

The Challenge of the Changing Same: The Jazz Avant-garde of the 1960s, the Black Aesthetic, and the Black Arts Movement

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On March 28, 1965, a benefit concert for the newly formed Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School was held at the Village Gate in New York City.¹ Arranged by LeRoi Jones, founder of the organization and influential Black Arts Movement writer who later changed his name to Amiri Baraka, this event represents an historic confluence of dominant figures in the so-called "avant-garde" jazz movement of the 1960s. The concert brought together diverse voices from the experimental fringes of the jazz community, many of whom were entrenched in improvisatory methodologies that challenged traditional assumptions about jazz. In addition to performances by John Coltrane and Sun Ra, two of the primary innovators of the new music, a number of "first wave" experimentalists, like Archie Shepp and Albert Ayler, also appeared. Baraka was an outspoken black critic and supporter of the music *sui generis*; his essays frequently appeared in *Down Beat* and other music magazines; in 1963 he published *Blues People*, a landmark socio-political history of African American music; and his 1968 anthology of music criticism entitled *Black Music* analyzes the emergence of the jazz avant-garde in broad detail. This new music, or "New Black Music" as Baraka branded it, became the soundtrack to a developing black nationalism in literature. The Black Arts Movement looked to black musical expression as a site of authentic artistic "blackness." By exploring the conjuncture of music and literature, we see the emergence of a discursive critical space that generates a number of questions about "meaning" in music, and that is centrally constructed around improvisation, experimentation, and new musical vocabularies. Within this discourse, the function of criticism itself is attenuated through the music's radicalization of the moment, through its processual nature that undermines the possibility of reified, static identities and musical meanings.

In this essay, I focus on the relationship between writers associated with the Black Arts Movement and the experimental directions in jazz that occurred during the 1960s, the decade generally associated with the evolution of the Black Arts Movement as well as the rise of the jazz avant-garde. The emergent experimentalism in the music centered on transgressive and innovative uses of improvisation that led to new approaches, sounds and interpretive meanings. While it is necessary to understand that both poetry and music of the 1960s were important sites where hegemonic processes were contested, it is equally important to draw out differences in the strategies of various black artists. Throughout this period, the attitudes, values, and goals of black artists were anything but monolithic. Instead, the interrelated worlds of black literature and musical experimentalism created a dialogic space that encouraged interrogation, innovation and articulation of new artistic ideas. Within this environment, "black music" took on heterotopic meanings; rather than a rigid, collectivized notion of "black identity" in music, the Black Arts Movement and the jazz avant-garde were marked by multiple, sometimes competing, conceptions of artistic identity. In most cases, the musicians stridently resisted any single narrative of racial and socio-aesthetic identity.²

Rather than present a new thesis or interpretation about these historical moments, I am instead interested in a kind of anti-thesis. I wish to clarify the complex critical positions of those involved with the Black Arts Movement and the jazz avant-garde, while challenging the possibility of any one unifying narrative about music that is so radically centered on improvisation and processual understandings of performance that it even resists the oversimplified category of "avant-garde" that, for the sake of continuity and ease, I use throughout this essay.

The Black Arts Movement and the "Black Aesthetic"

The emergence of the Black Arts Movement demonstrates what Houston A. Baker, Jr. has termed a "generational shift" in African American literature ("Generational Shifts"). Responding to the perceived failure of the Harlem Renaissance and the "integrationism" of the 1950s, many African American writers, poets, and playwrights focused on redefining their work based on a "Black Aesthetic." Centered in New York, a cadre of young writers became the voice of this change. They were heard in numerous journals, magazines and other printed sources, chief among them *Negro Digest* and *Liberator*. At the forefront of this movement were writers such as Baraka, Addison Gayle, Jr., Hoyt Fuller, Larry Neal, Ishmael Reed, and James Stewart, to name a few.

In his heralding essay "Toward a Black Aesthetic," Hoyt Fuller boldly asserts that "the young writers of the black ghetto have set out in search of a black aesthetic, a system of isolating and evaluating the artistic works of black people which reflect the special character and imperatives of black experience" (9). Fuller and other black writers vehemently maintained that the dominant literary discourse did not represent this perspective. In fact, many of the emerging writers characterized the debate as a struggle between a "black" and a "white" aesthetic. In "Cultural Strangulation: Black Literature and the White Aesthetic," Addison Gayle, Jr. argues that the "white aesthetic

genealogy" is rooted in the foundations of western civilization and thinking, when "white" and "black" became signifiers for "good" and "bad." A literary discourse built upon such premises eliminates the validity of black experience. As Gayle maintains, "it is the definition with which we are concerned, for the extent of the cultural strangulation of Black literature by the white critics has been the extent to which they have been allowed to define the terms in which the Black artist will deal with his own experience" (45).

In "The Black Arts Movement," one of the clearest articulations of the Black Aesthetic, Larry Neal argues that "a whole new system of ideas" is needed to enable the expression of black experience in literature (185). In bringing together concepts from a number of black writers, and drawing on the concepts of Black Power and black nationalism, he explains that the Black Aesthetic has four essential parts: an assumption that its basis is already in place; second, the destruction of the "white thing" is a main motivation; third, it takes into account black interests; and fourth, it is, inherently, an ethical movement (186). Most important, however, is the insistence that "ethics and [. . .] aesthetics are one," a pivotal element in the aims of the Black Arts Movement. Writing, music, and other arts were viewed as vehicles to fight racism and oppression while asserting a self-determined vision of identity. The arts were sites of the Black Aesthetic, where white hegemonic discourse was contested by a black experience-based perspective. This perspective challenged notions of "art for art's sake."

Baraka's "Black Art" (1966), an important poem of the period, sums up this emphasis:

Poems are bullshit unless they are
teeth or trees or lemons piled
on a step
[.]
We want a black poem. And a
Black World.
Let the world be a Black Poem
And Let All Black People Speak This Poem
Silently

Or LOUD (1-3, 51-7)

Baraka's "Black Art" argues for the fundamental connection between artistic expression and social, political and racial identity. The black artist is challenged to create a "Black Poem" and a "Black World," and an emphasis is placed on immediacy—there should be no separation between art and life, no abstractions: art is specifics directed at particular issues. Immanent in this claim is the interweaving of ethics and aesthetics. From this combination comes the possibility of transgressive social and political action through artistic expression. Baraka's poem pursues this liberating combination; his work both exemplifies the direct connection of ethics and aesthetics, and demands that other black artists follow his lead.

Neal's "Black Boogaloo" (1969) continues the manifesto established by Baraka, and sets forth particular aims to various arts. Specific sections of the poem are directed to "Black Poets," "Black Painters" and "Black Musicians":

BLACK BOOGALOO
(Notes for Black Musicians)
Stop bitching. Take care of business. All get together all over America
and play at the same time. Combine energy. Combine energy. Play to-
gether. Wild screaming sounds [. . .]
[.]
[. . .] Calling all Black People.
Calling all Black people. (48-52, 59-60)

"Black Boogaloo" unflinchingly suggests that black music should be used as a rallying cry for liberation and power. By the end of this section of the poem, Neal transforms the "petty" issues that consume musicians ("business," "bitching," etc.) into a siren's call for the Black Arts Movement. Music is the "calling" of the people, a ritualistic sounding that denotes black identity and struggle.

Along with Neal and Baraka, many other black writers of the 1960s looked to music as a model for black expression in the arts. In addition to expository works that provide theoretical arguments for this relationship, black music was embraced in literature in two other primary forms. The first takes the shape of eulogy or dedication, in which music or specific musicians become the subject, theme, or homage within a poem. In these cases, the musician represents an

iconic image of Black identity. A second approach appropriates musical characteristics, devices, and improvisatory approaches as new modes of literary expression. Writers incorporate ideas that are often associated with music, such as repetition, variation, and improvisation, into their work.

This is certainly not a new development in the 1960s; Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Zora Neal Hurston, and other writers associated with the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s used music as a means of inspiration in their work. Like many of the writers of the period, Langston Hughes's use of the blues is highly stylized and demonstrates a complex approach to the intersection of music and literature. As Steven Tracy argues, "he attempted to capture and extend the nuances of the oral blues tradition [. . .] by exploring the ways in which the oral and written traditions can be applied and intertwined to great effect" (9).

A central project of the Harlem Renaissance was the "elevation" of the folk, or vernacular, to the level of the "classic" established arts. The blues, spirituals and work songs represented the "folk" element of African American culture. This trend was seen in music as well as in literature. Black composers such as William Grant Still and William Dawson, with their "folk" inspired symphonies, used black music as a strategy of representation in forms firmly rooted in the Euro-American concert music tradition. Still's *Afro-American Symphony* (1930) employs blues melodies as central themes, and Dawson draws upon the spirituals of the African American church in his *Negro Folk Symphony* (1931).

In addition to Harlem Renaissance writers, other African-diasporic writers began to explore the use of vernacular influences in their work. A number of Caribbean writers, such as Claude McKay,³ used language as a way to bring the "folk" into their work. In McKay's novel, *Banana Bottom* (1933), the characters "speak" in their own Jamaican creole patois. This lineage can be directly traced to the Caribbean Artists' Movement, a literary and artistic movement of the 1960s and 1970s that was contemporary to the Black Arts Movement.⁴ Within this larger, African-diasporic context, the vernacular, and music in particular, has been used as inspiration for literary "blackness."

In a related way, the chief figures of the Black Arts Movement hoped to harness the representational power of black music in determinations of identity in their work. Literary scholar Kimberly Benston notes that "the new writers seek to go beyond hypostatization of music as the perfect metaphor for black life; rather, they have collapsed the distinctions between musical and other black expressions to such an extent that black music is seen as black life itself, pressed into its purest essence" (*The Renegade and the Mask* 71). Benston's influential book *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African American Modernism* explores ways in which Coltrane's musical influence is heard in the work of various writers and ways in which the influential saxophonist becomes an icon of black identity. Throughout his analysis, and indeed in the Black Arts Movement as a whole, black music as black identity is a recurring trope. In the search for a Black Aesthetic rooted in experience, the highly improvisational and innovative music of the jazz avant-garde became a signifier for authenticity and a model upon which non-musical forms of cultural expression could be developed.

In his famous essay "The Myth of a Negro Literature" (1966), Baraka argues that music articulates authentic black expression:

Negro music alone, because it drew its strengths and beauties out of the depth of the black man's soul, and because to a large extent its traditions could be carried on by the lowest classes of Negroes, has been able to survive the constant and willful dilutions of the black middle class. [. . .] There has never been an equivalent to Duke Ellington or Louis Armstrong in Negro writing, and even the best of contemporary literature written by Negroes cannot yet be compared to the fantastic beauty of the music of Charlie Parker. [. . .] The development of the Negro's music was, as I said, direct and instinctive. (165-8)

Baraka's argument concatenates a number of interrelated claims about musical expression. First, black music derives from the "black man's soul": it comes from the innermost depths of black identity. This in turn creates an intrinsic essence that relates to experience, but is nevertheless immutable in the face of external pressures. Baraka's disdain for the black middle class is also quite obvious; the Marxist critique of black culture that informs Baraka's work challenges black middle class values. The upwardly-mobile assimilationism of the black middle class is seen as a "dilution" of black essence. According to Baraka, it "was the growing black middle class who believed that the best way to survive in America would be to disappear completely, leaving no trace at all that there had ever been an Africa, or a slavery, or even, finally a black man" (*Blues People* 124). In contrast to this, the true roots of African American identity lay within the "lower" classes, the folk and the vernacular. Baraka's mention of Ellington, Armstrong and Parker illustrates that his notion of black music is intricately connected to innovative developments in composition and improvisation. Within this argument there is certainly a tension between essentialized "European" and "African

American” identities that masks Baraka’s own affinity during this period with Marxism, a socio-political philosophy so intimately connected with European culture that it creates a number of dilemmas. In particular, it is somewhat perplexing that Baraka would use Marxism—a class critique reliant upon a European awareness of socio-economic stratification—to admonish the black middle class for becoming “white” while at the same time advancing an essentialized black musical expressivity.

Of paramount importance here is Baraka’s insistence that “authentic” black identity is articulated in music, a kind of racial essentialism that sounds in musical terms. Throughout *Black Music* and, principally, *Blues People*, Baraka develops a sustained argument tracing this identity in the development of African American music. In *Blues People*, his argument is simple: black identity, and therefore music, is a product of the black experience in the American context. In Baraka’s words, “It is a native American music, the product of a black man in this country: or to put it exactly the way I have come to think of it, blues [and consequently jazz] could not exist if the African captives had not become American captives” (17). Within this dialectic of essence and experience, Baraka frames the evolution of jazz as a series of contrasting responses to the black experience in America.

One of Baraka’s most poignant and illuminating essays on music and racial identity is “The Changing Same (R&B and the New Black Music)” (1966). As the title indicates, Baraka discards the term “avant-garde” and replaces it with “New Black Music.”⁵ This often-cited essay details the ubiquitous essence, or “changing same,” of black musical expression. His argument centers on the connection of “form” and “content,” and seeks to show a similar “implication of content” amongst black musics that sound very different. The essay begins with the radical assertion of the “blues impulse,” the fundamental changing same present in the panoramic diversity of black musical expression: “THE BLUES IMPULSE transferred ... containing a race, and its expression. Primal (mixtures ... transfers and imitations). Through its many changes, it remained the exact replication of The Black Man In The West” (180). Baraka continues by explaining that the most European-influenced black music (which he seems to suggest is the most “avant”) and the “Blackest jazz” share this blues impulse. In doing this, he creates a continuum of black identity in music, enabling him to describe musical expression in terms of proximity to the blues impulse.

Baraka’s essay centers on specific examples in both R&B and the new black music. In R&B, Baraka highlights the difference between James Brown, who “represents” a people, and Leslie Uggams, a “half-white” singer. Despite their clear differences in “form,” both singers maintain a direct connection to the blues impulse. The ultimate difference in form, however, is represented by the highly improvisational new music. Here, Baraka creates a continuum that includes the secular, European-influenced music of Cecil Taylor at one end, and the spiritually-focused music of Albert Ayler and the broad vision of Sun Ra at the other. Ultimately, he concludes that, despite their clear differences in form, “the New Black Music and R&B are the same family looking at different things” (210).

The role of religion in music is a precarious trope in Baraka’s “changing same.” The tension between religion and secularism factors into his description of Christianity’s role in the transformation of African slaves to African Americans:

The Christian slave became more of an American slave, or at least a more ‘Westernized’ slave, than the one who tried to keep his older African traditions. The slave masters also learned early that the Africans who had begun to accept the Christian ethic or even some crude part of its dogma were less likely to run away or start rebellions or uprisings [. . .] It acted as a great pacifier and palliative, although it also produced great inner strength among the devout and an almost inhuman indifference to pain. (*Blues People* 38)

Symbolically, however, the embracing of Christianity by slaves “represented a movement away from Africa. It was the beginning of Africa as ‘a foreign place’” (39).

The music of the black church in America serves as his point of departure in “The Changing Same (R&B and the New Black Music).” Pointing to the difference between spirituals and the secular nature of James Brown’s music, he contends that black music moved away from the church as it evolved. Baraka concludes that “most of the R&B people were really into the church at one time, and sang there first, only to drift or rush away later” (191). He also maintains that “the new jazz people are usually much more self-consciously concerned about ‘God’ than the R&B folks”—he identifies Coltrane, Ayler, Sun Ra, and Pharoah Sanders as “God-seekers.” His characterizations of these musicians, specifically the religious aspects of their music, are ripe with tensions. Religion and “spiritualism” are key terms that are exchanged at crucial moments. Moreover, Baraka identifies Taylor and Shepp as “secular” artists, providing a rather detailed assertion of Shepp’s self-proclaimed secularism.

Read within the experience-based, Marxist-influenced position of the Black Aesthetic, the tension between religion and secularism in the New Black Music assumes a poignant character. A number of questions highlight this pregnant tension: does Baraka's description of the "God-seeking" musicians (Coltrane, Ayler, Sun Ra, etc.) strategically connect them to black experience? What is the role of religion in the Black Arts Movement? How do writers of the Black Arts Movement interact with the religious contingent in the new music? The seeming contradictions between religious expression and the goals of the Black Aesthetic ("poems are bullshit unless they are teeth" and aesthetics and ethics as one) highlight a powerful discrepancy in Baraka's narrative. Although the question of the relationship between African American forms of Marxism and religion, especially as a measure of musical expression, is well beyond the scope of this essay, it is somewhat easier to explore the confused terrain of religion and spirituality in the reaction to the jazz avant-garde by black writers of the time. To begin to explore this issue, I will turn first to the way many black writers have used Coltrane as a symbol of black expressivity.

Throughout the work of writers in this period, Coltrane acts as an iconic figure in the relationship between literary and musical expression. The deep rich tone of the saxophonist's sound, as well as his improvisational and expressive techniques (screaming, wailing, honking, repetition, and so forth), serve as cross-fertilizing, interdisciplinary borrowings for writers. Baraka, Larry Neal, Michael Harper, Jayne Cortez, David Henderson, Sonia Sanchez, Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee), A.B. Spellman and others used Coltrane's music as inspiration for new expressive techniques in poetry writing and performance. From the 1960s to the present, a large number of poems have been written in homage to the saxophonist. This body of work is commonly referred to as the "Coltrane poem."⁶

the tenor sax cannibal
heart, genitals and sweat
that makes you clean-
a love supreme, a love supreme-

(Harper "Dear John, Dear Coltrane" 29-32)

Harper's "Dear John, Dear Coltrane" is perhaps the most widely-known Coltrane poem. Echoing Coltrane's famous composition, the repeated motif "*a love supreme*" acts as a structural device throughout the poem. The motif separates and anchors different images of impotence, transformation, sickness, love and hope—the constant being "*a love supreme*." This dialectic of transformation/permanence (possibly read as the *changing same*) easily corresponds to the nature of the first movement of Coltrane's composition. In the immensely influential 1965 recording *A Love Supreme*, Jimmy Garrison's bass-line anchors the entire first movement and is eventually sung by Coltrane with the lyrics "a love supreme." Although Coltrane's solo during the movement builds, transforms, and covers many distinct areas, Garrison's bass-line acts as a continual point of reference. In "Dear John, Dear Coltrane," Harper's repetition of the phrase "a love supreme" appears to function in a similar manner.

Repetition plays a dominant role in many Coltrane poems. Harper's "Brother John" demonstrates a Coltrane-like performative sensibility, in which a phrase is repeated and strategically transformed. This approach echoes Coltrane's exhaustive exploration of improvised melodic development that became a trademark of his music from the 1960s. Harper's poem accomplishes this in a similar manner:

Black man:
I'm a black man;
I'm black; I am-
A black man; black-
I'm a black man;
I'm a black man;
I'm a man; black-
I am-

The core statement "I am a black man" is explored, juggled, and rearticulated, finding a final resting point in the simple assertion "I am." Whether it is meant as an open-ended statement of identity, or as a claim to Coltrane's enduring presence, such transformation through repetition is an open musical signifier. It refers to musical improvisation and exploration. A similar use, on a larger scale, is found in Jayne Cortez's "How Long Has Trane Been Gone." Functioning simultaneously as remembrance, oral history, and accusation, Cortez's poem gradually transmogrifies the phrase "how long has Trane been gone" to "How long/Have black people been gone" (in Benston, *Performing Blackness* 314, 316). The initial phrase is stated at the beginning (as a title) and is slowly transformed throughout the poem. The poem suggests the collapse of the distinction between Coltrane and "black people" – Coltrane's identity is equated with a core black identity.

The iconic representations of Coltrane throughout these poems serve a variety of functions. As Benston eloquently states, “Coltrane’ thus emerges as a node of multiple, potentially conflicting, implications that, taken together, evoke black modernism’s effort to reimagine relations of self and other, individual voice and communal performance” (*Performing Blackness* 186). Coltrane’s symbolic meaning vacillates between the improvisational and visceral qualities of his music and saxophone sound, and the transcendent spiritualism expressed through his later music. The universal nature of such titles as “A Love Supreme,” “Ascension,” “Om,” “Expression,” and many others, suggests that Coltrane’s music and spirituality were oriented beyond the experience-based parameters of the Black Aesthetic. Even though other songs problematize this characterization of Coltrane’s music, songs such as “Africa,” “Ogunde,” and “Dahomey Dance,” there is still a clear direction throughout his musical development that culminates in 1967 with the abstract, universal-oriented *Expression*. In a somewhat related way, the iconic representation of Coltrane within the Coltrane poem strikes a precarious balance between spiritualism and racial particularity. Baraka, Neal, Cortez, Sanchez, Harper and other Black Arts Movement writers often rearticulated Coltrane’s spiritualism in vernacular terms. In doing this, these writers shifted the iconography away from spiritualism towards the principles of the burgeoning black nationalism of the 1960s. Before we explore the possible disjunctures created by this turn, we must first look at the emergence of the new music of the Black Avant-garde.

The Inspiration: New Directions in Black Music

The appearance of saxophonist Ornette Coleman in New York in November of 1959 marked the beginning of a new era in jazz. His group’s legendary series of performances at the Five Spot drew immense attention from critics, musicians and listeners. Coinciding roughly with two other landmark recordings of the year, Miles Davis’s *Kind of Blue* and John Coltrane’s *Giant Steps*, Coleman’s music stands in stark contrast to other directions in jazz of the period.

Accompanied by a series of record releases,⁷ Coleman’s “sudden” arrival on the New York scene certainly caused a sense of unbalance, and dramatically asserted that his music was, as one of these record titles indicates, *The Shape of Jazz to Come*. *Down Beat* columnist George Hoefer characterizes the controversy surrounding Coleman’s music: “He’ll change the entire course of jazz,” “He’s a fake,” “He’s a genius,” “He swings like HELL,” “I’m going home to listen to my Benny Goodman trios and quartets,” “He’s out, real far out,” “I like him, but I don’t have any idea of what he’s doing” (qtd. in Litweiler, *The Freedom Principle* 78).

Hoefer’s descriptions depict the wide range of responses to Coleman’s music from musicians, critics and listeners. Informed by his early life in Texas, his musical development in regional rhythm and blues bands, and the laboratory-like creative space of Los Angeles in the mid- to late-1950s, Coleman’s alto sound is both a throwback to blues-influenced saxophonists, and a modern projection of bebop-inspired phrasing sensibilities. His unique, fluid tone and open-ended approach to melodic-harmonic structure (sometimes referred to as “harmolodics”⁸) offered a very different alternative to Davis’s “modal” approach, as well as to Coltrane’s harmonically-overdriven “Giant Steps.” Coleman’s approach to improvisation was melodic and developmental, but much more open than the bebop-influenced “straight-ahead” and hard bop jazz scenes of the late 1950s and 1960s. Also, his 1961 *Free Jazz* release was one of the first of its kind—extremely loose ensemble arrangements, and, for the most part, devoid of pre-planned structure. In some ways similar to New Orleans jazz, the double quartet led by Coleman on *Free Jazz* negotiated a highly interactive collective improvisation. While the dominant improvisatory approach was still solo-based and the piece retained a regular pulse, the improvised backgrounds behind the solos and the lack of harmonic structure provide a clear sense of the “freedom”⁹ that Coleman strove for in his music.

Prior to Coleman’s emergence in 1959, a number of older, more established musicians acted as pioneers for the new music and influenced its development. Charles Mingus, Sun Ra, Coltrane, and Cecil Taylor were among this group, most of whom were not only influencing the avant-garde, but also becoming strong voices within the new music. Iconoclastic bassist, composer and bandleader Charles Mingus often included varying degrees of collective improvisation in his music. Many of his compositions, especially the larger-form pieces, such as *Black Saint and the Sinner Lady*, rely heavily on various approaches to improvisation that transcend the dominant solo-based norms of jazz at the time.

Pianist Cecil Taylor was also a pioneer of new improvisatory approaches in jazz and would become a leading figure in the avant-garde. Originally from Long Island, Taylor attended the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston in the early 1950s. Critics tend to make much out of this “European background,” including Baraka. Taylor’s music, though, sounds like no other pianist’s in the avant-garde. His percussive, cluster-oriented approach is an identifying characteristic in all the periods of his music. *Conquistador* and *Unit Structures*, two of his major recordings during the

1960s, feature a number of the musicians associated with Taylor during this period: Jimmy Lyons (alto saxophone), Andrew Cyrille (drums), Henry Grimes (bass) and Alan Silva (bass).

Coltrane is another of these pioneering forerunners to the avant-garde of the 1960s. As Ekkehard Jost maintains, similar to Taylor, Coltrane fulfills a “dual function—first a pioneer, then as the central figure of post-1965 free jazz” (11). Coltrane’s work with the first Miles Davis Quintet in the mid-1950s, and then his own quartet in the late-1950s and 1960s, shows a series of evolutionary phases in his musical output. The religious orientation of *A Love Supreme* (1965) signaled a shift in his musical conception that would lead him into the terrain typically associated with the avant-garde.

Approximately a year later, Coltrane assembled a large group of his regular musical collaborators, augmented by a number of younger, “second wave” avant-garde musicians, and recorded one of his most influential albums, *Ascension* (1966). Among the younger musicians on the recording that would become dominant voices in the “new thing” were Archie Shepp, John Tchicai, Pharoah Sanders and Marion Brown. The extended, open-ended composition begins with a loose ensemble passage led by Coltrane’s dominant tenor saxophone voice. Eventually, solo sections emerge which are intersected by various similar ensemble passages. In the liner notes, A.B. Spellman, a key Black Arts Movement writer who frequently interacted with musicians, notes that the recording is a “plexus of voices” that, as saxophonist Archie Shepp adds, “achieves a certain kind of unity.” In other words, each performer is both individual and a part of the whole, a part of the community. Shepp also argues that this type of individual/community, part/whole relationship has key forerunners that, at the time, were rarely mentioned in the discourse surrounding Coltrane and Coleman:

That’s the kind of thing Sun Ra has been working on for years, and it’s a damn shame that Sun Ra’s been ignored for so long. Sun Ra and Cecil Taylor have both done this a lot—setting up the horns so that they play things against as well as with each other. The precedent for what John does here goes all the way back to New Orleans, where the voicings were certainly separate even though the group idea held. This is like a New Orleans concept, but with 1965 people. (*Ascension* liner notes)

As Shepp illustrates, Sun Ra is also a predecessor and pioneer of the avant-garde. His dramatically unique approach to performance and mysticism often sets him apart from other avant-garde musicians. Born in 1914 in Birmingham, Alabama, pianist and composer Herman Blount adopted the name “Ra” after he discovered that it referred to the sun god of ancient Egypt (Szwed 83). In fact, most of Sun Ra’s musical life was spent looking to bigger horizons, larger traditions, and eventually to “space” as “the place.” After moving to Chicago and becoming a mainstay in the jazz scene, he formed the “Arkestra.” In 1961, the group moved to New York, and became a prominent force in the jazz community. Sun Ra’s philosophy is simple yet deep: “I want everybody to have immortality. It’s too big for one nation, one people, or even one planet” (qtd. in Thomas 19). The Arkestra’s music supports this claim. With pieces titled “Angels and Demons at Play,” “We Travel the Spaceways,” and “Rocket Number Nine Take Off for the Planet Venus,” the music defies standard categorization, and frequently shifts from one stylistic influence to another. Most of the group’s performances also included multimedia elements—spoken word, dance, and elaborate costumes with mythological ornamentation. These unique elements attest to the experimental nature of Sun Ra’s music and, as we will see below, prompted him to collaborate with Black Arts Movement writers.

Shepp’s eloquent exposition on Coltrane’s music included above evidences his stature as one of the most outspoken of the avant-garde musicians. A tenor saxophonist with a deep, coarse tone reminiscent of rhythm and blues players, Shepp arrived in New York in 1959 and quickly became a prominent voice in the new music. Amongst the “new thing” ranks, Shepp was perhaps the one most closely allied to the Black Aesthetic. He frequently articulated this in interviews:

The Negro musician is a reflection of the Negro people as a social and cultural phenomenon. [. . .] His purpose ought to be to liberate America esthetically and socially from its inhumanity. The inhumanity of the white American to the black American as well as the inhumanity of the white American to the white American is not basic to America and can be exorcised. (qtd. in Baraka, “Voice from the Avant-garde” 20)

His music itself was a strong assertion of this “aesthetic” liberation. On his well-known 1965 recording *Fire Music*, Shepp’s music twists and turns between rhythm and blues inspired grooves, bebop informed angularity, collective improvisation, and dramatic social commentary. A powerful moment on the album occurs in “Malcolm, Malcolm—Semper Malcolm” when Shepp recites a poem in homage to the influential black leader. Prior to his arrival in New York, while attending Goddard College, Shepp studied poetry and playwriting (“Voice of the Avant-garde” 19)—this background surely influenced his close association with Baraka and others and helps to explain his vocal

performance on the piece. His reading of “Malcolm, Malcolm–Semper Malcolm” demonstrates a stark theatrical awareness, rooted in a performative sense similar to the way Black Arts writers used jazz as a creative model.¹⁰ Musically, he viewed his work as an attempt to reconnect with earlier forms of African American music. Describing the new music, Shepp claimed that “in a way it’s more of a throwback rather than a projection into some weird future. A throwback in the direction of the African influences on the music” (qtd. in “Voice from the Avant-garde” 20). Although he was perceived as “avant-garde,” he understood his music as a “throwback,” as historically relevant and connected to a broad awareness of black musical expression. However, Shepp’s view of “race” and music was complicated, and diverged somewhat from the black/white binary central to the Black Aesthetic. In a 1965 roundtable discussion titled “Jazz and Revolutionary Black Nationalism,” which included Baraka and others, Shepp emphasizes the importance of class (even more than race) in the continued oppression of African Americans and, according to Eric Porter, “warned against romanticized notions of blackness” (201). Consequently, while Shepp’s view of black musical expression is a strong voice in support of the Black Aesthetic, his racial politics retain a cautionary stance against the black/white binary implied by many Black Arts writers.

Albert Ayler, another saxophonist associated with the new music, emphasizes “peace” and “spirituality” through his music. Songs such as “Ghosts” and “Spirits” invoke a deep desire to transcend time and space, simultaneously referring to the history of black music and allowing exploration of new modes of expression. In an interview in 1966, Albert and his brother Don Ayler, a “new thing” trumpeter, emphasize their approach to music:

We are the music we play. And our commitment is to peace, to understanding life. And we keep trying to purify our music, to purify ourselves, so that we can move ourselves—and those who hear us—to higher levels of peace and understanding. You have to purify and crystallize your sound in order to hypnotize [. . .]. To accomplish this, I must have spiritual men playing with me. (qtd. in Hentoff, “The Truth Comes Marching In” 17)

For the Aylers, music was a universal language focused on spiritual transcendence. The manner in which they describe their music suggests that it is meant to act as a panacea to divisive social issues. While Albert and Don Ayler’s music is often embraced by the writers of the Black Arts Movement, their message diverges somewhat from the black nationalist concerns of Baraka, Neal, Fuller and others.

Another pair of musicians, alto saxophonist John Tchicai and trombonist Roswell Rudd, show an additional interesting ambiguity involving Baraka. In 1964, Tchicai and Rudd, along with drummer Milford Graves and bassist Lewis Worrell, formed The New York Art Quartet. Although the group was together for only a year, their self-titled debut album was quite influential. One cut combines a Rudd composition, “Sweet,” with Baraka’s recitation of “Black Dada Nihilismus.” Compared to Shepp’s performance of “Malcolm, Malcolm–Semper Malcolm,” Baraka’s delivery seems held back and emotionally controlled. While scholars have noted that “Black Dada Nihilismus” represents an attempt to use black vernacular and musical expression as informing inspirations for new literary performance practices (see Benston, *Performing Blackness* 217-20), I feel that it is still far from the expressivity that poets like Sonia Sanchez would develop later. More striking, however, is the discrepancy between the role of Baraka’s poem as emblematic of the Black Arts Movement’s key philosophies, and the different outlooks of the musicians. While Graves tended to support the key tenets of the Movement (see Mathieu), Rudd and Tchicai saw their music in more universal terms.¹¹

In this conflicted space, saturated with a multiplicity of views, Baraka’s involvement with the New York Art Quartet embodied the diverse nature of the avant-garde environment. Rather than one unified view of the new black music, musicians and critics maintained a variety of positions.

(Re)Presenting the Music: Critics and Musicians Speak Out

By the end of the 1960s, the “new thing” in jazz was firmly established in the cultural and musical fabric of New York. The influential, pioneering musicians of the 1950s and early 1960s had been answered by a cadre of “first wave” experimentalists. Other, younger musicians, such as Tchicai, Rudd, Marion Brown and others were emerging as a “second wave.” In addition to the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School event described above, Bill Dixon’s “October Revolution in Jazz” in 1964 and the subsequent formation of the Jazz Composers Guild served as confirmation that the new music was a permanent, if structurally unsupported, development (see Levin). Although a sufficiently detailed account of new musical developments pioneered by these forward-thinking musicians and activists is well beyond the scope of this limited essay, it is clear that a multiplicity of musical and social voices participated. Other dominant elements in the cultural milieu of New York, the music community, and young black intellectuals, were the assassinations of Malcolm X (1965) and Martin Luther King, Jr. (1968), and the growing voice of Stokely Carmichael and other Black Power leaders. Carmichael, who was elected chairman of the Student Non-violent Coordinating

Committee (SNCC) in 1966, coined the term “Black Power” at a rally in Mississippi later that same year (Kaufman). The cry for Black Power marked a radical shift in the organization: SNCC became an all-black group, and the concept of Black Power became a rallying motto throughout much of the black intellectual community. The inclusion of Carmichael’s 1966 essay “Toward Black Liberation” in *Black Fire*, a key anthology of black writing edited by Baraka and Neal, established a documented link between Black Power and the Black Arts Movement. A number of the essays in *Black Fire* echo Carmichael’s motto. In 1968, Larry Neal makes this connection clear when he asserts that “Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept” (184). Within this context, we now turn to the interaction between writers and musicians.

Throughout this period, the critical environment of the jazz avant-garde consisted of three general constituencies: the press (*Down Beat* and other jazz publications, the critics that wrote essays in these publications, and the published letters from readers); writers aligned with the Black Arts Movement; and musicians performing the new music. The boundaries of these three areas were somewhat permeable; for example, Baraka and Spellman were frequently published in the music press, yet they were dissident voices. Because of this border-crossing, Baraka often became a “spokesman” for the musicians, defending their music and speaking out against the press and “white critics.” Two camps existed in the press, one with Baraka and a few outspoken musicians informed by the Black Aesthetic, and another that attacked the jazz avant-garde on the basis of both musical and political concerns. A thin middle ground was negotiated by critics such as Don Heckman, Leonard Feather, Don DeMichael, and Dan Morgenstern, who published interviews with key figures in the new music (presenting a somewhat more direct representation of the artists).

Because of his fundamental place in various developments in jazz and his prominent public stature in the music, Coltrane became the subject of intense debate. Beginning in the early 1960s, jazz critics bombarded Coltrane with severe criticism, even to the point of calling his new musical directions “anti-jazz” (a term used in 1961 by *Down Beat* critic John Tynan and later picked up by others). In response to this, two interviews took place in *Down Beat* in which Coltrane defended his music. The first of these, “Coltrane on Coltrane” (Coltrane and DeMichael), focuses on explaining his musical approaches and the motivation behind his search for new means of expression. He concludes by confirming that he was looking to other traditions to “broaden his musical outlook [. . .] to come out with a fuller means of expression” (27). Two years later, in Don DeMichael’s “John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy Answer the Jazz Critics,” Coltrane takes a decidedly pragmatic approach to the criticism waged against the music that he and Dolphy were exploring: “quite possibly a lot of things about the band need to be done. But everything has to be done in its own time. There are some things that you just grow into” (23). In both of these interviews, Coltrane candidly addresses the faultfinding concerns of the critics, and resists framing the responses to his music in terms of race, or an emergent New Black Music. Even when asked if his music expresses political and social issues at the somewhat persistent prodding of Frank Kofsky, the saxophonist replies in a straightforward yet noncommittal manner: “it’s the same socially, musically, politically, and in any department of our lives” (qtd. in Kofsky 435). Coltrane’s direct yet circumspect response to Kofsky problematizes the assumption that his music is strictly “about” politics, race, and social commentary—it could also be about religion, mysticism, mundane social issues, musical concerns and so forth.

By the mid-1960s, the complicated and often contradictory rhetoric surrounding the new music had reached a tense climax. In 1966, a handful of vitriolic articles were published in *Down Beat*, refuting the outspoken proponents of the avant-garde as “angry young men.” One of the most poignant ones, “Down Where We All Live: Today’s Avant-garde Seen in the Light of Jazz’ Long History of Internal Strife,” a two-part essay by Gus Matzorkis, argues that “the greatest jazz [. . .] cuts through the labyrinthian agglomeration of social influences, psychological factors, consciousness of race and style and tradition, as well as technical challenges of rhythm, harmony, and sonority to achieve the status of art” (18). He identifies Baraka as “one of the ideological leaders of the militant doctrinaires,” and argues against the notion that “the really great jazz comes from the black man” (21-2). Matzorkis makes a pointed attempt to remove issues of race from musical value, maintaining that truly great music is “race-less.” In an essay entitled “Racism in Jazz,” Brooks Johnson develops another type of argument: “Currently there is a perversion of pride; it is easier to be a racist than it is to be a good trumpeter” (15). Here, Johnson deploys the “Crow Jim” argument that was a frequent response to black nationalism, especially by white musicians. In other words, “racism in jazz” was meant to be read as “reverse-racism in jazz.” This tactic attempts to undermine the Black Aesthetic by (re)defining it as an anti-white proposition: “It is still possible to be aware of your color and heritage and not thereby assume that every man of a different color is your inferior or oppressor” (15). In his essay titled “The Avant-garde is Not Avant-garde!” Don Ellis presents yet a third critique of the new music. Ellis’s argument is based on the premise that the members of “the current avant-garde,” whom he identifies as Archie Shepp, Albert Ayler, and others, are simply rehashing tried and tested ideas and sounds that already had a long history in the music, thus historically trivializing the improvisational and compositional approaches being developed by these influential musicians.

The critiques of the new music based on race, either Crow Jim or the call for a “race-less” music, strove to eliminate “extra-musical” issues in the music. This tendency was at odds with the Black Aesthetic, which called for a direct

connection between aesthetics and ethics, between music and social and political issues. Don Heckman, a more sympathetic critic, identifies this defining turn of aesthetic orientation:

Jazz is now confronted [. . .] for perhaps the first time in its history, with a developing esthetic resulting not from growing technical competency but from an intrinsic change in artistic viewpoint. This, more than any other single factor, is what has caused so much confusion and hostile reaction to the new music. (24)

Throughout the 1960s, often attempting to articulate this new artistic viewpoint, Baraka was one of the most ardent, outspoken supporters of the jazz avant-garde. As a journalist, he published a variety of articles featuring various musicians or countering critiques of the new music, most of which appeared in *Down Beat*. One of Baraka's first controversial assertions of the Black Aesthetic was published in 1963 (coinciding with the release of *Blues People*), titled "Jazz and the White Critic: A Provocative Essay on the Situation of Jazz Criticism."¹² Baraka's argument focuses on the need for a jazz criticism based on a "native knowledge and understanding of the underlying philosophies and local cultural references that produced blues and jazz" (34). He strongly criticizes white writers for their Euro-American orientation and tendency to appropriate black music. Baraka's "provocative essay" prompted several responses from *Down Beat* readers. In a following issue, four reader-response letters were published, three of which, somewhat surprisingly given the context, supported Baraka's strong claims. The one critical letter contends that "music has to be judged as music," calling upon Matzorkis's argument (see "Chords and Discords").

Baraka's incendiary essay is also interwoven with issues of class. In identifying the white critics as "white middle brows," his rhetoric strategically combines critiques of race and class. His separation of "middle-class" values from those of the blues and jazz aesthetic reiterates his assertion made in "The Myth of a Negro Literature," and throughout *Blues People*, that the core essence of Negro music comes from the lowest classes. In fact, throughout Baraka's writing of the period, black middle-class values are often equated with Euro-American values. This Marxist-informed critique of "middle brow" critics is compounded with key dimensions of racial identity. The problems with white critics are their own cultural, racial and economic orientations, which prevent them from understanding the basic attitudes of the music. Or, as Baraka states, "the notes mean something [that is] part of the black psyche, as [the music] dictates the various forms of Negro culture" ("Jazz and the White Critic" 17).

As enticing, persuasive and bombastic as Baraka's arguments are, the musicians themselves often contradict the key tenets of the Black Arts Movement. Coltrane's response to critics as outlined above frames his music in technical and expressive terms and generally avoids the rhetoric of black nationalism. The progression of his music beginning with *A Love Supreme* (1965) and ending with *Expression* (1967) demonstrates a clear focus on religious and spiritual transcendence. This focus contrasts the "experienced-based" grandiloquence of the Black Arts Movement writers.

Coleman, the artist associated with the ushering in of the "new thing," also voiced concerns that differ from the Black Arts Movement's ideals. In a 1967 letter published in *Down Beat*, Coleman argues, "So why don't we Americans, who have a duty to our neighbor and our mother country, get off this war-jazz, race-jazz, poverty-jazz, and b.s. and let the country truly become what it is known as (GOD country) [. . .]" (19). Invoking religion, American nationalism (as opposed to black nationalism), and good will, Coleman's plea confronts the critical discourse surrounding his music and pleads for a broad understanding of the relationship between music, religion and society. In a basic way, his statement emphasizes religion and seeks to neutralize the argument between the proponents of the Black Aesthetic and its critics (Matzorkis, Johnson, and Ellis, for example).

Sun Ra also demonstrated an ambivalent relationship with the Black Aesthetic. Throughout the 1960s Sun Ra had many connections to the Black Arts Movement. In 1967, the Arkestra performed every Monday night at Slug's Saloon on Manhattan's east side, often featuring poets (usually Amos Mor and Yusef Rahman) (Szwed 222). Many writers frequented these performances, including Ishmael Reed, A.B. Spellman, Baraka, Henry Dumas, and others. Perhaps drawn to Sun Ra by his use of Egyptian and West African mythology and imagery, these writers often referred to his music in their work.¹³ There are also many examples of Sun Ra's interest in these black writers. In addition to performing at the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School fundraiser concert at the Village Gate, Sun Ra frequently visited Baraka at the fledgling cultural center in Harlem. Also, the Arkestra was an integral part of the premiere of Baraka's important play *Black Mass*, in May of 1966 (Szwed 211).¹⁴

Despite this degree of involvement and iconicization, Sun Ra had serious misgivings about some of the ideological foundations of the movement. He felt that Baraka's ideology would "push blacks into conflict with whites, [and] that his nationalism was too earthly and materialistic" (Szwed's characterization, 211). Similar to Shepp, Coleman, and the Aylers, Sun Ra's musical philosophy diverged from the strict tenets of the Black Aesthetic; Ra was interested in cosmic harmony: "I'm in tune with nature and nature's vibrations [. . .]. But most people are not. They're getting all

kinds of other vibrations from outer space, bad vibrations. The purpose of my music is to counter these bad vibrations” (qtd. in Thomas 13).

A few of the younger members of the avant-garde also held views that diverged significantly from the Black Aesthetic framework. As mentioned above, John Tchicai and Roswell Rudd, both members of the New York Art Quartet, voiced opinions at odds with Baraka and the other writers. Rudd, one of the few white musicians associated with the new music at the time, argues for “The Universality of the Blues.” Moreover, in a somewhat ironic essay titled “John Tchicai: A Calm Member of the Avant-garde,” Dan Morgenstern characterizes Tchicai as the opposite of Shepp and other ardent black nationalist musicians. Not only is he “calm,” but Tchicai’s upbringing in Denmark acts as a marker of difference in relation to African American musicians. Responding to the fundamental tenets of the Black Aesthetic, Tchicai asserts that, “the music here today, the jazz music—it’s not just any one thing; it’s a combination of different influences from all over the world. You can’t claim that it is any one kind of music” (50). Tchicai continues: “The avant-garde has this in common, that we are all young people and that we are all trying to find new ways of being creative and expressing ourselves. Artistic values change, just as generations change and social attitudes change” (50).

This discourse is also marked by tenuous economic conditions in the New Black Music. The portrayal of Taylor, Coleman, and pianist Herbie Nichols in A.B. Spellman’s *Four Lives in the Bebop Business* focuses heavily on this aspect. Each musician is characterized as hard-working, dedicated to their art, yet still unable to find steady work performing the music they’ve spent years developing. In Taylor’s case, this was an enduring issue in the press throughout the 1960s. In a 1961 *Down Beat* article, Bill Coss writes “Cecil Taylor thinks of New York City as the place where he is seldom hired and less often allowed any prolonged engagements” (19). Four years later, a Nat Hentoff article titled “The Persistent Challenge of Cecil Taylor” affirms that things had not changed. By 1965, Taylor was an established New York pianist, occupying a dominant role in the development of the new music. Despite such prominence, established jazz venues were unwilling to host his group.

The social, political, artistic and economic distance between the new music and commercial performance contexts drove many musicians to create alternative spaces for the presentation of their work. By 1963, a coffee shop jazz scene was emerging, and many musicians began to play in multi-use “lofts.”¹⁵ A number of coffee shops in the Village and lower east side, the White Whale, Take 3, Playhouse Coffee Shop, Cafes Avital and the Metro, were venue options, but few, if any, paid the musicians for their performances. The use of work-live “lofts” provided another alternative to the closed-door policies of the major jazz clubs. According to Baraka, this “underground” approach to producing concerts proved successful, especially in attracting younger audiences (“Loft Jazz” 42). Despite the artistic flexibility such new contexts allowed, the additional performance opportunities did not solve the economic struggle of the New Black Music. Except for Spellman and Baraka, there seems to have been a significant silence among Black Arts adherents about this issue in the new music. Although many black writers looked to the music as a site of authenticity, their assertions of what black music should be were inconsistent with commercial expectations confronting jazz musicians in the 1960s. Ultimately, musicians were caught between a non-supportive commercial environment that allowed a limited breadth of musical expression and a demanding racial-aesthetic climate.

The disjunctures that emerge in these brief examples demonstrate that the jazz avant-garde consisted of various concerns that often diverged from the key tenets of the Black Arts Movement. Coltrane’s apprehension to addressing specific political concerns in his music, Coleman’s plea for transcendence, Sun Ra’s sci-fi mysticism, the Ayler’s spiritualism, and other examples show that the musicians were not limited to any unifying narrative proposed by Black Arts writers.

Conclusion: De-Essentializing the Avant-garde

[. . .] our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. (Taylor 25)

In his influential essay “The Politics of Recognition,” Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor explores the decisive role that *recognition* plays in individual and group identity. In the interplay between private and public expressions of identity, the function of recognition helps establish and maintain hegemonic representations of racial “authenticity.” In the heated discourse of black nationalism and the New Black Music, black jazz musicians negotiated a complex terrain of expectations. The “jazz industry” (recording industry, mainstream press, mainstream audiences, etc.) was contemptuous and unsupportive of experimentation that transgressed dominant notions of the “jazz sound.” At the same time, Baraka and other Black Arts Movement writers were postulating the “blues impulse,” “black aesthetic” and

"changing same": they were *essentializing* musical expression. In reality, however, the pioneering musicians of the 1960s resisted any strict categorization or methodological, ethical, and aesthetic unity; within such heterogeneity are wide-ranging approaches to the confrontation of hegemonic structures through experimentalism and improvisation. While confirming this (now) widely accepted counter-hegemonic nature of the jazz avant-garde, this essay is a modest attempt to portray the complex dialogic space that the musicians of the New Black Music inhabited and to show that their voices were anything but monolithic.

The Black Aesthetic was a fundamental questioning of the meaning of black artistic production, and was a journey that ultimately insisted on the service of art to politics. This is an important element in bell hooks's convincing critique of the Black Arts Movement which concludes with the assertion that the Black Aesthetic was essentialist (68). The manifesto set forth by Neal, Fuller and Baraka limited the expressive potential of black musical creativity. It insisted that aesthetics and ethics are one, and defined a notion of aesthetics built upon the "blues impulse" and "experience." While Baraka's "changing same" attempted to open possibilities for a varied continuum of black musical expression, he ultimately prescribed a given range within which black musical authenticity existed. Therefore, the political project of Black Power, black nationalism, and the Black Arts Movement became the measure of acceptable musical practice. In striving to establish criteria upon which black art could be judged, these writers turned from description to *prescription*. The "social responsibility" of the artist became synonymous with what Kobena Mercer has termed a "burden of representation," and certain forms of expression were legitimized over others (233-58).

Developments in African American literary theory since the Black Arts Movement have problematized the relationship between artistic expression, racial identity, and aesthetics. In his influential 1977 essay "Preface to Blackness: Text and Pretext," Henry Louis Gates, Jr. redefines "blackness" as an intertextual network of relations: "Ultimately, black literature is a verbal art like other verbal arts. 'Blackness' is not a material object or an event but a metaphor; it does not have an 'essence' as such but is defined by a network of relations that form a particular aesthetic unity" (67). This new emphasis on *intertextuality* points to the development and functions of tropes, and calls for a detailed analysis of individual works—an undermining of mechanical classifications that leave ideas like the "black aesthetic" or the "blues impulse" uninterrogated. Several writers have looked to music as a way of exploring intertextuality, which is seen prominently in Houston A. Baker, Jr.'s notion of the "blues matrix" (see "Belief, Theory and Blues"). Within this discourse, the relationship between musical expression and racial identity is discursive rather than essential. Although beyond the scope of this essay, the connection between African American musical experimentalism and improvisation and these more recent trends in literary theory deserve detailed historical and critical theorization.

Recent scholarship has examined the connection between musical freedom, social activism and improvised musical practices. This growing body of work is an important exploration of the "utopian" and freedom-oriented rhetoric commonly associated with improvised music but seldom theorized in depth. An important volume within this discourse is *Rebel Musics: Human Rights, Resistant Sounds, and the Politics of Making Music* edited by Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble. When Fischlin and Heble pose the question "What does it mean to practice political resistance through music making?" (8), they articulate a central issue in many musics that value transgression of expectations, experimentation and innovation. The music that helped usher in the "new thing" in jazz in the 1960s inevitably challenged standard notions of musical, racial and political expression; or, as Jacques Attali argues in his influential book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, these new approaches were "a new way of making music" (134), a radical reordering of the musical process and consequently a form of political questioning.

In a recent interview in the *Village Voice*, Shepp reiterated a similar perspective: "This music is political by its very nature" (qtd. in King). The examples explored above and countless others demonstrate that black music, and improvised music in particular, often articulates counter-hegemonic ideals: the religious tropes in Coltrane's later music; Sun Ra's sci-fi mysticism; Albert Ayler's "religious music"; Shepp's transgressive protest music; Cecil Taylor's convention-transcending approach; etc. All of these examples exhibit the multifarious ways that creative improvising musicians challenge hegemonic structures through musical expression. However, we must resist the urge to qualitatively conjoin all of this music into one form since protest can take many forms. While this essay is primarily focused on activities that took place in New York in the 1960s, other examples of musical experimentalism outside of New York throughout the decade further problematize monological assumptions about race and musical expression. The emergence of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) out of Chicago's black community; Horace Tapscott's pioneering Watts-based community oriented Union of God's Musicians and Artists Ascension; The Black Artists Group (BAG) from St. Louis; and many others offer diverse examples of ways in which African American musicians have challenged dominant notions of the relationship between musical expression and racial, religious and political identity.

Ultimately, we must recognize the heterogeneity of the jazz avant-garde and must strive to understand the motivations, mindsets and goals of the individual artists and groups that pioneered the new music. This surprisingly

simple method would help to undermine various essentialisms that buttressed the music's reception while confirming that artists like Shepp were intricately connected to the burgeoning Black Arts Movement—all signs of heterogeneity rather than homogeneity.

This turn towards de-essentializing the avant-garde by giving voice to diverse actors in the music must be qualified. As scholar and trombonist George Lewis has recently argued, the systemic erasure of "race and ethnicity" in experimental music in the United States serves to marginalize vital contributions of African Americans and other non-white artists ("Afterword"). Standard histories of experimentalism in the U.S., such as Michael Nyman's *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, fail to consider forms of experimentalism emerging from African American music. Although coming from a somewhat different trajectory, the discourse surrounding the jazz avant-garde of the 1960s—in the mainstream press and amongst the Black Arts Movement writers that looked to music as a site of authenticity—obscured the diverse ways that the New Black Music transgressed prevailing jazz, social, political and religious standards of expression. The de-essentializing of this music is not meant to produce a bland relativism that does away with "race and ethnicity." Instead, we must look beyond generalizing assumptions about the relationship between race and musical expression and allow room for voices of the musicians themselves to explain their diverse intentions, beliefs and dreams; to tell us what their music is "about." These disruptive critical moments would certainly lead to a better understanding of the ways that musicians conceptualize experimental and improvisatory methodologies.

Stuart Hall has described the Black Arts Movement as a time when "black experience" became a hegemonic signifier. For Black Arts Movement writers and musicians such as Shepp, this was a strategic move to counter marginal, negative images of blackness, and a struggle for self-representation. However, Hall emphasizes the recognition of the "end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject" (443). This premise supports a view of black musicality that is open and marked by multiplicity. Such multiplicity was already in place with the emergence of the jazz avant-garde in the 1960s.

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Notes

¹ The concert was recorded and released as *The New Wave in Jazz*. Impulse AS-90, 1965.

² While this essay is focused primarily on race as a signifier of difference, various functions of gender factor significantly into the writing and music of this period. A detailed analysis of the relationship between gender, music and writing of the jazz avant-garde is desperately needed, but beyond the scope of this essay.

³ Claude McKay is one of a handful of "border crossing" writers of the period. Throughout the 1930s, he split his time between Jamaica and Harlem. This certainly influenced his work and helps to explain the connections between his work and that of other Harlem Renaissance writers. His focus on the vernacular, however, predates his arrival in New York. His 1912 *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads* demonstrate this (Collier 284-93).

⁴ For an excellent study of the Caribbean Artists Movement, see Walmsley.

⁵ The reason for this shift, Baraka contends, is "because it ['avant-garde'] also means a lot of quacks and quackers, too" ("The Changing Same" 187-8).

⁶ An influential source for my understanding of the Coltrane Poem is Kimberly Benston's essay "Renovating Blackness: Remembrance and Revolution in the Coltrane Poem," from *Performing Blackness* (145-86).

⁷ Among the most influential were *The Shape of Jazz to Come*, *Change of the Century*, *This is Our Music* and *Free Jazz*. All of these were recorded between 1958 and 1961.

⁸ For a discussion of “harmolodics,” see Litweiler, *The Freedom Principle* (147-50).

⁹ “Freedom” is a dominant trope in the discourse surrounding the new directions in the music of the period. See, for example, Litweiler, *The Freedom Principle*.

¹⁰ The Coltrane poems discussed above are examples of this.

¹¹ In many ways, both Rudd and Tchicai represent *différance* in the context of the Black Aesthetic. This is discussed in more detail below.

¹² An earlier essay titled “The Jazz Avant-garde” (originally published in 1961 in *Metronome Magazine*) briefly touches upon some of the issues in the 1963 essay, but is primarily concerned with outlining the emerging figures in the new music. See the reprinted version in *Black Music* (69-80).

¹³ For example, Dumas’s “Outer Space Blues,” “Ark of Bones,” and Reed’s “I am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra” use the eccentric pianist as subject matter, and it is likely that Reed’s renowned novel *Mumbo Jumbo* was highly influenced by Sun Ra’s philosophy (Szwed 222-3). It is also likely that Baraka’s “Black Dada Nihilismus” bears traces of Sun Ra. Szwed argues that “[Ra] is there in [Baraka’s] historical allusions, in the tone and pitches of his reading, in his sense of the importance of language, and in his consciousness of the possibilities of playing the spoken word against the written, unleashing the phonetics buried within the printed word” (Szwed 209).

¹⁴ An audio recording of the play with the Sun Ra Myth Science Arkestra accompaniment was made in 1968.

¹⁵ For one of the first analyses of this scene, see Baraka’s “Loft Jazz.”

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