CHAPTER 6

WHAT IS “GREAT BLACK MUSIC”? 
The Social Aesthetics of the AACM in Paris

Eric Lewis

In the summer of 1969, members of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) recorded a number of albums in Paris. Many of the musicians had recently made Paris their home, including Roscoe Mitchell, Lester Bowie, Malachi Favors, and Joseph Jarman (known collectively as the Art Ensemble of Chicago, or AEC) and the ensemble of Leo Smith, Anthony Braxton, and Leroy Jenkins. The recordings, and their associated performances, were subjected to intense critical scrutiny by both the French press and American and English critics. The many albums issued during this period (a large number on the French label Actuel) are often thought to represent an artistic high-water mark for the music variously called “the new thing,” “avant-garde jazz,” or, as we shall examine, “Great Black Music.” It was certainly viewed by critics as being of great social, political, and aesthetic interest. George Lewis devotes a chapter in his magisterial *A Power Stronger than Itself* (2008) to the AACM in Paris, discussing with characteristic detail and subtlety a wide range of issues related to this period of the association’s history and evolution. Building on Lewis’s account, I want to explore the aesthetic ramifications of these AACM members’ varied artistic activities—from the music they performed, the albums they recorded, and the interviews and press conferences they gave to the critical reception they received and their responses to it—and argue that they consciously engaged in what I will call repeated acts of “aesthetic thickening.” These acts discharged both aesthetic and social functions and can therefore be fruit-
fully seen as the articulation of a particular kind of social aesthetics that is deeply rooted in aspects of a more general African diasporic aesthetic and the constellation of political and social issues focusing on identity that many see as an important function of such art. More specifically, these aesthetic and social functions are not distinct but require each other for their effect.

Much of the attention the music of the AACM in Paris received centered on a basic question: what “sort” of music were they creating and what is its relationship to jazz, on the one hand, and European art music, on the other? As we shall see, the members of the AACM were acutely aware of the importance of such genre/ontological judgments. Far from being passive recipients of categories, genres, meanings, and goals foisted on their art and actions by others, the AACM in Paris turned on its head the potential ghettoizing of genre categories and used them to widen the aesthetic and social interest of their art. They accomplished this by destabilizing any single genre perspective from which to critique their art and (therefore) argued that their art was best seen as multi-generic and thus aesthetically thick. As will be discussed more fully later, since membership in a genre partially determines what properties are potentially of aesthetic interest, multi-generic works are aesthetically richer than they might otherwise have been.

I begin by describing two particular recorded performances: “Silence” (1974), by Smith, Braxton, and Jenkins, and the album Message to Our Folks (1969), by the AEC. These performances play with and problematize assorted musical genre categories. I then relate this genre play to theorizing on the antiessentialist impulse found in much black art and the hypothesis of multiple authentic artistic identities that is seen to follow from this. After relating this to aspects of genre theory, I argue that the AACM in Paris, aware of the roles and functions of genres and their associated critical discourses, consciously manipulated these categories and expectations against a backdrop of criticism of their art that drew on both modernist and nascent postmodernist theory. I tie this together by sketching a theory of aesthetic thickness and argue that this is what the AACM in Paris were undertaking and show how this thickening discharges both traditional aesthetic and social/political functions. Finally, I discuss the expression “Great Black Music” as coined by members of the AEC, concluding that it takes on the function of a meta-genre, signifying on the notion of genre itself—an act that is simultaneously a social and an aesthetic critique of how genres function and the politics of genre ownership.
“Silence,” by Wadada Leo Smith, is a very sparse musical work, with long periods of silence punctuated by usually brief interjections of small percussion, reeds, trumpet, violin, harmonica, flute, or accordion. A skeletal structure is discernible (see table 6.1). The sections that contain sounds, viewed as single temporal blocks, become more closely spaced as the piece progresses. There is also an increase in the number of instruments that play simultaneously and the length of time that they do so, although the pitch density is never very great. There is always much “space” in the music and little in the way of musical syntax as traditionally conceived. It is unclear whether the “environmental” sounds such as footsteps and chair creaks are intentional or residue from a less than perfect recording environment. There is the regular use of extended techniques, although at no times are these foregrounded per se (the playing is controlled throughout and does not draw attention to its techniques). The instrumentation also avoids coding as jazz. The violin is often played in non-standard ways; the percussion lacks the characteristic tones and effects of a trap set; there is a preponderance of small percussion instruments; the trumpet is played with highly inflected timbre decentering its sound from the jazz world; and a series of reed instruments are all played with no sonic gestures toward the jazz idiom. Certainly, this piece is worlds away from the dynamics, pitch density, rhythmic sense, and melodic and harmonic language of what at the time was commonly called “free jazz.” It does not sound like how that species of new jazz associated with African American political movements of the time was often characterized, lacking, most obviously, the propulsive beat, loud dynamics, and pitch density.

The AEC recorded its album *Message to Our Folks* around the same time in Paris. The album opens with the piece “Old Time Religion” (itself a traditional), which here is not a spiritual so much as a sermon. Over a repeating four-note arco bass riff Joseph Jarman recites a sermon in what sounds like an archaic style, with vocal responses from the other band members. Soon, long horn tones start to interfere with the spoken sermon, along with a tambourine. The call and response continues, with multiple “amens” that resolve into the melodically sung line, “Give me that old time religion.” The vocals throughout are spoken with odd timbres that suggest post-production engineering. The piece rises in intensity with a series of “woops” and half-valve trumpet blasts. Then the horns play the emergent melodic line in unison, and the piece dissolves into a series of soft call-and-response lines, ending with a single long tone.

Taken in isolation, and with no contextual information, it would be very
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0:00–0:12</td>
<td>Rough violin bowing near bridge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0:39–1:08</td>
<td>Long alto horn (?) tone, mezzo-piano</td>
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<tr>
<td>1:12–1:14</td>
<td>Brief percussion hits, wood then metal with sustained overtones</td>
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<tr>
<td>1:31–1:35</td>
<td>Muted trumpet note</td>
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<tr>
<td>2:07–2:15</td>
<td>Violin note vibrato, mezzo-piano</td>
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<tr>
<td>3:02</td>
<td>Single short clarinet (?) note, with perhaps ghost images before and after, a result of recording process?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3:34</td>
<td>Very faint vocalization?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3:51</td>
<td>Footsteps?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:04–4:21</td>
<td>Triangle hit &gt; wood block hits &gt; hand muted cymbal? &gt; single tenor horn with white noise</td>
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<tr>
<td>5:59–6:09</td>
<td>Baritone horn notes piano, with overblowing &gt; single soft percussion hit?</td>
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<tr>
<td>6:18–6:20</td>
<td>Chair noises, very soft?</td>
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<tr>
<td>6:32–6:40</td>
<td>Violin notes, bow percussive taps</td>
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<tr>
<td>6:54–7:02</td>
<td>Forte trumpet riff, held note &gt; dense cluster (more ghost tones)</td>
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<tr>
<td>7:07–7:25</td>
<td>Ascending wood flute / recorder riff with simultaneous small percussion taps (first time more than one instrument playing)</td>
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<tr>
<td>7:30–7:33</td>
<td>Brief, soft wood percussion taps</td>
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<tr>
<td>7:45–7:57</td>
<td>Bells with scraped cymbal?</td>
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<tr>
<td>7:57–8:15</td>
<td>Harmonica melodic section</td>
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<tr>
<td>8:25–8:37</td>
<td>Low register trumpet glissandos &gt; chimes with single wood flute / recorder tone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:45</td>
<td>Chair squeak?</td>
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<tr>
<td>8:50–9:45</td>
<td>Accordion notes &gt; high muted trumpet &gt; valve flutter on sax with single short note &gt; violin note with horn tongue flutter then with forte trumpet riff and tenor horn? Upper harmonics / lower growl</td>
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<tr>
<td>9:49–10:21</td>
<td>Assorted percussion playing together &gt; wood flute?</td>
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<tr>
<td>10:30–11:55</td>
<td>Plucked violin with cymbal &gt; cymbals with human voice whistle &gt; soprano sax &gt; harmonica with trumpet and wood flute? &gt; percussion hit (sense of structure here)</td>
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<tr>
<td>12:07–12:47</td>
<td>Cymbals and gongs, wood block, with bass clarinet tone?</td>
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<tr>
<td>12:52–13:42</td>
<td>Percussion with recorder wood flute &gt; accordion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13:44–14:43</td>
<td>Assorted percussion decreasing tone density to end</td>
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*Note:* > = successive sonic acts. The question marks indicate my lack of confidence in my description of the instrument being played. Also, many sounds are discernible during this recording that may be “incidental” but that may still be intended as part of the listening experience. These details are not particularly important here.
hard to place this piece with respect to genre, time, or place. “What is it?” is the question I often get when I play this piece for listeners without supplying any prior information about it. Its reference to, and embeddedness within, African American sacred music is clear, but little else is. It is followed by “Dexterity,” a bebop standard written by Charlie Parker. Here the AEC seems to call into question one of the founding rules of the AACM, which is to promote original, or creative, music. While the founding members of the AACM held a range of opinions about both the desirability and interpretation of a prohibition on the performance of standards, this was, I believe, the first time an AACM ensemble had recorded a standard. While the performance is full of small idiosyncrasies, it is played fairly straight, with Malachi Favors’s walking bass line serving as a backdrop for a series of solos. While there are vocal interventions, the musicians are clearly sticking rather close to the piece as scored, and the overall structure of their performance places it recognizably within the jazz idiom.

Next is “Rock Out,” with Favors moving to fretless electric bass and someone playing brief electric guitar riffs, all over a busy percussion track. The piece is highly repetitive, with little rhythmic variation and no harmonic movement (indeed, for quite a while, apart from the repeating bass riff, no real harmonic or melodic material is present at all). At one point, a horn enters playing a rhythm-and-blues-style solo, with, however, little interest or real commitment; it is more satire than substance. The piece then moves to a brief bridge, after which the horn engages in more forceful honking, evoking the tradition of Texas tenors. The piece lies somewhere between parody and merely boring, as if the AEC are saying that rock music has black musical forms as its source but has denuded them of any musical interest. A brief guitar-driven section follows, with playing that would not be out of context in a punk piece; it, in turn, resolves into a series of distorted tones accompanied by car horns, cymbal crashes, and vocal exclamations. At this point the piece ends (is rock just noise?).

The final piece on the album, “A Brain for the Seine,” takes up the whole B side. It is far more abstract; small instruments abound; and the ensemble makes much use of space and silence. This piece occupies a sonic space similar to that of “Silence.” There are spoken interludes that ask, “Can I please have a drink of water?” as if one is begging an aloof French waiter or, perhaps, a jail guard. The piece sits squarely within the precise tradition of experimentalism that the members of the AEC and other first-generation AACM members developed. It sounds like the audio track of a performance-art piece, which in many senses it is (given the highly performative nature
of live AEC concerts). It lacks any rhythmic propulsion, although it occasionally has an implied beat. Sections include accordion, seeming to evoke French street musicians, while other sections, with piano and reeds, may remind one of modernist European art music before morphing into sonically sui generis ensemble playing. Carefully constructed trumpet and saxophone lines often emerge out of near-silence, with a focus on tone color and timbres produced by the use of extended techniques. There is a great variety of percussion accompaniment (the AEC was known to travel with more than two thousand instruments in total), from bells to assorted idiophones, gongs, horns, and cymbals, which collectively were to suggest to critics both the jungle and the city, along with many imaginary soundscapes. Near the end of the piece a brief melodic line is played in unison, resolving into a series of cymbal taps.

“Silence” (and the performances of the Smith-Braxton-Jenkins trio more generally) and the music of the AEC as exemplified by the pieces on Message to Our Folks confused both French critics and those from the English-speaking world precisely because of how the variety of their sonic gestures impeded obvious pigeonholing of their music into one genre category or another and so problematized discussion of their art from any single given critical perspective. It is worth delving into this “confusion” in some detail to flesh out the aesthetic strategies employed by the AACM in Paris related to this genre instability. As Stuart Hall (1992, 26) writes, “By definition, black popular culture is a contradictory space. It is a sight [sic] of strategic contestation. But it can never be simplified or explained in terms of the simple binary oppositions that are still habitually used to map it out.” It is a commonplace of postcolonial studies to note and theorize about the (apparently) contradictory elements of African diasporic culture and, in particular, to note the careful negotiations and manipulations of these contradictions undertaken by black artists. Such contradictions are demonstrated not to be “mistakes”—elements that need to be exorcized to create a consistent artistic discourse and practice—but are shown to be the building blocks of creative artistic practices. Hall goes on to say, “In its expressivity its musicality, its orality, in its rich, deep and varied attention to speech, in its inflections towards the vernacular and the local, in its rich production of counternarratives, and above all, in its metaphorical use of the musical vocabulary, black popular culture has enabled the surfacing, inside the mixed and contradictory modes even of some mainstream popular culture, of elements of a discourse that is different—other forms of life, other traditions of representation” (27). Such hybridity, with its element of the contradictory, is itself
theorized to be grounded in the affirmation of multiple identities by many black artists, itself seen as a product of colonialism, and to operate as a critique of essentialist racial discourse. A clear statement of this linkage is made by bell hooks:

Employing a critique of essentialism allows African-Americans to acknowledge the way in which class mobility has altered collective black experience so that racism does not necessarily have the same impact on our lives. Such a critique allows us to affirm multiple black identities, varied black experience. It also challenges colonial imperialist paradigms of black identity which represent blackness one-dimensionally in ways that reinforce and sustain white supremacy. This discourse created the idea of the “primitive” and promoted the notion of an “authentic” experience, seeing as “natural” those expressions of black life which conformed to a pre-existing pattern or stereotype. . . . Contemporary African-American resistance struggle must be rooted in a process of decolonization that continually opposes re-inscribing notions of “authentic” black identity. . . . When black folks critique essentialism, we are empowered to recognize multiple experiences of black identity that are the lived conditions which make diverse cultural productions possible. When this diversity is ignored, it is easy to see black folks as falling into two categories: nationalist or assimilationist, black-identified or white-identified. Coming to terms with the impact of postmodernism for black experience, particularly as it changes our sense of identity, means that we must and can re-articulate the basis for collective bonding. (hooks 1990, 28–29)

In a telling autobiographical passage from a different essay, hooks (1989, 11) tells us, “It was listening to black musicians like Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and later John Coltrane that impressed upon our consciousness a sense of versatility—they played all kinds of music, had multiple voices.” While the hybridity of African diasporic art practices, their playful use of contradictions, and their multivocality and denial of single authentic identities is now well established, it is rarely recognized that the enactment of these artistic strategies is itself employed as an aesthetic gambit—that the aesthetic theory that emerges out of these strategies both serves to critique racial and artistic essentialism and uses these contradictions to thicken the aesthetic value of such works. What results are not works fractured from the perspective of an aesthetics bent on revealing aesthetic value but works whose aesthetic worth can be viewed from multiple aesthetic vantage points, from assorted critical positions, and employing varied aesthetic discourses.
What I hope to do is demonstrate that the sort of critique of essentialism that hooks discusses is *consciously* undertaken by the AACM in Paris and that it is an *aesthetic* strategy that enacts this critique—a most intimate entwining of the social and the aesthetic. This can be seen as a way to cash out George Lewis’s (2008, 240) claim, concerning the criticism the AACM in Paris received, that “the [black] nationalist strait-jacket that the music of the AACM Paris contingent was being shoehorned into often served to limit the ways in which their music might be perceived and contextualized. . . . These and other reductivist accounts of their work were strongly resisted by AACM musicians working in Paris.”

The primary terrain on which contrasting critiques, both laudatory and negative, of the AACM in Paris were constructed, and to which the AACM responded (both while in Paris and in earlier and later statements), is that of the genre designations appropriate for discussing their music. Criticism was not so much directed at individual performances and musical works as it concerned the AACM’s musical practices writ large. *What* kind of music was the AACM producing, *why* was the AACM producing it, and (therefore) what critical stance is best suited to come to an understanding of it, were the questions asked, and the site of much controversy. Genre theory can help us both understand what was (and continues to be) at stake and make sense of the AACM members’ responses to the reception of their music, for they understood perfectly the role genre determinations play both at the level of general theory and in the precise manner that genre terms were employed by their critics, offering a critique of them. As hooks (1990, 28) says, “Such a critique allows us to affirm multiple black identities, varied black experience. It also challenges colonial imperialist paradigms of black identity which represent blackness one-dimensionally in ways that reinforce and sustain white supremacy.”

Genre theorists, particularly those who have focused on music, have stressed the role that musical genres play in the mediation of social identities and investigated the porous (synchronic) and malleable (diachronic) nature of genre boundaries. For example, David Brackett (2005, 75) states, “The notion of genre speaks to transitory divisions in the musical field that correspond in discontinuous and complex ways to a temporally defined social space. . . . Musical genres participate in the circulation of social connotations that pass between musicians, fans, critics, music-industry magnates and employees. That these connotations, these ‘meanings’ are accepted as ‘real’ speaks to the phantasmatic nature of identity, that ever-shifting sense of self that finds confirmation and reinforcement in quotidian social
practices and in a range of discursive formations, both institutional and shadowy.” How the “logic of genres” affects aesthetics is nicely summarized by Georgina Born (1993b, 215), who writes, “Indeed the wider cultural character of popular music, as of non-Western music, forces a reconsideration of the concept of the aesthetic itself—if, by aesthetic, we understand the ways that music-as-culture produces both meaning and pleasure. The point is that, in these cultures, since meaning inheres in the social, visual, discursive and technological mediations of music as well as in the musical sound, we may consider the aesthetic as subsuming these mediations. From this perspective, then, the social, the visual, the discursive and so on are all constitutive of the aesthetic.” The aesthetic properties of music are partially a function of the meanings attributed to music, and musical meaning is both partially constituted and constrained by genre.9 Here we can begin to see the complex intertwining of the social and the aesthetic at the site of genre, since genres are as much about identities (and they are, after all, themselves a kind of identity, a category of being) as they are about aesthetics. Perhaps better yet, no real separation of the two can be made. The AACM in effect combine the antiessentialism of hooks and the social aesthetics of Born in a demonstration that they are in effect two sides of the same coin. The methods for effecting the critique of essentialism are themselves aesthetic gambits, and the music that mediates such critiques is aesthetically richer for undertaking such a critique.

In an influential article concerning the role of art category/genre judgments in the formation of aesthetic judgments, Kendall Walton (1970) explores the manner in which what category we take an art object to be an example of establishes fields of aesthetic value and disvalue. Walton argues that the category into which we place an art object generates three kinds of properties that such an object may or may not manifest, which he calls standard, variable, and contra-standard. While he does not descend to the level of genres within a traditional art form (his account operates at the level of art forms themselves, painting, sculpture, and so on), his account strongly suggests the appropriateness of so doing. He concludes, “What aesthetic properties a work seems to have, what aesthetic effect it has on us, how it strikes us aesthetically often depends (in part) on which of its features are standard, which variable, and which contra-standard for us” (343). Walton goes on to argue that works that can be considered members of more than one art kind, or more than one genre, may well have distinct, even contradictory aesthetic properties attributed to them.10 In a passage that, as we shall see, can usefully explain some of the response to the AACM in Paris, Walton,
considering the aesthetically relevant property “shocking,” claims, “Shock then arises from features that are not just rare or unique, but ones that are contra-standard relative to categories in which objects possessing them are perceived. . . . What is important is not the rarity of a feature, but its connection with the classification of the work” (354). In this sense, the aesthetic properties that the works have are relative to the genre of which we take the work to be a member.11 Here we can see the importance of Jacques Derrida’s (1980, 59) notion of “participation without belonging” with respect to a genre, for the tendency to naturalize and view as objective the aesthetic properties, and thus meanings, we find in artworks is actually to a great extent a product of our genre judgments, as both Derrida and Roland Barthes have argued. Again, Born succinctly draws a moral from this:

But the point is that the relation of these extramusical connotations to music-as-signifier is cultural, historical, established by convention and in social practice. Yet they are experienced as “inherent in” or “immanent to” the music by a process of projection of the connotations into the musical sound object. It is this process of projection that achieves what Barthes calls the “naturalising” effect: the connotations appear to be natural and universal where they are cultural and historical. It is, then, the forms of talk, text and theory around music—the metaphors and rhetoric explaining and constructing it, whether propounded by composer, theorist or critic—that constitute its inherent discursive intertextuality, and that may liable to analysis as ideological. (Born 1993b, 222)

As we shall see, the AACM in Paris consciously fought against such naturalizing readings of its music on ideological grounds; its members attempted to widen the field of connotative projections into their music to avoid the situation in which the acceptance of certain connotations led them to ossify into essentialisms; in effect, to avoid a connotation becoming a denotation, in Derridian terms.

In a passage that he chose not to explore further, Walton recognized the aesthetic value, in and of itself, of the various, perhaps even contradictory, aesthetic properties a work might manifest due to the multiple genres in which it might plausibly be taken to “participate”: “Works may be fascinating precisely because of shifts between equally permissible ways of perceiving them. And the enormous richness of some works is due in part to the variety of permissible, and worthwhile, ways of perceiving them” (Walton 1970, 362). If we ignore his prescriptive talk of “permissibility,” what we have here is the recognition that what I call aesthetic denseness is itself an
aesthetic value; that works located in multiple social fields of art consumption, creation, and criticism, and that thus participate in multiple genres, may well be aesthetically richer for this. What is at stake in the genre debates surrounding the music of the AACM in Paris is not “just” the meaning found in the music, the role such music may play in an antiessentialist social agenda, the place of the association’s art in large art-related discourses and therefore history, but also good, “old-fashioned” issues surrounding aesthetic value, or how “fascinating” the AACM’s music may be. As Joseph Jarman sarcastically (as we shall see) yet truthfully states, “Yes we hope you enjoy our music.”

I now want to consider some of the writing of the members of the AACM in Paris and the criticism their music received to demonstrate how they engaged in collective acts of aesthetic thickening and to demonstrate that these acts discharged both aesthetic and social/political functions. In his dense book *notes (8 pieces)*, Wadada Leo Smith stresses the importance of autonomy in improvisation, which he sees as (among other things) freeing the “sound rhythm” elements from the limitations of reactive improvisation and from traditional elements of meter, tempo, and rhythm. Autonomy is one of the key concepts that the AACM members in Paris use both to respond to their critics and to describe their own music. This makes sense, since they are combating both genre judgments about their music made by others and related assumptions about what sort of music black so-called jazz musicians could, or should, produce. To be autonomous is in this context to be able to take control of these issues oneself. This stress on autonomy in improvisation suggests an emphasis on the autonomy of individuals more generally, something African Americans (among others) historically have been denied. More precisely, the expression of assorted identities, displayed via varied musical constructions, is a robust assertion of both personal and collective autonomy. It is the refusal to be typecast or essentialized.

By employing a variety of small instruments, each given equal footing; refusing to employ a strong rhythmic pulse; and employing long stretches of silence, Smith and the other AACM members in Paris were rejecting standard white constructions of black identity, particularly essentialist constructions of black music. The autonomy the music itself manifests is a product of Smith’s and his fellow improvisers’ autonomy in deciding what to play (and, crucially, when not to play), and, in particular, their conscious decision not to delimit their choices by genre expectations, themselves created
by assumptions concerning what they, as black musicians, should sonically produce and how their productions should be categorized. Smith himself seems to view his music this way: “I, a black man, a creative improviser, strive, through my improvisations and as an improviser to pay homage to the black, the blackness of my people, and that these creations themselves are for all, and the natural laws that are prevailing under these creations are relative as they are interpreted or perceived by beings of other peoples” (W. L. Smith 1973). He also writes, “Critics have applied narrow concepts to this improvisational music so that they could easily write about and define it and dictate what is the essence of black music-creative music. The percussion, brasses, strings and any other beaten, plucked or wind blown instruments in improvisational music are equal—they are all equal in the creation of music” (1973). Smith sees his music as part of a tradition of black music that has been (mis)constructed by critics. In other words, while he does view his music as speaking to issues of black identity, he is not limited by what many see as the characteristics music must have to be coded as black. He wishes to be able to construct his own history and future for his music—to express his personal autonomy via the creation of autonomous music. His music is to be considered part of the history of black music; the construction of a historical narrative of such music is at the forefront of what he is trying to accomplish. These thoughts are not mere conjecture but were made explicit by Smith himself with respect to “Silence” during an interview on the New York radio station WCKR-FM on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the AACM:

Well, we wanted to look at music that would give us a chance to express exactly who we were. And once you make that particular commitment, you have to find out how you’re going to do this. So we decided that we would write for instruments, and write for ensembles. We didn’t have to accept the history that was given to us before, and we didn’t even have to expect some kind of present history or future history. We were able to contemplate the real essence of creative music. We were able to come in with projects, for example, like “Silence” is a piece that has silence in it, and it came after John Cage’s “Silence,” but the philosophical connection of silence in this case was to materialize music within the space, and whatever was heard in the environment, whereas in the Cage piece there was absolutely no music in the space, and the gestures were the moments of the environment, you see. So creating a piece that seemed that it would look like and feel like a piece that came out of Cage’s tradition, in fact, we didn’t have that problem, because as I say, we are not bound by what came in the past or
Smith has consistently made claims such as this, and they form the core of notes (8 pieces), which explains some of the philosophy behind his compositional methods and contains more general thoughts about what has come to be called “creative music.” Smith begins with a “warning to black people” to take control of their own history (including the history of their musical practices) and to offer their own critiques of their music. This, he claims, is tantamount to becoming “self-conscious” (W. L. Smith 1973, 1). At the level of musical production, this is an argument for prioritizing improvising, “giving [improvisers] a part in the creation of the music” (13). Crucially, Smith builds this desire for autonomy into his music itself: “The concept that I employ in my music is to consider each performer as a complete unit with each having his or her own center from which each performs independently of any other, and with this respect of autonomy the independent center of the improvisation is continuously changing depending upon the force created by individual centers at any instance [sic] from any of the units. . . . In other words, each element is autonomous in its relationship in the improvisation” (22). He goes on to state that his compositional methods are created “in such a way as to preserve the autonomy of each improviser within a group, each group within the orchestra, and each improviser within the unit-total” (23).

Smith’s music is an expression of who he is, a self-construction of his identity (and the identities of his fellow improvisers). He rejects a view of “Silence” as just “Cage on the cheap” while denying that he was bound by others’ construction of black music’s history or similar constructions of European art music. By freeing himself from a history that historically has denied black artists autonomy, that has created a history and identity forcibly for such artists, Smith’s music—the silence Smith employs—speaks. It speaks of a new identity; it tells a new history. Silence as employed by Cage was perhaps a “mere” formal musicological element. Silence as employed by society against blacks (and others) was, and still is, a powerful tool of oppression. Silence as employed by Smith is both a musical “tool” serving to undermine a false construction of black music (as being necessarily rhythm-bound and pulse-driven) and a highly creative use of the tools of oppression to express musical and personal autonomy. When viewed against a backdrop of both Western experimental music and African diasporic music and the political issues that Smith foregrounds in his discussion of the piece, “Silence” be-
comes aesthetically thicker than it would be if one were to examine it from any single genre perspective. It is not just that both perspectives are “appropriate” but that the piece actually puts them in dialogue with each other, inviting you to compare your views about each, their differences and similarities, their distinct yet overlapping histories, and what follows from taking them to be mutually exclusive, how this might reveal perhaps often hidden prejudices.17

Smith is explicit in his goal of constructing a historical narrative for the ensemble’s music by referencing both Cage and the tradition(s) of black music. Thus, “Silence” is aesthetically thickened via genre multiplication, a multiplication that both problematizes our genre assumptions about black music and suggests a political agenda related to autonomy and freedom, both social and musical.

We can see how autonomy in “Silence” operates on assorted planes. The individual performers are given autonomy to choose what and when to play. Silences in particular are hallmarks of this autonomy, since their length, placement, and frequency in the piece direct one’s attention toward these performers’ decisions not to play. The resultant music, lacking many obvious hallmarks of traditional musical structure and mimetic content, can easily be heard to aspire to the oft-cited goals of autonomous music and to invite the associated acousmatic listening. Yet the emphasis on autonomy also refers to the politics of autonomy and its closely associated concept, freedom, and “Silence” can be viewed as performing—that is, instancing—what a more egalitarian social reality in which all are free to assert their autonomy would be. By using silence—a tool of oppression—to assert autonomy, Smith, Braxton, and Jenkins turn the oppressors’ means of oppressing back on itself. Autonomy is performed as much as it is injected into the music. Here what are at one obvious level aesthetic choices (to employ silence, to allow performers great autonomy in their sonic choices, to avoid melodic and harmonic development) discharge social functions and critiques (the assertion of alternative histories of black music and a rebuttal to essentialist readings of such music), and these social functions themselves determine the aesthetic choices that are made. This is a perfectly integrated social aesthetics, and if it has elements of a musical-social homologism that some find simplistic, I hope to have demonstrated that with the AAcm this operates at a high level of sophistication and is well theorized.

This brand of social aesthetics is consistent with assorted “founding” documents of the AAcm and comments by its original members. Consider
the following statement by two of the founding members Muhal Richard Abrams and John Shenoy Jackson (1973, 72): “The AACM intends to show how the disadvantaged and the disenfranchised can come together and determine their own strategies for political and economic freedom, thereby determining their own destinies.” This passage echoes their claim that the primary concerns of the AACM are “survival, accountability and achievement.” The collective responsibility they have in mind concerns the community of black artists and the wider community these artists represent and partially constitute: “In the area of accountability, Black artists should be held responsible to their brothers and sisters, who, in turn, should demand excellence and give their support to Black endeavors” (73). The notions of accountability and self-determination in these passages, which clearly have a primary social/political meaning, are, as we have seen, enacted or modeled musically by the AACM by holding each improviser responsible for his own sonic contributions, by allowing the music to perform its own history, and by creating, in effect, autonomous music.

These themes are picked up in the following passage:

The AACM is attempting to precipitate activity geared towards finding a solution to the basic contradictions which face Black people in all facets of human structures, particularly cultural and economic. There is an incessant demand in Black communities to solve the disparity between participation and nonparticipation in the social process. Our concerts and workshops in the schools and in the community are an effort to expose our Black brothers and sisters to creative artists contemporary to their time and present to them a factual account of their glorious past as an undergirding for facing the future. Demonstrating the creation and production of art will enhance the cultural and spiritual posture of a people and it is our firm belief that artistic appreciation will so enhance cultural and spiritual growth that the individual’s participation in the social process will be highly accelerated. It is the contention of the AACM that it is not the potential which Black people have which will determine what they do but, rather, how they feel about themselves.

Finally, the AACM intends to show how the disadvantaged and the disenfranchised can come together and determine their own strategies for political freedom and economic freedom, thereby determining their own destinies. This will not only create a new day for Black artists but for all Third World inhabitants; a new day of not only participation but also of control. (74)
Here participation in social processes that might bring about the betterment of their community is explicitly tied to participation in the creation of art. Artistic growth is almost presented as a *prerequisite* for social growth or change, and self-determination, as a social/political goal, is both practiced and modeled artistically. The AACM, and other likeminded cooperatives of black artist-activists, intends both its music/art and its organizational structures to model a more participatory egalitarian culture. Statements such as these by members of the AACM can easily serve to ground Jacques Rancière’s observation that “it is not a misunderstanding of the existing state of affairs that nurtures the submission of the oppressed, but a lack of confidence in their own capacity to transform it” (quoted in Bishop 2006, 83). The AACM’s practices and art serve to instill this transformative capacity in the association’s community.

Let us turn our attention to the critical reception of the AACM in Paris, and other comments by AACM members about their own work, to both flesh out the points made earlier and demonstrate the precise manner in which genre judgments were implicated in critiques of the group’s music. As demonstrated, the AACM in Paris used its relationship to genres to assert its agency against the danger, which Brackett rightly noted, that particular genre judgments fix too rigidly the meaning attributed to the music and the appropriate aesthetic to apply to it. For this reason, the members of the AACM in Paris steadfastly refused to talk about their music from any single genre perspective, and they constantly problematized attempts at genre pigeonholing by employing a variety of tactics, from straightforward assertions of the multi-generic nature of their music through the employment of contradictory utterances about their art and the use of multi-generic pastiche in their performances. Many of these tactics and tropes would soon become characteristic of postmodern art discourse, and the French critics were quick to pick up on the postmodern nature of the AACM in Paris’s art.

Genre-destabilizing gestures by the AACM have a long history. Consider, for example, the following poems from the liner notes to Joseph Jarman’s album *Song For* (1967) and the albums *Reese and the Smooth Ones* and *Message to Our Folks*, recorded in Paris in 1969 by the AEC:

**SONG FOR** is made of sound and silences from Musical Instruments, controlled by seven men; it’s Music that lasts 13½ minutes, it’s for itself, For love, for hate & for the God within
Us
All—it has no “meaning” outside of itself,
The music.

Then the following “ironic” poem is added:

Yes, we read and write music
And sleep, eat food, have visions, etc. . . .
“just like everyone else.” Yes we are humans.
No, we do not think the whole world is full of evil
Only ¾ of it. Yes, some of us have wives and children. No, we do not
work
Enough. Yes we hope
You enjoy our music.

The first poem appears to be a statement asserting that *Song For* is a work of absolute music, “having no meaning outside of itself.” Yet even this claim, in keeping with a major strand of modernist art-music theorizing, is immediately problematized by the claim that the music is for love, hate, and the God within us—a direct renunciation of the claim that it has no external meaning that, in fact, grounds the music in traditional strong emotions and religion, akin to claims often made about so-called primitive music when it is held in contradistinction to Western art music and its oft-theorized purely self-referential character. The second “ironic” poem reads like a series of responses to an imaginary interviewer (and picks up on a theme explored by the composition “Is Jazz Dead?” found on *Congluptious*, by the Roscoe Mitchell Art Ensemble, which is a parody of an interview of Lester Bowie by a jazz critic). Here Jarman is responding to a critic who questions the musical credentials of the AEC (“Yes we do read and write music”) and even their very humanity. There is the suggestion of a question about whether he thinks anyone could actually enjoy their music, and a question about his political/ethical take on humanity, itself answered ironically. His responses foreground the AEC members’ roles as traditional music makers (they read and write music), what they have in common with all humans (as if this could actually ever be in question), and their desire, almost universal among all artists, that their work be received well, that it be enjoyed. Taken together, these two poems suggest that the AEC members were situating themselves squarely (if not exclusively) within a tradition of Western art-music production and tacitly denying that their music should be read through some sort of narrow, perhaps political/racial lens.
Yet the ironic claim concerning the evil found in the world is picked up in other poems by Jarman in the liner notes of the Actuel albums the AEC recorded in Paris in 1969:

(excerpt)
REVOLT / DO NOT INCITE TO RIOT—INCITE TO / REVOLUTION
Quietly-calmly (to the point) universal energy black yea
he said / LOVE / Observe-poison is what the west would give
us. This message to Our Folks-Seek (love what you are) These songs then
to offer you your Truth of having what you are GREAT BLACK MUSIC
your light, sound & being TOGETHER we free together.

And

(excerpt)
INTENSIFY THE STRUGGLE, SEIZE THE TIME . . .
we joined the mau-mau to cut honkie throats, kill their children and
claim the
soil—it was a love movement seeking peace.

This poem squarely situates the AEC’s art practices in the radical black politics of the time—or, perhaps, a (white) reception of these politics. Again, ironies abound. While the message does seem to endorse the need for radical political change and to enjoin blacks to “seize the time,” it also plays into the worse (racist) fears of whites by claiming to “enjoy” the murder of white children and to view such actions as part of “a love movement.” Of course, the ironic nature of this last claim may reflect as much on white fears and expectations of the nature of black radical politics as it endorses the need for and legitimacy of violent political action. Either way, such statements are a far cry from the “music for music’s sake” claims found earlier; thus, these poems taken together led to confusion on the part of critics, many of whom missed the intended message: that the music of the AACM could, and sometimes did, speak to political issues, but that this was not the only lens through which it should be viewed. The music was intended also to stand on its own—to be effective examples of pure or absolute music, to yield “traditional” musical enjoyment. Indeed, as we saw, its autonomous nature, its internal musical structure, is (one) way that it discharges its social/political function. While certain historical discourses about art music would find a fusion of these positions difficult, the AACM do not endorse the agenda of either the absolute music camp or the music as politics (music with propositional content) camp.
The multi-generic, mixed-message nature of the performances by the AACM in Paris was not missed by the French critics of the time. The author of the program notes for the first AEC performance in Paris, at the Theatre Lucernaire on June 12, 1969, states:

It sounds like Xenakis. . . . Wait, there’s Stockhausen, with a beat to boot—here a pop progression, there we’re a bit bored—Klangfarbenmelodie—etc. etc. The AACM does everything. Coming into the Lucernaire, watch out for how they’re picking your pockets; you’ll be beaten, robbed, then abused, and sent back totally naked and crying for your mother. But certainly not back home. . . . If you knew how to listen to the AACM of Chicago, you would become, all at once, a subversive terrorist. You’ll see how intoxicating it is to kidnap Boulez, to kill Berio, or to beat up Xenakis. (Quoted in and translated by G. E. Lewis 2008, 223)

While it is perhaps appropriate to assume the author of this passage is manifesting a humorous tone, he does merge both high-art European methods and composers closely identified with absolute music and the radical—in fact, violent—tropes associated with black political radicalism and its associated music’s assumed adversarial stance toward European art music. George Lewis confirms both the syncretic nature of the music and the fact that the French both noted and responded to it:

Quick changes of mood were the rule, ranging from the reverent to the ludic. A quiet, sustained, “spiritual” offered by one musician might be rudely interrupted by an ah-ooh-gah horn or a field holler from another. A New Orleans–style brass fanfare would quickly be dunked in a roiling sea of tuned metal trash cans. An ironically demented fake-bebop theme could be cut up into a series of miniatures, punctuated by long silences and derisively terminated by a Marx Brothers raspberry. This was deformation of mastery, indeed. No sound was excluded and no tradition was sacrosanct, and French audiences and the jazz press quickly fell in love with the ruptures and surprises. (G. E. Lewis 2008, 226)

Lewis draws the conclusion that the practices of the AACM in Paris bore the hallmarks of postmodern artistic expression and seemed to be received that way by the French: “[Such descriptions by French critics] seem to support the notion that the work of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, where visual collage and historical montage combine, could exemplify Derrida's observation that collage/montage is the quintessential postmodern form of expression” (2008, 223).
Such use of collage and montage was recognized by the French press as contributing to the aesthetic of the music of the AACM. The AEC was said to “incorporate everything of value, classical, European, Hindu, African, seemingly without any prohibition against any kind of process of working with sound” (cited by G. E. Lewis 2008, 228). The AEC was not bound to any particular genre or culturally grounded methods of sound/music production, and while this was clearly viewed by many French critics as both new and liberating, it equally destabilized the aesthetic ground from which to critique the music. As Lewis (2008, 234) comments, “Rather than trying to fit in with an existing scene with defined borders of aesthetics, method and practice, AACM musicians in Paris made no attempt to contextualize their work solely within the jazz art world. Rather, they took work wherever they could, and regularly moved outside the frame of jazz, collaborating with a wide range of artists.” The aesthetic thickening that the AACM created via its members’ refusal to present music tethered to one genre or another also revealed itself via the choice of “scenes” in which they participated and not just the sounds they produced. These “trans-generic” explorations were seen by French critics as fitting squarely within the still-being-developed critical discourse of postmodernism. As Lewis (236) states, “Moreover, in contrast to much post-1990’s American scholarship, French critiques of the 1970s positioned free jazz as a postmodernist, rather than a modernist phenomenon,” He goes on to quote from Francis Marmande, who in 1971 talked about “ruptures” this music created, seeing in it “a certain lexical world that is constantly called upon (‘collages,’ ‘mixtures,’ ‘borrowing’ . . . ) scrupulous inventories of ‘quotations’ or ‘references’ from which programs for free music records or concerts are woven” (236). Here, characteristic tropes of postmodernism—intertextuality, collage, quotation—are used to characterize the music and its aesthetic power.

As we have seen, a key terrain on which the AACM in Paris fought for control over the appropriate interpretive context for discussing its art was its relation to black politics and broader issues of black identity and, in particular, the tendency among French critics to, on the one hand, make the linkage between radical black politics and the music of the AEC in particular, but on the other hand, to go on and assume that this political content revealed the primary or privileged position from which to access the AACM’s music. The postmodern tendencies the French were so quick to pick up on were often viewed as instrumentally serving the radical black political agenda, which those critics also assumed was “behind” the music. They treated “radical black music” as a genre term, and when they placed the AACM in it, they
tended to avoid considering alternative aesthetics. Again, the members of the AACM in Paris did not deny the presence of political aspects to their practices; they just denied particular interpretations of what the political content might be (the refusal to be essentialized with respect to a particular political message) and more global attempts to essentialize their music as being purely or primarily a means of mediating political messages—that is, that it was “just” political music. 19

Smith articulates these points nicely. The radical black political agenda French critics found in the music was not just a product of the sort of statements AACM members made in interviews and liner notes (as discussed earlier). It was heard via the AACM’s disassembly (hence, the relation to postmodernism) and “attack” on Western art-music conventions and the high-energy, often dissonant playing characteristic of (some of) the music of the AACM. These are forms of sonic homologism: an attack on white European musical conventions is heard as an attack on colonial power and racism, while high-energy dissonant music is heard as a violent struggle against such oppressive musical rules. As Smith says, “They thought we were going after the Western tradition. . . . We challenged that tradition, but it wasn’t our only investigation” (quoted in G. E. Lewis 2008, 242). Lewis goes on to quote Smith as saying: “From my recollection of interviews and interactions with people who were in the media system there, their questions were always limited to just the black issues, and what the music meant in those terms. Even though we would go into these areas of exploration, other ideas, they would always try to refocus it. Their idea was designed to present not just an artist, but a black artist in their society” (G. E. Lewis 2008, 242). As Smith says, “We were looking at music in a much broader way than a lot of other people in the music community at that time” (quoted in G. E. Lewis 2008, 244).

A narrow political reading of the music of the AACM in Paris served as a genre category from which to judge its music. The AACM members did, of course, contribute to the plausibility of such an interpretation. There certainly was a political element to the music, but how that element was best characterized, the fixity of the political stance it took, the relative importance of it to the musicians’ aesthetic vision, and, crucially the degree to which they intended their politics to carve out an exclusive position from which to consider their music were all contested by the members of the AACM. Their music was multi-generic and intended to be judged through a variety of lens.

Against this backdrop, it is perhaps not surprising that the very day after the AEC played a Black Panther benefit in Paris, an event that naturally
contributed to the radical political reading of their music, Jarman told the
audience at another concert, “The critics have called it avant-garde, they’ve
called it the New Thing . . . but we have only one name for it: ‘Great Black
which was to become a motto of the AEC and, to a lesser degree, the AACM,
is offered by Jarman as a genre to describe the music of the AEC of its/his
own choosing. As such, it evinces a sophisticated understanding of the issues
at play surrounding the reception of the music of the AACM and can be seen,
as I now show, as a perfect genre name, given the assorted commitments of
the AACM toward the social and the aesthetic.

The term “Great Black Music” has been received uncritically by many
people as squarely grounding the music of the AACM not just in black
politics but also in (so-called) radical black politics, as if merely mention-
ing blackness is to take a politically radical stance.20 As we have seen, the
AACM’s members did occasionally position themselves and their music in
sympathy with radical black political causes (although they never seem to
have advocated a narrow reading of black nationalism per se), but “Great
Black Music,” while suggesting such a political alignment, also denies an
exclusively narrow reading of the music to the exclusion of other critical
stances from which to discuss their art. The expression contains three words:
“Great,” an evaluative term that is deeply and obviously grounded in tradi-
tional aesthetic discourse; “Black,” a racial category; and “Music,” an art-
kind term that logically functions in many ways like a genre or meta-genre.
The expression is itself a concatenation of aesthetics, politics, and genres
and is best read, I claim, as a genre designation intended to include many
preexisting genre terms and the critical discourses with which they align
themselves, without prioritizing any of them and thereby taking a particular
theoretical stance toward genres and their aesthetic function.

The breadth with which Smith claims the AACM was approaching music
is intended to be foregrounded in the expression Great Black Music, and it
includes, of course, musical traditions that code as European and white.
Great Black Music, in a sense, is an anti-genre genre designation that is
intended to deny any particular narrow perspective from which to categorize,
and thus judge, the music while simultaneously seeming to do just that. It
is like the “trope of all tropes,” which Henry Lewis Gates Jr. calls the sig-
nifying trope, or an example of Derrida’s claim that there cannot be a text
that exists outside a genre. Each of the genres this expression implies (jazz,
new thing, experimental music, rhythm and blues, blues, African music, and
so on) is, at times, an appropriate perspective from which to consider the
AACM’s music and the different histories in which each perspective grounds the music. The distinct, if overlapping, aesthetics with which each perspective is in sympathy; the distinct properties of the music that bear aesthetic weight; and the distinct political and social narratives and functions each music is seen as discharging collectively serve to thicken the music of the AACM aesthetically. This thickening is a result of the multiple aesthetic perspectives one should take when considering the music of the AACM — that is, what the AACM is arguing for and (so) is what the term “Great Black Music” is intended to suggest. Yes, the music of the AACM is critiquing race relations and making universalist comments about music and culture and contributing to ongoing debates about art music and commenting on the received history of jazz and exploring aspects of black identity. It simply is not doing just one of these or any of these at the expense of the others. It is political music, and it is music for its own sake. The expression “Great Black Music” can now be seen as an exemplary instance of a double-voiced text: on its surface, it seems to endorse an essentialist reading of race and cultural artifacts closely identified with race, but its very point, on further analysis, is to warn one to avoid essentialist readings of black music (and thus of blackness in general). The essence of blackness is, in effect, to lack an essence, to resist essentialist constructions, and to enact blackness artistically is to repel essentialism.

Notes

1. While in Paris, Don Moye, who was already based there, joined the AEC. There were also musicians from abroad who had gravitated to Paris and engaged in collaborations with the extended jazz community there.

2. One sense in which this can be seen as a form of social aesthetics is the degree to which the aesthetic thickening requires more than just the production of certain sounds to take place. It is the combination of the AACM members’ assorted activities related to their music—from the sounds they played to the album titles they chose and the interviews they gave—that brings about this thickening. This account therefore is at odds with what is sometimes called “sonicism” as advocated by philosophers of music such as Julian Dodd (2007), and, in a related sense, Roger Scruton (1997).

3. Cf. Brackett 2005, 77: “The spectral protest of musicians hover before me, complaining that an emphasis on genre, and hence (to some extent) on structure, robs them of agency. . . . Moreover, when one posits a momentary relationship between a musical field of genres and different positions in social space, one is confronted with the instability of social identities, which, like genres, are subject to constant redefinition and which also become meaningful within a field of relationships at a particular moment.” I argue that the AACM in Paris used genres
and their characteristic instability to assert its agency. In this sense, the AACC M was a predecessor to Living Color, as described by Will Straw (1991, 384; emphasis added): “What these logics invite, however, is a reading of the politics of popular music that locates the crucial site of these politics neither in the transgressive or oppositional quality of musical practices and their consumption, nor uniformly within the modes of operation of the international music industries. The important processes . . . are those through which particular social differences (most notably those of gender and race) are articulated within the building of audiences around particular coalitions of musical form. These processes are not inevitably positive or disruptive of existing social divisions, nor are they shaped to any significant extent by solitary, willful acts of realignment. (Attempts to transform them into the bases of artistic strategy have generally failed, one notable recent exception being that of the group Living Colour).” For a useful, if at times obscure, account of the function of genres in “creating worlds” and determining actions, see Frow 2006.

4. Anthony Braxton, Leroy Jenkins, and Leo Smith, Silence, Freedom Records 278.128, 1974; Art Ensemble of Chicago, Message to Our Folks, BYG Records 529.328, Actuel 28, 1969. All listening was done with original vinyl, while timings were generated from digital copies.

5. This piece is usually said to have been recorded in Paris on July 18, 1969, as indicated by the record jacket. In private correspondence, Wadada Leo Smith informs me that it was in fact recorded in Chicago just before Anthony Braxton left for Paris in the early summer of 1969.

6. On the vexing question of defining “original” and “creative” music for the AACC M at the birth of the organization, see G. E. Lewis 2008, 98–103.

7. One may well think that the use of the voice and actually spoken sentences distances this piece from “Silence” insofar as this piece makes use of mimetic material and semantics in a way that the purely abstract “Silence” does not.

8. Hall (1992, 27) himself goes on to make the linkage with hybridity.

9. It is commonplace to state that genres establish criteria of both truth and meaning.

10. See Walton (1970, 347–48) for his discussion of what he calls “Guernicas” versus “Guernica.” Walton’s account can be profitably read alongside Jacques Derrida’s “The Law of Genre” (1980), written ten years later. A story for another day would be to locate where these two very different thinkers part company. Their disagreements focus, I think, on the unfortunate fact that Walton in the end wants to graft a theory of true versus false aesthetic judgments on his theory of art categories (a notion that is anathema to Derrida), and while he is sensitive to the changing nature of our genre judgments, he perhaps assumes that it is easier to tease out what these are than is actually the case. In effect he recognizes the importance of considering sociological “facts” but takes such facts to be neater than they often are. For an account of how the “sociological facts” may as often confuse as clarify our genre judgments, see Born 1993b.

11. I use the language of genre membership not as a commitment to a particular ontology of genres (that, say, they are types of which individual works are tokens)
but simply to foreground their classificatory aspect. Others, such as Flew, prefer to talk of works “performing” genres, but this notion also comes with heavy theoretical baggage.


13. In this sense, Smith’s sense of autonomy in music is crucially different from that commonly employed in modernist art-music discourse, where musical autonomy is not linked to the autonomy of the composers’ intentions but is somehow free-floating, wholly internal to the music itself. Smith is concerned most fundamentally with performed autonomy.

14. Excerpts from notes (8 pieces), including these passages, are available at http://music.calarts.edu/~wls/pages/philos.html.


16. The original is not paginated. The page numbers cited here are my creation.

17. That genre assumptions about black music may rest on prejudices follows directly from the history of race-driven music categories and, in particular, the characteristics of a “pure” form of jazz as being associated with various flavors of primitivism.

18. Similar claims were made by other AACM in Paris members, as found in an interview conducted by Daniel Caux in October 1969. Leo Smith claims that his goal is to employ “all forms of music . . . everything and anything is valuable,” while Jarman adds, “We play the blues, we play jazz, rock, Spanish music, gypsy, African, classical music, contemporary European music, vodum. . . . Everything that you’ll want . . . because finally, it’s music that we play: we create sounds, period” (quoted in Caux 1969).

19. Again, French critics seemed to pick up on the fact that the political and the aesthetic are not at odds with each other in the music of the AACM. In a classic and groundbreaking study, Phillipe Carles and Jean-Louis Comolli state that “with free jazz, one is witness to a real political positioning of the music, through the convergence of directly militant concerns, and their influence, also direct, on the very conception of the music and on its aesthetic explorations” (Carles and Comolli 1971, 71, quoted in and translated by G. E. Lewis 2008, 236). While one may object to aspects of Carles and Comilli’s precise account of the relation of “militant” political concerns to the AACM, they seem spot on in recognizing that political concerns, when they surface, need not come at the expense of aesthetics but may help give it form.

20. Recall that the genre “race records” was not abolished by *Billboard* magazine until 1949. It was replaced with “rhythm and blues” until within a month of Jarman’s creation of the term “Great Black Music,” when the genre became “soul.” In a certain sense, “Great Black Music” functioned to broaden the already widely accepted genre term “soul”; however, “soul” was imposed from the outside, by the white record industry, and no longer transparently admitted, for better or for worse, the racial connotations of the genre.