

Jazz Bodies: In Process, on Trial and Instrumental

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Summary

Fictional narratives commonly stage the ineffability of music while simultaneously constructing located identities and trajectories of meaning in the course of its configuration. This argument concerns a range of these constructions: attempts to configure jazz in discourse through translations across the border between the music and corporeality. The literary embodiment of jazz has historically been embedded in primitivist discourses which reify desire in a racist mode. By applying Kristeva's explication of the relationship between the *semiotic* and the *symbolic*, the article considers recent examples of jazz literature – most notably Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* (1984) and Geoff Dyer's pastiche text, *But Beautiful* (1991) – which counter this reductive tendency by constructing the imbrication of desire and codes of expression. These renderings of the emergence of the jazz subject allow for productive ruminations on the relations between the somatic body, the body of the instrument and the body of knowledge out of which individual performances arise. The article concludes with the claim that jazz discourses might well be a site for theorising fluid processes of intersubjective becoming and that these theoretical variations might well have application in a range of other knowledge domains.

Opsomming

In fiktiewe narratiewe word daar gewoonlik op die onsegbaarheid van musiek gesinspeel, terwyl die opgespoorde identiteite en bane van betekenis terselfdertyd tydens die konfigurasie gekonstrueer word. Hierdie argument het te make met 'n reeks soortgelyke konstruksies: pogings om jazz te konfigureer in diskoers deur verplasinge oor die grense heen van musiek en korporaliteit. Die letterlike beliggaming van musiek is histories ingebed in primitivistiese diskoerse wat begeerte op 'n tasbare wyse vergestalt. Deur Kristeva se uiteensetting van die verhouding tussen die semiotiese en die simboliese toe te pas, neem die artikel onlangse voorbeelde van jazz-letterkunde in oënskou – veral Michael Ondaatje se *Coming through Slaughter* (1984) en Geoff Dyer se pastiche-tekse, *But Beautiful* (1991) – wat hierdie reduktiewe neiging teëwerk deur die konstruksie van 'n afwisselende oorkoepeling van begeerte met die wyses van ekspressie. Hierdie weergawes van die opkoms van die jazzonderwerp maak voorsiening vir die produktiewe oorpeinsings oor die verhoudings tussen die somatiese liggaam, die liggaam van die instrument as sodanig, asook die liggaam van

kennis waaruit individuele opvoerings voortspruit. Die artikel sluit af met die stelling dat jazzdiskoerse wel 'n terrein kan wees vir die teoretisering oor die wisselende prosesse van intersubjektiewe wording en dat hierdie teoretiese variasies, op hulle beurt, van toepassing kan wees op 'n hele reeks ander kennisdomeine.

Music is a fugitive essence resisting enclosure in words. The need to render musical creation verbally – to describe or explain just what it is the musician does – is especially critical in fiction, and no form remains so elusive, resists evocation so stubbornly, as jazz.

(Sudhalter 1999: 1)

For there is no melody, there is only melodying. And melodying practices are handful practices as soundly aimed articulatory reaching I learned [the language of jazz melodying] through five years of hearing it spoken. I had come to learn, overhearing and overseeing this jazz as my instructable hands' ways – in a terrain nexus of hands and keyboard whose respective surfaces had become known as the respective surfaces of my tongue and teeth and palate are known to each other – that this jazz music *is* ways of moving from place to place as singing with my fingers. To *define* jazz (as to describe any phenomenon of human action) is to *describe* the body's ways.

(Sudnow 1993: 146)

If we listen for resigned sighs in discourse, for those exasperated lapses of faith in language which mark encounters with things seemingly ineffable, they sound persistently in the discursive pursuit of the “fugitive essence” of music. This turn, a rhetorical detour into an almost routine despair when the *forms* of language confront the supposed *force* of music, disseminates the aura of music. It ensures that writing or speaking about music is regularly cast as an apocalyptic lifting of veils through which one approaches, but never reaches, the thing itself. Situated as the elusive *other* of language, as an aesthetic process and object untainted by speech, music becomes something like a discursive space of wishing. Its ineffability is endlessly penetrated in the construction of knowledge, histories and identities while it simultaneously functions as a screen onto which yearnings are projected and, consequently, on which versions of human subjects and their contexts flicker. A filigree of inextricable desires (ontological, political, sexual and epistemological) produces and is manifest in these penetrations and projections. Despite the reverberating sighs, music is relentlessly dragged into discourse. This article is not a headlong critique of the Romantic idealism inherent in the notion of a “fugitive essence” of music. It dwells, then, on neither the “essential truth” of music, nor the sighs of representational resignation. What concerns me here is the use of bodies in literary texts as configurations of jazz music and its performance. Stated rather more reciprocally, I consider the discursive

translations in literature between jazz and corporeality. These journeys or, in David Sudnow's idiom, these "articulational reachings", comprise a sector of the symbolic economy of jazz mythologies from which, in important ways, the music is inextricable. Even while, in the mouths of anxious orators, many of these translations are, to use Nathaniel Mackey's description of a Pharaoh Saunders performance, "jittery-tongued articulations" (1986: 79), they comprise discursive journeys into jazz which subjectify both its practitioners and audiences. They do so by traversing and organising existential, anthropological, historical and political domains of meaning.

Describing translations back and forth across the (configured) border between music and bodies runs all the risks of a cartography. In "Walking the City", Michel de Certeau warns against the particular "erotics of knowledge" (1984: 92) which reduces a multitude and proliferating range of practices within a terrain of meaning to "a 'theoretical' (that is, visual) simulacrum" (p. 93). To produce a map from these countless practices, these countless *interventions* by practitioners, is to assume an extrication of a point of observation from the processes (or, in De Certeau's term, "tactics") which (re)constitute the object of its gaze. Such a map, then, situates the theoretician as a "voyeur-god" (p. 93) disentangled from the tentative, provisional and nomadic interventions of those on the ground. It generalises and immobilises the complexities of meaning-making which are too diverse, numerous and fleeting to be observed and then rendered schematically. In defence of the "scopic or gnostic drive" (p. 92) which would seem to infuse this mapping of patterns, of well-worn figurative routes and their contraries, it might be argued that the recurrence of particular figurative trajectories in representations of jazz music and its performance has organised the space of the music's cultural meaning. If we accept De Certeau's hypothesis that the topography of meaning is rendered, actualised and altered by the ways in which it is traversed, then deeply-etched paths (and the less commonly navigated spaces between them) warrant charting. Elsewhere in *The Practice of Everyday Life* De Certeau asks, "These proliferating metaphors – sayings and stories that organise places through the displacements they 'describe' (as a mobile point 'describes' a curve) – what kind of analysis can be applied to them?" (p. 116). Considering, in accordance with the literal meaning of "metaphor", the semantic "carrying over" from one ideational domain to another, and then *describing* what the consequences of such a transfer might be, might prove a useful style of analysis or, at least, an interesting improvisation on a range of discursive standards.

Before considering what the embodiment standards in jazz representations comprise, it is worth rehearsing a range of arguments concerning embodiment in general and the body's¹ place in jazz in particular. The academic hegemony

of postmodernism commonly elides the need to define terms. This is apparent in much contemporary embodiment theory which simply assumes the body to be a *tabula rasa* across which are inscribed cultural discourses which give it meaning. While the body is doubtlessly a site of discursivity, an argument needs to declare its position on the micromodalities through which bodies become and embodied identities remain in process. There seems a particular need to do so when we consider the representational conflation of the body and a non-linguistic form of expression such as dance or music. The second part of my argument attempts to fulfil this obligation to particulars by detailing and then applying Kristeva's notion of the *chora* to a passage from Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* (1984). That section of the argument shows how certain literary texts can be read as representing alternative forms of embodied-subject formation (in the course of jazz performance) which challenge hegemonic, and significantly detrimental, myths about the music and its practitioners. For the time being, though, it suffices to define "the body" and its relation to "the instrument" through the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty:

The body is our general medium for having a world. Sometimes it is restricted to the actions necessary for the conservation of life, and accordingly it posits around us a biological world: at other times, elaborating upon these primary actions and moving from their literal to a figurative meaning, it manifests through them a core of new significance: this is true of motor habits such as dancing. Sometimes, finally, the meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body's natural means; it must then build itself an instrument, and it projects thereby around itself a cultural world.

(Merleau-Ponty 1962: 146)

According to Merleau-Ponty, "the union of soul and body is not an amalgamation between two mutually external ... terms, subject and object" (1962: 88–89), but is invariably enacted in every moment of existence. This existential integration stands in signal contrast to Cartesian dualism, to the tradition which maintains that, among other acts of "consciousness", the aesthetic process originates in a *cogitato* which is quite separate from any physiological event. According to Merleau-Ponty, "[m]an taken as a concrete being is not a psyche joined to an organism" (p. 88), but is rather a succession of movements between the corporeal and psychological. It is the epistemological import of these movements, the ways in which they complicate our knowledge of the subject, which makes the "purely somatic" merely hypothetical and impossible to locate. That the body can meaningfully project itself into the world (through movements with figurative meaning or through an instrument) further complicates the definition of "the body" for it

is consequently not limited to its own physical extent.

Later in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty returns to the relation between the body and the instruments it uses:

To get used to a hat, a car or a stick is to be transplanted into them, or conversely, to incorporate them into the bulk of our own body. Habit expresses our power of dilating our being into the world, or changing our existence by approaching fresh instruments.

(Merleau-Ponty 1962: 143)

The boundary between the body and the instrument (musical or otherwise) is, then, fluid. The body is translated into and through the instruments it chooses, and these choices are commonly motivated by the capacity of instruments to effect this translation. It follows that in representing instrumentation, or the expressive projection of the body through the instrument, one approaches the dilation of “being into the world” and is inevitably implicated in some version of embodied subjectification. In music performance, for instance, the disciplined (somatic) body becomes coextensive with the instrument forming an *instrumental* body that can articulate an embodied knowledge of the musician (a body of knowledge).² This liminality, this articulation of somatic and cognitive knowledge at the border of the body and the instrument, induces a condition of persistent slippage in representation from one body to another or, stated more pedantically, this is the site of the figurative economy in which tropes endlessly carry meaning between bodies, instruments and the music itself.

The question remains, though, as to whether jazz (among other modes and traditions of music)³ has a particular relation to the body of the performing subject and its instrumental dilation into the world. We might consider just two arguments in this regard. In *The Imperfect Art: Reflections on Jazz and Modern Culture* (1988), Ted Gioia argues that evaluating jazz compels an “aesthetics of imperfection” because of the contingencies of improvisation. Jazz resists the fetish of the work. A jazz performance is, according to Gioia, interpreted and evaluated “not by comparison with some Platonic ideal of perfection but by comparison with what other musicians can do under similar conditions” (1988: 101). Jazz valorises the process of creation, the witnessed activity, above any classical aesthetic of the work itself. Since the opus is not sacred, because it has no transcendental identity independent of performance, evaluative criteria emphasise a (usually co-operative) *competence*.⁴ The performer is not a conduit who actualises the already-existing work, but a practitioner who intervenes in a range of existing or created possibilities. To return fleetingly to De Certeau, the improvising musician is a walker in a city

comprising the tune, remembered traversals and the discipline and “tradition” of walking. This distinction between process and aesthetic object, of course, echoes Sudnow’s characterisation of jazz as *melodying*, not a melody. It is a mode of work existing beneath a constellation of verbs rather than a canon of works existing in established categories. Competence, given the oft-commented on combination of somatic memory or visceral intelligence and conscious recollection and reflection in improvisation,⁵ cannot be abstracted from its embodiment. It also cannot be generalised in description or notation: a particular performer develops a competence which is located in *her* body. Albeit that the competence adheres to (or violates) certain formal disciplines, it remains individual in its situatedness in a body formed through a distinct history of desire in conjunction with a body of knowledge. Herein lies some of the dilemma of bringing poststructuralism to bear on jazz performance. The question of agency, given embodied competence, causes the jazz tradition to make a fetish of the proper noun, the named competence (Armstrong, Parker, Monk, Coltrane, Davis, Coleman, Taylor). It is difficult to imagine a parallel to Barthes’s “death of the author” in either jazz scholarship or in popular jazz argot.

The second argument can be placed under the rhetorical banner of Edward Said’s formulation, that musical performance is an “extreme occasion” (1991). Said, who “scorns music so vulgar and rough with energy” as jazz (Merod 1992: 193), describes “serious” music recitals as “extreme” in that they are irreducible and unrepeatable and, therefore, compel a severe form of attention which places the audience in a role approaching being the submissive partner in a sadomasochist experience (Said 1991: 3). The “extremity” of jazz, however, lies less in conventional reverence, obliged respect or the creation of hallowed spaces or rituals⁶ than in the realities of improvised music. The audience is aware that they are witnessing an emerging work, that they are compelled to “read” something with which they cannot be familiar. Furthermore, they “know” (even if this is often a willing suspension of disbelief) that they are in the presence of simultaneous composition and performance, that each elaboration entails a narrowly-averted danger of failure. The musician, by repute if not always in reality, is a tightrope walker fashioning the rope in the course of a traversal without a clear notion of a destination. This “extremity” has at least three consequences for embodiment theory. First, the audience will use every device to read the *becoming* work, including locating the music in the body (position, breath, gesture, expression, fingerings) of the musician. The body becomes, for the audience, a visual choreography of jazz. It also becomes the inevitable site of recourse in the discursive representation of the music itself. Second, the “public trial” of the improvising musician (to which I will return) is a limit-

experience which is characterised by the performing subject's integration.⁷ The closer the subject is dragged to the edges of identity, the more testing the performance of selfhood, the less distinguishable are her "body and soul". This relates to the primacy of the *process* of performance in jazz. Denied the safety of a transcendental opus in improvisation, the improvising musician has to rely on learned and embodied competencies. Finally, the marked voyeurism of the audience, its privileged spectatorship, and the intense interaction between musicians create an eroticised space of the gaze and somatic communication. This sexiness has a fine genealogy in the blues and jazz tradition and permeates representations of the music at every turn.

Keeping the possibility of the fluid jazz body and the contingencies of improvisation in mind, it is interesting to turn to the common figurative routes along which the bodies of jazz performers and musicians enter literary discourse. These figurations can be read as discursive attempts to come to terms with jazz, as practices through which music signifying nothing specific *in itself* is made to mean existentially, culturally or politically. In turn, though, the tropes through which representation is effected come to form a repertoire on which musicians themselves draw in order to articulate and express the music. Any consideration of jazz argot and terminology indicates that, no matter how the exchange functions, improvised music and the language through which it is represented exist in a complex economy. Although, literary (and perhaps cultural) analysis is really what is at stake in my argument, this form of analysis may say something about the music and the processes through which it is produced and through which it, in turn, produces its performing subjects.

While most contemporary jazz criticism explicitly or implicitly subverts primitivist representations of the music, the history of literary jazz is dominated by tropes embedded in Romantic nostalgia and atavism. Harlem Renaissance and early Modernist writing is replete with representations of jazz and performance occasions which are figurative journeys back through the history of slavery, across the oceans traversed by slave ships, to the Dionysian arousal of African ritual. At the heart of jazz, these representations would have it, pounds a tom-tom which entrances individuals to a state of ecstatic communal expressivity. In this discursive mode, the signifier "jazz" signposts an alternative to the repressive mechanisms of history, rationality and Calvinism. To play or listen to jazz is to experience the "return of the repressed" (in Freud's terms), to escape Christian *ressentiment* by moving into the realm of Dionysus (in Nietzsche's terms), or, in the language of contemporary embodiment theory, to disrupt the hierarchy of Cartesian dualism. The "primitive recovery", configured with very different ideological implications in African-American, French *avant-garde*, Beat and British

“Angry Young Men” writing, is effected through a liberation from etiquette and constraint, an immersion is a libido unmutated by political repression and historical domination by hegemonic Western ethics.

Rudolph Fisher’s short story, “Common Meter” ([1928]1990), is one of many Harlem Renaissance stories founded on a version of this return. It reaches its crescendo in a clash between Fess Baxter’s Firemen and Bus William’s Blue Devils in the Arcadia Ballroom in Harlem. The contest is “the jazz championship of the world” (p. 22) and at stake is not only a gold trophy but, according to the ecstatic and salacious crowd, the youngest and most beautiful hostess, Jean Ambrose. Fess contrives jazz sabotage: someone cuts the pigskin of the drums in Bus’s band and the “spine [is] ripped out of their music” (p. 24). In a last ditch attempt, having failed in two numbers, the band is forced into an embodied improvisation: the blues are turned into a shout as each band member drops “his heel where each bass-drum beat would have come” (p. 26). As the beat takes hold of the crowd, they begin to dance and are transported:

They had been rocked thus before, this multitude. Two hundred years ago they had swayed to the same slow fateful measure, lifting their lamentation to heaven, pounding the earth with their feet, seeking the mercy of a new God through the medium of an old rhythm [T]hey had rocked so a thousand years ago in a city whose walls were jungle, forfending the wrath of a terrible black God who spoke in storm and pestilence, had swayed and wailed to that same slow period, beaten on a wild boar’s skin stretched over the end of a hollow tree trunk [The beat was not] a sound but an emotion that laid hold of their bodies and swung them into the past.

(Fisher [1928]1990: 26)

The tempo then increases and the crowd is moved beyond enraptured supplication to an ecstatic “madness” (p. 27) by the conclusion of the performance.

In performing or dancing to jazz, representations such as this suggest, submerged histories are reclaimed as individuals are liberated from humanist subjectivity and united in an embodied reclamation of identity *as* communal genealogy. The music becomes what Bhabha refers to as a “performative deformative” (1994: 241) practice of countercultural memory and historiography. Those grand narratives of culture which have sought to divide individuals and remake them in the image of rational Apollonian clarity are ruptured at the moment that jazz “make[s] demotic the grander narratives of progress” (p. 246). Literary jazz kicks down the picket fences of humanist historiography by casting the past as communal, brutalised, elided, repressed, and as present. In jazz writing, the Dionysian domain, inhabited by ecstatic

dancers, tricksters, devils, and the *orisha*, those riding-horses of the gods of alterity, is the site of return and recovery. Cyclic journeys through the past to the present mobilise silenced histories and, through an archaeology of identity, suggest the possibility of communal healing.

Obviously not all narratives which imbricate jazz and the desiring body do so in terms of historical and cultural nostalgia. Jazz narratives regularly depict communities, families or even individuals as divided into an embodied and repressed aspect. Jazz music and performance occasions are regularly the banner under which the embodied congregate. Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* (1990) includes the following description of a performance by "Benbow's Famous Kansas City Band":

The banjo scolded in diabolic glee, and the cornet panted as though it were out of breath, and Benbow himself left the band and came out onto the floor to dance slowly and ecstatically with a large Indian-brown woman covered with diamonds "Whaw! Whaw! Whaw!" mocked the cornet – but the steady tomtom of the drums was no longer laughter now, not even pleasant And under the dissolute spell of its own rhythm the music had gone quite beyond itself. The four black men in Benbow's wandering band were exploring depths to which mere sound had no business to go The odors of bodies, the stings of flesh, and the utter emptiness of soul when all is done – these things the piano and the drums, the cornet and the twanging banjo insisted on hoarsely.

(Hughes 1990: 16)

The dancers, enraptured by the performance, become nothing other than "[b]odies sweatily close, arms locked, cheek to cheek, breast to breast ... quite oblivious each person of the other" (Hughes 1990: 18). Waiting at home for her errant niece to return from the dance, Aunt Harriet Williams sits on the porch, "the Bible open on her lap ... a bundle of switches on the floor at her feet" (p. 16). At the margins of the saturnalian liberation of bodies sit the staunch mechanisms of control that would bring the libidinally liberated back into the fold governed by the law of the father. The word and the rod are wielded to silence the instinctive and abandoned, to force Aunt Harriet's niece back to a world in which souls are not "empty" and bodies are not "oblivious".

Despite the possibilities of countercultural representations which challenge bourgeois Cartesian assumptions, the inscription of the desire/control binary, and the situation of jazz on the side of desire regularly constructs the jazz body as primitive libidinal excess and, consequently, jazz as unrestrained expressivity. While representations often avoid the essentialisation of jazz this binary inscribes, legions are prone to a reductionism that makes Africa a realm of savage excess, the sounds of which are mere rhythm. By extension,

they construct jazz as a simple emotionalism and the performer's body as a wildly eroticised ebullience. On the one hand, this is the basis of the modernist use of primitivism which suggests that the law strives endlessly to contain the body, but that desire is always in excess of the law, constantly subverting its capacity to reduce identity to the succinct categories of humanist selfhood. On the other, though, primitivism becomes the currency of racism when embodied celebration comes to stand for a lack of the ability to reflect, as the immediacy of impulse or instinct. In the second instance, Dionysian embodiment can be situated, not as a site of recovery, but as the figural bedrock of terror at the fragile order of "civilization" and at the forces which have to be repressed in order to maintain it. Journeys to the domain in texts are, in this version, in the interests of diagnosing, not a history of *deformative* repression, but that which must needs be repressed if we are not to revert to the savage barbarity of prerationality. Jacques Attali cites one such instance. The *Revue Musicale*, in 1920, reported:

Jazz is cynically the orchestra of brutes, with nonopposable thumbs and still prehensile toes, in the forests of Voodoo. It is entirely excess, and for that reason more than monotone; the monkey is left to his own devices, without morals, without discipline, thrown back to all the groves of instinct, showing his meat still more obscene. These slaves must be subjugated, or there will be no more master. Their reign is shameful. The shame is ugliness and its triumph.

(Attali 1985: 104)

The Dionysian domain can, it is clear, be wielded in Darwinian terms which reduce jazz to the sound of an earlier discord, civilisation's *dissonance* which exists in our past, and echoes only in the music of the "undeveloped", the "uncivilised". The realm of desirous bodies, seemingly free of the yoke of civilisation's repression, far from being a constructive disruption of the *principium individuationis*, facilitates a language of atavism and racism in which the "heart of savagery" is located just beneath the historical and psychological surface of African and diasporic identity.

It remains, then, to discern in contending literary representations of jazz more provocative renderings of the relation of desire to control, more productive ways of conceiving the relationship between bodily drives and the structures of musical discipline and rigour which are integral to improvised performance. One text which seems to me endlessly productive in this regard is Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* (1984). Ondaatje's novel stages an array of possibilities for the incorporation of music in discourse. One of these occurs at the climactic moment of Bolden's final performance when he, to quote Jelly Roll Morton, "went mad because he blew his brains out through the trumpet" (Morton quoted by Gioia 1988: 57). The passage

describes an obliterating self-actualisation that offers a particular rendering of the body and music, and of desire and discipline, as coextensive in improvised performance.

For something's fallen in my body and I can't hear the music as I play it. The notes more often now. She hitting each note with her body before it is even out so that I know what to do through her. God this is what I wanted to play for, if no one else I always guessed there would be this, this mirror somewhere, she closer to me now and her eyes over mine tough and young and come from god knows where Half dead, can't take more, hardly hit the squawks but when I do my body flicks at them as if I'm the dancer till the music is out there. *Roar* She still covers my eyes with hers and sees it slow and allows the slowness for me her breasts black under the wet light shirt, sound and pain in my heart sure as death. All my body moves to my throat and I speed again and she speeds tired again, a river of sweat to her waist her head and hair back bending back to me, all the desire is cramp and hard, cocaine on my cock, eternal for my heart is at my throat hitting slow notes into a shimmy dance of victory, hair toss victory, a local strut, eyes meeting sweat down her chin arms out in final exercise pain, take on the last squawk and let it cough and climb to spear her all those watching like a javelin through the brain and down into the stomach, feel the blood that is real move up bringing flesh energy in its suitcase, it comes flooding past my heart in a mad parade, it is coming through my teeth, it is into the comet

(Ondaatje 1984: 130-131)

Bolden, in this extract, navigates the border of desire and expressibility. His exploration of the limit experience of performance is no simple abandonment to desire, but a journey along the fluid boundary between desire and musical expression. The visceral rupturing arises in the code-breaking performance: the music originates in, is transformed into, is finally indistinguishable from "flesh energy". In a Lacanian move, it is the mirroring of his emergent identity by the vocalist, a musical reciprocation or "giving back", that allows his identity to reach its destructive crescendo of realisation. I will return to the passage in more detail later. How might this configuration of a jazz body be characterised, though, and how might such an analysis qualify primitivist embodiments?

In approaching this coextension of music and desire, Kristeva's geometry of concepts in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984) provides a compelling analogy and a useful equivalence. Kristeva's representation of the signifying process, her account of the coextensive *semiotic* and *symbolic*, provides a useful model of an anti-dialectic⁸ that nevertheless configures a binary account of the journey towards meaning which implicates both signification and its relation to embodied drives. Her theory centres desire in the creation

of meaning by proposing that its irruption into signifying systems is the origin of “revolutions” in language, that the linguistic code is revitalised by disruptions instigated by the immanence of the body. The implications of this for the representation of code-breaking jazz improvisation will emerge later in this analysis.

For Kristeva the *chora* is a modality in the act of signifying. A primary site, the *chora* is “a non-expressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated” (1984: 25). The *chora* is *pattered* because the energies of which it is constituted are arranged, in the course of identity formation, around the restraints placed on the body (by family and social structures). It emerges, not as a cacophony of unrestrained and unmitigated desires, but channelled by the restraints of socialisation. The *chora* is also *patterning* in that its irruptions are generated in accordance with its organisation; they take their form and content from its composition and arrangement. The *chora*, while not an arbitrary assemblage of chaotic drives, is also not a static pattern. Shifting desires, the flowing force of the drives, unsettles the structure of the *chora*, causing a constant (almost kaleidoscopic) rearrangement. It is this multivalent nature of the *chora* (generative, reactive, mobile, structured, structuring) that makes it impossible to characterise as succinct. To do so is both to deny its flux and to entrench a concept that is provisional, to reify a postulate known only by its manifestations. The semiotic emerges from (and constitutes) the *chora* and disfigures the expected configurations of discourse. It ruptures the syntax of being by contorting the symbolic (signification) into unanticipated and unpredictable shapes. Desire floods, overwhelms and changes indelibly the “surface” of language: force fragments, then reconstitutes, form. This, for Kristeva, is the origin and function of poetic language.

To characterise poetic language as the realm of the semiotic is, however, a misreading of Kristeva. “The subject is always *both* semiotic *and* symbolic”⁹ (Kristeva 1984: 24) and any enunciation (inevitably from a subject position) is liminal, existing in motion at some point along the border of the two. The liminality in poetic language is more pronounced since it is here that the incursion of the semiotic is most immediate, is as yet unregulated by reiteration in the symbolic. It is in poetic language, therefore, that the process of subject formation (in the economy of exchange between the symbolic and semiotic) is most apparent. It is also here that the subject, experiencing the rupture of the familiar, is at risk. Kristeva expresses this by describing the (poetic) subject as “in process/on trial” (p. 58). The self, in this formulation, is a journey at the interstices of language and desire (an always-becoming subject) and it is in poetic language that this journey is most recognisable.

It is significant that, in the work of Kristeva, such journeys of being are not

teleological. They are closer to the tactic of “walking” in De Certeau since the subject intervenes in space by positing a *here-there*, but never comes to terms (especially literally) with the beginning and end (or the extent) of the city. The master narratives of ontology are always beyond the scope of the walking subject who *becomes* only at the micromodalities of intervention. The analogy to De Certeau’s “walking” is not absolute: the *thetic* moment in Kristeva (the “journey” from the semiotic to the symbolic) is impossible to conceive as a spatial traverse. This is because the semiotic and the symbolic are always-already *within* one another. The symbolic is comprised of the traces of previous irruptions of the drives and the semiotic is at once structured by symbolic categorisation and can only be seen in its effect on signification. The “both-and” structure of Kristeva’s process of being disrupts the spatiality implied by the metaphor of the journey. This disruption, the collapse of each point in the scheme into its seeming opposite, is also an act of integration, a move contradicting Cartesian dualism (mind/body) while asserting the primacy of *process* over the transcendental notion of the Freudian ego.

At this juncture it may be useful to consider possible analogies between Kristeva’s anti-dialectical geometry of linguistic meaning and musical innovation. An influential strain in music scholarship (extending in variations from Plato, through Schopenhauer, to Nietzsche and several contemporary composers, among them Messiaen) holds that music is unconfined by referential language and is, therefore, the *pure* (sometimes *purser*) language of the human soul, of its longings and its desires. In not signifying (literally), music can express the nuances of *being* without confining them to clumsy lexical categories or reducing them to grammar. This version of Romantic idealism might suggest that music is more proximate to the semiotic than (even) poetic language, that it nestles in the *chora* more completely than poetic utterances, which, by definition, undergo the *thetic* moment, the translation of desire into the symbolic. To claim that all music stands in a particular relation to desire is, though, counterproductive. It creates, for instance, an equivalence between the highly codified practice of the baroque fugue and an erupting solo by Ornette Coleman. We need, if Kristeva’s theory is to be useful in analysis, to consider each work of music (or each style of performance) in relation to the codes of practice from which it emerges or which it transgresses; to find the musical equivalent of the semiotic and symbolic *in each instance*. This is valid when we consider either individual performances or their representations in discourse.

What I take from Kristeva is the idea of liminal identity: that individuals are in a perpetual state of *becoming* at the border of desire and expression. This seems a useful conceptual framework for understanding much of the

mythos of jazz improvisation in literature. The “symbolic order” of linguistic codes does not correspond in all ways to codes of musical practice (cf. a detailed discussion in Perlman & Greenblatt 1981). It is, though, possible to argue that music which remains within the conventions of particular codes is distinct, in important ways, from that which ruptures codes. The notion of rupture (in Kristeva’s terms “revolution”) suggests, in musical terms, the introduction of elements from other codes of musical practice or from the matrix of “noise” against which codes are established at their origin. It is worth mentioning that such ruptures mobilise or evoke the code they unsettle. Many representations of crisis moments in jazz configure an inevitable outside (of all codes) from which a “new sound” emerges and suggest the evolution of a new code *ex nihilo*. Codebreaking is, though, always contextual: the sonic extremity which wrenches the code apart is extreme in terms of particular conventions only. In speaking, therefore, of code-breaking, it may be worth remembering that the process is more implicated in tradition, more imbedded in persistence, than representations of the performer as a Romantic revolutionary imply.

Why this emphasis on code-breaking? In Kristeva’s *Revolution in Poetic Language*, the semiotic emanates from the drives which, desirous in their aspect and forceful in their manner, attenuate to breaking point the capacity of codes of expression. The semiotic ruptures these codes, initiating new possibilities of expression and, consequently, different processes of being. Jazz music (according to its mythos) prizes, above all else, the new. The music is *about* innovation and the extent to which an innovation recasts potential expressivity.¹⁰ Revolutionary or limit performances, in the course of which the tradition is realigned as new codes of musical practice emerge, are generally represented as libidinal excess and/or the irruptions of drives: moments at which desire floods the expected, the regulated and the codified. On one level, the body (made immanent through the drives) is always present in music. Just as the symbolic plane of language is comprised of the traces of all previous irruptions of the semiotic, so codes of musical practice are the codifications of earlier “revolutions”, prior incursions of desire. But it is not the repetition of the past which commonly attracts jazz novelists and poets: it is crisis moments (such as Bolden’s performance in Liberty-Iberville) or their poignant elusiveness (as in John Clellon Holmes’s *The Horn*) around which most jazz narratives and representations are configured. The revolutionary moment is, though, the basis of so many representations of jazz not only because it is then that musical history is seemingly made. These crisis moments are also moments of subjectification. It is then, at the confluence of desire and its expression, that the individual performer is in the process of emergence as a (musical) subject; that the individual is seen as *becoming* in

the combination of drives and their expression. And it follows that this process, so compelling to signify upon, is also, because of the degree to which it is in excess of the symbolic, the most resistant to representation.

Bolden's music offers Ondaatje an imaginative space unencumbered by any disembodied trace on a wax cylinder. In his novel it becomes a site of a jazz ontology composed of an exchange between eroticised bodies (Bolden's and the singer's), a flow across the border between the instrument and the performing body and the climactic embodiment of a tradition or body of knowledge. The Libery-Iberville performance is wrought, through these ontological transferences, into a site of an emergent, embodied selfhood which is both "in process/ on trial" and intersubjective. In this culmination of Bolden's desire to play/to be, we can hear any number of reverberations of Kristeva's theory of the subject. If the artist's becoming (here indistinguishable from the conditions of emergence of the work) is at the border of the semiotic and symbolic, then this moment is a rupture of selfhood precisely because the semiotic (momentarily) *destroys* the symbolic. Desire thus manifest, in disturbing any notion of the subject's coherence, causes an influx of the death drive "which no signifier, no mirror, no other, and no mother could ever contain" (Kristeva 1984: 50). While not being able to "contain" the rupture, the "other", the mirror provided by the vocalist, is a precondition for the crisis. The erotic exchange of the capacity to cross borders, the enticement to go further, provides an external correlate for a process of subjectification already under way for Bolden. It is through this reciprocation, though, that he *experiences* (as epiphany) his trajectory of becoming, recognises this flood of desire as the culmination of selfhood. This limit-experience is marked by existential integration and a complete dilation of the body (as being) into the world. Not only does Bolden literalise the instrumental body as he bleeds into the cornet, the horn also becomes the phallus,¹¹ a penetrating extension of desire into the world. The performance, thus, is libidinal (as sonic) eruption, the Apollonian dream of pure form having been rent by the force of desire. Like a bacchic dismemberment, the intrusion of force finally obliterates the forms that would seek to contain it.

At the risk of labouring the point, this version of the jazz body subverts notions of primitivism while not discounting the countercultural import of the forms of subjectification it allows. It suggests that we can conceive of the jazz body as endlessly becoming at the borders of desire and discipline and that such becoming can be conceived in terms of ideologies of repression (in the psychological and political sense) and liberation. Further, it makes it possible for us to conceive of jazz bodies (through the relation of the symbolic to the semiotic) as points at which, in communication with others, musical and cultural tradition and history are actualised. A primitivist emphasis on desire

essentialises such actualisations. Finally, using the semiotic and symbolic as conceptual organisers allows us to explore the need for communicability in music. It is the reciprocation of Bolden's performance by the singer which leads to the culmination of desire, it is the interrelation of desire and the codes of its expression which makes jazz a site of fluid (perpetual) rather than atavistic identities. Jazz, no matter how eruptive, no matter how code-breaking, marries desire to discipline in order to actualise music in the space of other embodied – performing or listening – identities.

Reading Ondaatje through Kristeva's ideas on creativity and the subject (and the Liberty-Iberville performance is one of many parts of the novel which can be productively approached through the geometry of "revolutions in poetic language"), raises any number of interesting issues concerning the body's place in jazz music, history and its representation in literary discourse and the visual arts. I conclude this article by gesturing towards just three lines of thinking for which this might be a basis.

In approaching literary representations of jazz we need to think critically about the possibilities of dilated being and embodiment in connection with the relations between the somatic body, the body of the instrument and the tradition of jazz performance. Such thinking might contribute to liberating jazz scholarship and literature from its unproductive embeddedness in Romantic primitivism, traces of which continue to proliferate. If we consider, with this in mind, three short extracts from *But Beautiful: A Book about Jazz* (1991), Geoff Dyer's evocative, if rather mythomaniac, collection of fictional jazz portraits, they immediately suggest possibilities in terms of the relation of desire and the symbolic to emergent identities.

You had to see Monk to hear his music properly. The most important instrument in the group – whatever the format – was his body. He didn't play the piano really. His body was the instrument and his piano was just the means of getting the sound out of his body at the rate and quantities he wanted. If you blotted out everything except his body you would think he was playing the drums, foot going up and down on the high-hat, arms reaching over each other. His body fills in all the gaps in the music; without seeing him it always feels as if something is missing but when you see him even piano solos acquire a sound as full as a quartet's. The eye hears what the ear misses.

(Dyer 1991: 32)

[Webster] had always been heavily, powerfully built and by his mid-thirties you could sense his body waiting for the chance to bulk itself out even more. As time went by his body and his tone became almost identical to one another: big, heavy, round.

(Dyer 1991: 85)

Gradually [Mingus] assumed the weight and dimensions of his instrument. He got so heavy that the bass was something he just slung over his shoulder like a duffel bag, hardly noticing the weight. The bigger he got, the smaller the bass became. He could bully it into doing what he wanted. Some people played the bass like sculptors, carving notes out of an unwieldy piece of stone; Mingus played it like he was getting in close, working inside, grabbing at the neck and plucking strings like guts.

(Dyer 1991: 95)

The desiring body collapses the palpable surface of the instrument into itself making convoluted, as the two sides of a Möbius strip, the relation of mouth-pieces, keys, valves, frets and strings to the body that controls them. The locus of identity shifts from the somatic body to the instrument and back again in a series of exchanges that invariably has ontological repercussions. The instrument allows a language of the body and, in its expression, the body becomes something new. Perhaps this is a way of thinking, not only of Dyer's portraits of Monk, Webster and Mingus, but of the ursine body of the Bear in Rafi Zabor's *The Bear Comes Home* (1998), the "terrible" relation of identity a musician has to his instrument described in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" (1990), the etherealisation of Edgar Pool as he fades from grace as a jazz performer in John Clellon Holmes's *The Horn* (1990), and the multiple representations of Django Reinhardt's missing fingers, Louis Armstrong's split lip or their fictional equivalents.

The second line of thinking concerning the relation between desire and its expression suggested by representations of jazz performance concerns the question of the archive. If we speak of embodied competence as manifest at the border of desire and discipline, where, then, does the tradition of jazz *exist* and how can we secure its persistence? Returning to Geoff Dyer's novel, he represents Rashaan Roland Kirk as "an encyclopedia of black music: he stored all of this knowledge not in his head but in his body, not as knowledge but as feeling" (1991: 101).

Kristeva's notion of the becoming subject, given the complex origins of the individual *chora* and its determining role in disrupting and rejuvenating the symbolic, suggests that the body's relation to a tradition of expression is *the* site of emergence (and emergency). A disembodied jazz tradition comprising recordings and reflections cannot substitute for the seemingly humanist imperative to protect and foster an embodied tradition, the somatic memory of individual musicians. There is an imperative to reflect on the impact of totalitarianism on jazz in these terms. The persecution of musicians (whether by the Nazis, in the erstwhile Soviet Union, the racist South or in apartheid South Africa) through violence, intentional deprivation, or sheer neglect, effects a forgetting that is permanent. One of South Africa's most important

musicians, Kippie Moeketsi, recalled in a 1981 interview:

[T]he doctor said to me, “No, Kippie, I think you’re still not awright. You have to stay another two weeks in the hospital.” After the two weeks, I was discharged, having been given treatment – like electric shock – three times. That thing can make you stupid, man.

It makes you to become forgetful. Even now, I’m like that – forgetful. I have this tendency of forgetting things – I can hold a pen and forget where I have put it.

But the doctor said it would do me good. He told me that if one nerve in my brain snapped, I had had it and would eventually become insane, if I kept on thinking too much about music. He said electric shock treatment was the best for me.

(Moeketsi 1981: 44)

The history of South African jazz is signally a history of racist oppression. All that remains is a fragile web of memory over chasms of forgetting. The idea of an archival body in jazz has important implications for conceiving of how tradition might be maintained (even on the level of policy) and how historiography might be conducted. In both instances we have to acknowledge that power is composed across the bodies of those who remember.

Finally, a strutting claim. If one conceives of identity as a fluid process of intersubjective becoming in which the body and the mind are indistinguishably linked, one might develop approaches to critical discourses that are less prone to reification and less insistent on keeping identities trapped within Cartesian categories. The notion of “nomadic becoming”, of “becoming being” at the interstices of desire and meaning, may function as a useful alternative to ontologies that prevail in an array of disciplinary discourses and which maintain particular power relations. Thinking through the ways in which jazz performance enters discourse might well give us a vocabulary for new discursive improvisations around the ways bodies have and might come to be.

Notes

1. The use in this article of the singular “body” is a stylistic convenience. The generalising move it entails, its elision of bodily difference in terms of gender, race and culture, is countered later in the article.
2. This triad of bodies is suggested in John Corbett’s “Writing Around Free Improvisation” (1995: 236). He goes on to discuss the space of musical

improvisation at the juncture of and between the bodies of musicians. While touched on later in the discussion of Ondaatje's representation of Buddy Bolden, this highly productive line of thinking is beyond the scope of my argument.

3. To speak of "jazz" as a singular tradition, or as a music defined by a range of formal elements or performance practices is, of course, riddled with difficulties. Many analyses of jazz are more apposite to music in other improvisational traditions than they are to much of the jazz canon. It follows that any hypothesis concerning "jazz" be treated as provisional, as more or less useful in approaching music (and the ways in which it is represented) across a broad spectrum.
4. This distinction, between valorising the work or the process of performance, is usefully set out in Goehr's article, "The Perfect Performance of Music and the Perfect Musical Performance" (1995) which traces, in the tradition of classical and Romantic music, the desire to conceal (as evidenced in Wagner's architectural blueprint for Bayreuth) the body of the performer or, alternatively, to witness the musician's exertions.
5. For one of many discussions of this aspect of existential integration see Berliner's interviews and comments (1994: 95, 194).
6. This is an instance where one would have to distinguish between modes of jazz performance. The concert-hall tradition of jazz, which seldom functions as a literary reservoir, conflates the classical occasion detailed by Said and the realities of improvisation which I discuss. It might be added, though, that the mythos of jazz manifest in literature tends to equate jazz *with* improvisation.
7. It has been argued that a definite relation exists between this existential extremity and the disruption of the mind/body binary (see, among many others, Berliner 1994: 392 and Maslow in Woodward 1992: 104).
8. Kristeva refers to semiotic and symbolic as "dialectical", but it becomes clear that she is using "dialectic" in a sense very different from the Hegelian scheme that term commonly suggests.
9. The "both-and" style of Kristeva's thought is informatively similar to Merleau-Ponty's. For an analysis of this trend in his *Phenomenology of Perception* see Macann 1993: 161-170.
10. Think of the status accorded the following moments in jazz history: Louis Armstrong's initiating improvisations on the "Hot Seven Sides", Charlie Parker's solo on "Koko", the recording of Miles Davis's *The Birth of the Cool*, John Coltrane's *Ascension* session, Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz* and the original fusion work of both Donald Byrd and Miles Davis. Whatever the particularities, jazz fans are adept at choosing a series of "revolutionary"

moments by which to configure the development of the music.

11. Representations of “phallicist” trumpet playing are examined in Gabbard 1995. The following comment is interestingly applicable to Ondaatje’s representation of Bolden:

As with many aspects of black culture, jazz provided its practitioners with wide latitude for expressing masculinity while avoiding the less mediated assertions of phallic power that were regularly punished by white culture. If it is true that no one ever possesses the phallus of the father - the first phallus that anyone desires - then all of us, male and female alike, are castrated. The trumpet can then be conceptualized as a compensatory, even hysterical mechanism to ward off castration.

(Ondaatje 1995: 108)

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