entertainment into art. The genius-leaders of the movement—Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelonius Monk—knew better, of course; the traditions live in even their most volatile experiments, whereas their disciples, more obsessed with the propaganda of the new, were inclined to dismiss as passé the sweetness of Johnny Hodges or the showboating of Louis Armstrong. Still, what both the geniuses and their disciples propagated was new. (Rhythm xiii)

Yet Giddins also emphasizes that bebop was not really such a radically modernist rejection of the old: “It is now commonplace to view modern jazz as a logical outgrowth of the past, an evolution rather than a revolution. Hindsight is a great peacemaker, especially since no one can mistake the obvious debts Parker, Gillespie, Monk, and [Kenny] Clarke owed such predecessors as [Lester] Young, [Roy] Eldridge, Teddy Wilson, and Jo Jones” (Celebrating 66–67).

The modernist tension between tradition and change Giddins diagnoses in bebop is not the only one the music brought to the fore. Bop’s “improvisational disruptions,” to use Pavlić’s phrase again, also interrogated received notions of authentic blackness. We recall that Sidney Bechet had adored Caruso; Charlie Parker, the “genius-leader” of the new movement, begged Edgar Varèse for lessons in music theory and eagerly drank in everything from the tinny brass of a Salvation Army band around the corner to the fiddler in a Romanian restaurant to twangy country and western from the jukebox (Giddins, Celebrating 104–13; Reisner 138–39, 229–30). But to Ellison the self-conscious modernist, bop did not sound like “good jazz” at all. Ironically, he heard in bebop something more akin to Euro-American high modernism, namely its severance from the authentic jazz and blues impulse grounded in black vernacular blues culture. “The thinness of much of so-called ‘modern jazz’ is especially reflective of [a] loss of wholeness,” he lamented (Shadow 275). Amiri Baraka heard in the same music the exact opposite,
an Afro-modernism that paved the way for the next generation of avant-gardists to return to the authentically black roots of jazz: “the moderns, the beboppers, showed up to restore jazz, in some sense, to its original separateness, to drag it outside the mainstream of American culture again” with its “willfully harsh, anti-assimilationist sound” (Blues 181). To both writers, jazz music’s hybridity is a threat: Ellison decries it, Baraka suppresses it.

What, then, are the demands the jazz aesthetic as modernism with a historical conscience places on literary-critical practice? Musicologist Ingrid Monson rightly points out that “the heterogeneity of musical elements found in jazz improvisation is deeply related to the heterogeneity of African American cultural experience. The jazz experience has always been more varied and cosmopolitan than many of the narratives that have been written about it” (“Doubleness” 311). Baraka’s and Ellison’s takes on bebop are precisely such partial narratives, but what they share, disparate as they may be, is the stipulation of authentic blackness as a stable, fixed category that is either normative (implicit in Ellison) or essentialist (explicit in Baraka). As Madhu Dubey notes of more recent trends in African American literary criticism, “[t]he academic production of the vernacular [e.g. blues and jazz] as the ultimate sign of African American cultural difference works along a contradictory circuit, participating in the commodification of black culture as a distinct area of expertise, while redressing anxieties about ‘mulattoization’ that inevitably attend the commodification of black culture” (310). Take, for instance, how literary criticism has commodified the music of John Coltrane. To Baraka, as we have already seen, Coltrane was the blackest of all black revolutionaries of the sixties, the undisputed leader of the “poets of the Black Nation” (Black 176). To Henry Louis Gates, whose tremendously influential theory of Signifyin(g) was explicitly devised, at least in part, to redress the fallacies he perceived in the tenets of Baraka and others in the Black Arts Movement, Coltrane’s music of around 1960 is still a “stellar example” of Signifyin(g), the epitome of authentically black cultural practices grounded in the vernacular, and therefore “fundamentally black” (Figures xxiv–xxix, 274–75; Signifying 104, 64).4

In fact, Coltrane, who had journeyed from blues to bebop to hard-bop, had grown dissatisfied by 1960 with the harmonic cycles that had defined jazz improvisation up to that point, and jazz, he felt, had become stagnant. He started to express an increasing interest in the traditional music of India, especially in the patterns and scales of the Indian raga (L. Porter 202–3, 209–11; Kofsky 424–25). He was also beginning to collect recordings by Indian sitar master Ravi Shankar and told a French critic,
“I’m certain that if I recorded with him I’d increase my possibilities tenfold” (qtd. in Polillo 602–3). Furthermore, Coltrane’s intense practice regimen had included for quite a few years the *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns* by Russian-born maverick lexicographer and musicologist Nicolas Slonimsky, an occasional collaborator of Varèse’s, and there are even direct quotations from Slonimsky’s tome on some of Coltrane’s recordings (L. Porter 149–50).

Thus, Coltrane was clearly looking for inspiration from outside African American culture to reinvigorate his art, and even though his growing interest in Indian music coincided with his immersion in traditional African musics, he was never interested in shaping a musical expression of ‘authentic blackness,’ as he stated explicitly in many interviews as well as album liner notes (Nisenson, *Ascension* 94, 109–11; Gerard 67–69; Kofsky 418–19).5 “Labels, I don’t bother with,” he said a year before his death (qtd. in Kofsky 433). Significantly, when pressed to settle on one label after all, he did not choose ‘jazz’ or ‘black music’: “As far as types of music, if you ask me what we are playing . . . I feel it is a music of the individual contributors. And if you wanted to name it anything, you could name it a ‘classical music’” (qtd. in Kofsky 454).

But what is ultimately at issue here is not whether, say, Archie Shepp is ‘blacker’ than John Coltrane, nor whether Bechet’s “Summertime” is any less authentically jazz than Gordon and Gray’s “The Chase.” Bechet and Coltrane are great jazz artists precisely because they push the envelope by synthesizing seemingly disparate musical styles and traditions. Literary criticism has tended to ignore or distort jazz’s inherent hybridi-

ty in order to posit a program of authentic blackness—or, indeed, in order to eschew probing the relationship of whiteness to blackness. Jazz suggests that any notion about and expression of ‘authentic’ blackness is a process, a process that, like jazz improvisation, occurs in time and therefore asks to be continuously negotiated anew. And precisely because an authentic blackness embedded in time must necessarily also react to impulses from ‘outside’ the African American tradition, the resulting hybridity does not dilute authenticity, but it is that authenticity: the jazz aesthetic in fact encourages the usage of extraneous material, as long as that material is brought into some sort of negotiation with the tradition’s historical conscience—its Omar. As Sidney Bechet muses at the outset of his autobiography, “all my life I’ve been trying to explain about something, something I understand—the part of me that was there before I was. It was there waiting to be me. It was there waiting to be the music.” (4). Perhaps, then, there is also still much more African American narrative that is there waiting to be the music.