

Don't deny my name: The resounding of a Black avant-garde in post-war music history

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Abstract: From a vantage point surveying the past half-century's radical and often utopian experimentation, the free improvisational practices of the jazz avant-garde stand as perhaps one of the most significant, yet too often overlooked, expressions of iconoclastic musical innovation in the post-war era. Based on over a decade of ethnographic fieldwork with a contemporary community of improvising musicians in New York City, I argue that high-handed dismissals from institutionally validated "serious-music" vanguardists—along with rear-guard denunciations from jazz neo-conservatives of what they term the "so-called avant-garde"—reveal in their attempts at effacement and exclusion a profound anxiety, engendered by the survival of a movement that has challenged fundamental premises of the racially marked jazz and concert-music worlds. In exploring the discourses surrounding, if not always successfully containing, this black avant-garde, I thus engage what Fred Moten has identified as the defining paradox of such movements: the manner in which they appear to exist "oxymoronically—as if black, on the one hand, and avant-garde, on the other hand, each depends for its coherence upon the exclusion of the other." Through an analysis of the aporias from which this conundrum arises, I ultimately find that the unique vantage point jazz provides upon the avant-garde not only makes possible a critical reappraisal of established theories of the phenomenon—such as those of Poggioli, Bürger, and Enzensberger—but also helps cast light upon the intersection between cultural identity and racial ideology in Euro-American post/modernism.

In its title, this essay pays homage to the pioneering work of scholar-poet Lorenzo Thomas on the vital musical and literary scenes that launched the Black Arts Movement, especially his seminal article "Ascension," which took seriously the political-aesthetic and socio-historical implications of Amiri Baraka's notion of a jazz avant-garde, enough so to remark upon its parallels to the French surrealist movement (1995/2008: 133). In the wake of this compelling scholarly precedent, continuing contestation surrounding the now well-established rubric of avant-garde jazz (e.g. Whitehead 1995) suggests the merit of further exploration in this regard, to situate the emergence and endurance of this movement within the broader theoretical and historical context surrounding the canonical artistic vanguards of the modernist era. Not only will a reappraisal of Euro-American avant-gardism, from the standpoint of an African-American movement largely excluded from its histories, offer a critical perspective upon the racial lacunae of the predominantly class-based theories upon which its legacy rests, but it will also cast light upon the problematics of meaning inherent in the improvisational practices under consideration.

Briefly, for the purposes of an introductory overview, the basis upon which I argue this position derive from over a decade of archival, oral-historical, and ethnographic field research with a contemporary community of improvising musicians on New York City's Lower East Side. My engagement with these artists, and research on the history of their tradition, leads me to conclude that (to paraphrase Mark Twain) reports of the jazz avant-garde's death have been greatly exaggerated, and calls for its interment rather premature. In fact, I contend, if viewed in the context of a critical reconsideration of influential theories of the avant-garde, quite a different picture emerges: rear-guard denunciations of what jazz neo-conservatives term the "so-called avant-garde," along with high-handed dismissals from institutionally validated "serious-music" vanguardists, reveal in their attempts at effacement and exclusion a profound anxiety engendered by the survival (against all odds) of a movement that has challenged fundamental premises of the racially marked jazz and concert-music worlds. The following exploration of the discourses surrounding, if not always successfully containing, this black

avant-garde, will thus ultimately engage what Fred Moten has identified as the defining paradox of such movements: the manner in which they appear to exist “oxymoronically—as if black, on the one hand, and avant-garde, on the other hand, each depends for its coherence upon the exclusion of the other” (Moten 2003: 32).

At the outset, though, the very naming of the musical genre under consideration as avant-garde jazz brings to the fore issues of race and cultural power that require unpacking before any systematic inquiry into meaning can begin. The use of the term avant-garde should not only evoke the innovations of such composers as Cage, Babbitt, Stockhausen, and Boulez – whose music similarly baffled and even alienated concert audiences – but also spur the critical recognition that these composers have gained acceptance, however grudging, into institutionally sanctioned canon of twentieth-century art-music, while those of Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, Anthony Braxton, and other artists associated with the jazz avant-garde by and large have not. Rather than limiting the racial implications of this observation to the fact that Cage et al. are white while Taylor et al. are black, I would argue that the exclusion of jazz – perhaps the preeminent example of a uniquely African-American art form – from the modernist canon of European-American concert music contributed directly to the consolidation of avant-garde jazz practice and substantially shaped its meanings.

Historicizing the jazz avant-garde

Avant-garde jazz is the term most commonly used in critical and scholarly discourse to connote the loosely associated group of diverse stylistic traditions pioneered in the late 1950s by African-American artists such as Cecil Taylor and Ornette Coleman.¹ The characteristic practices of artists associated with this movement challenged many of the conventional foundations of modern-jazz improvisation and composition, such as the use of tonal melodic materials, functional harmonic structures, and metrical rhythmic organization. The notion that the iconoclastic innovations of Taylor and Coleman placed them at the forefront of an emergent jazz vanguard apparently took hold in the late 1950s among critics and scholars such as Martin Williams, Nat Hentoff, and Gunther Schuller,² who edited a short-lived but influential journal called the *Jazz Review*, which attempted – through “serious” musicologically minded analysis and criticism – to valorize jazz as an aesthetically valid form of contemporary music.³

Although initially situated, vaguely and a bit uneasily, somewhere on the fringes of a Third Stream movement that sought to bridge jazz and modernist Euro-American concert music,⁴ the emergent jazz avant-garde soon found itself singled out in a firestorm of controversy, sparked by Ornette Coleman’s New York debut at the Five Spot nightclub, and stoked by recordings such as his *Free Jazz* (1960) and John Coltrane’s *Live at the Village Vanguard* (1961). In terms that clearly echo reactionary social rhetoric of the times, critics such as John Tynan and Leonard Feather condemned the music as “nihilistic,” “anarchistic” “anti-jazz” (Tynan 1961; Welding and Tynan 1962; Feather 1962; DeMichael 1962).⁵

Around the same time, Amiri Baraka – featured contributor to the *Jazz Review* as well as *Down Beat* and *Metronome* under the name LeRoi Jones – declared boldly “There is definitely an avant-garde in jazz today.”⁶ He defined it as a movement deeply rooted in the African-American bebop and blues traditions that also utilized what he considered “the most important ideas” in “contemporary Euro-American ‘art’ music” as “solutions to engineering problems the contemporary jazz musician’s life is sure to raise” (Baraka 1961/67: 69-70). Although he did not at first entirely exclude white musicians from membership in his jazz avant-garde, the black nationalist sentiments that came to dominate his writing led him increasingly to refer to the genre as “New Black Music” by 1965, and define it as “the music of contemporary black culture” and an “invention of Black Lives” (Baraka 1965/67: 175-76), thus articulating one of the most enduring complexes of meaning surrounding this music.

Over the next decade, the term “jazz” – along with its “avant-garde” modifier – fell into

disfavor, as black nationalist frustration with the racial redlining they associated with it gave rise to such alternative generic designations as “the new thing,” “creative music,” and “improvised music.” Nonetheless, in addition to the increasing tendency of African American improvising musicians since that time to identify themselves once again with a broadly defined jazz tradition, several further compelling reasons support the prevailing transnational scholarly consensus in favor of describing the improvisational practices at issue here as avant-garde jazz.⁷ Considerations of precedent, acknowledged influence, stylistic genealogy, and continuity of practice, all militate for such usage, as do those of political economy and racial ideology.⁸ As George Lewis has observed, “even European free jazz musicians, with few or no African Americans around, still experience the reception of their art through the modalities of race” (Lewis 2004b: 84),⁹ and the term jazz has come to index this racialized reception.

Indeed, the distinction Lewis draws between “‘Afrological’ and ‘Eurological’ systems of improvisational musicality” (2004a: 133), and his incisive analysis of the unequal power relations obtaining between them, provide perhaps some of the most compelling reasons for subsuming African-American traditions of “improvised music” under the heading of “avant-garde jazz” rather than vice-versa. Whereas the former rubric has served at home and abroad to “exnominate” or unname a tacit privileged position of “whiteness,” – often implicitly valorizing European “non-idiomatic” improvisational approaches over those of “idiomatic” African diasporic traditions – the latter resists the erasure of shared origins in African-American expressive cultural practice, and reaffirms enduring Afrological influences. In general terms, then, the perspective advanced here posits avant-garde jazz as a transcultural aesthetic space in which African-American improvisational paradigms structure the exploration of local identity within the experience of global/izing hybridity.

Theorizing the jazz avant-garde

Even granting the capacity of a broadly conceived category of jazz to accommodate all the various traditions at issue here still leaves open the question of the suitability of characterizing them collectively as avant-garde. On the one hand, the value-laden teleology of the term has engendered a certain amount of controversy about the way it should apply to jazz (e.g. Wynton Marsalis’s criticism of the “so-called avant-garde”). On the other, the often imprecise and unproblematized use of the term in certain other musical and aesthetic domains has introduced an element of disadvantageous ambiguity about what it might imply in this application, particularly as far as the relationship of the jazz traditions thus invoked to other avant-garde movements in music and the arts.

Elucidating these issues requires not only distinguishing among various general aesthetic connotations and specific historical denotations of the term, but also appreciating the extent to which the former have come to dominate in discourse on music, where the term avant-garde has a primary historical field of reference that diverges significantly from that typical in many other critical narratives of modern art and literature. As the following examination should demonstrate, extant theories of the avant-garde offer compelling reasons to consider the vanguardist jazz traditions at issue here – including free jazz, creative music, and improvised music – as manifestations of this broader transdisciplinary aesthetic phenomenon, by any definition. Moreover, my analysis will suggest that the unique vantage point jazz provides upon the avant-garde not only makes possible a critical reappraisal of established theories of the phenomenon, but also shows their diachronic succession in the unfolding historical narrative of avant-garde jazz.

The main problem in defining the avant-garde stems from the fact that there exist about as many theories of it as theorists. While sorting out in any detail the bewildering variety of competing and often conflicting notions of the avant-garde in critical and scholarly use could pose quite a challenge, a simple categorization based on the posited relations to modernism and the institution of art as a whole offers perhaps the most advantageous means of highlighting the salient commonalities and contrasts for present purposes. Following this logic

allows the crude but effective classification of the diverse uses of the term into a strong or highly specialized sense, of the avant-garde as antagonistic toward the institution of art, and weaker or more generalized senses, of the avant-garde as integral to it, either as the "experimental cutting edge of modernity" (Călinescu 1987: 275) or as modernism's renegade critical adversary. The strong socio-historical sense, propounded by Peter Bürger (and echoed at times by Matei Călinescu), applies specifically to such early 20th-century movements as Dada and Surrealism, while the weaker formal-aesthetic and socio-aesthetic senses, defined by Matei Călinescu and Renato Poggioli respectively, admit of more general application to a variety of aesthetic schools and movements from the late nineteenth to the mid twentieth century.

In musical discourse, the widespread association of the term avant-garde with post-war modernist composers complicates matters, insofar as most other aesthetic and literary disciplines tend to formulate their notions of the avant-garde primarily around the iconoclastic modern movements of the early twentieth century.¹⁰ Thus, music critics and scholars often label the music of the Darmstadt and New York Schools of the 1940s and 1950s as "avant-garde,"¹¹ where now prevalent periodization and categorization schemata in other disciplines might just as easily classify them as "late" or even "high" (or, better still, perhaps "late-high") modernist.¹² In part, this situation might reflect the limited (or at least rather short-lived) influence of archetypically avant-garde movements like Dada or Surrealism – as compared to, say, that of neoclassicism – on the work of most pre-war modernist composers.¹³ In a broader sense, however, this relative lack of influence corresponds to the generally conservative socio-aesthetic character of musical modernism: even the radical paradigm shift involved in the development of serialism by the Second Viennese School hardly threatened an attack upon the institution of concert music, certainly not one aimed at the revolutionary reintegration of art into the practice of everyday life. Accordingly, most musical applications of the term "avant-garde" tend to evoke not Peter Bürger's strict, socio-historically particular sense of a movement aimed at the destruction of art as an institution, but rather the looser connotations of vanguardist experimentalism.

Formal-aesthetic perspectives

The formal-aesthetic conception of "avant-garde" as an honorific title signifying membership in a recognized modernist vanguard links the criticism of Clement Greenberg to the critical theory of Theodor Adorno. Both emphasize the avant-garde's evolutionary rather than revolutionary tendencies, and portray it not as bent upon uprooting tradition but instead as deeply rooted in it.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, they both share an antipathy, if not outright hostility, to the main movements of what Bürger considers the "historical avant-garde"¹⁵ – Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism – a negative assessment echoed by influential writer and critic of the (historical) avant-garde Hans Magnus Enzensberger (1962/97).¹⁶

Greenberg and Adorno differ, however, in their assessments of the essential value(s) defining avant-garde practice. For Greenberg, "what created the Avant-Garde and defines and constitutes it essentially, crucially" is its "insistence on aesthetic quality, aesthetic value"; "[t]his insistence," he believes, "amounts to the Avant-Garde's only *raison d'être*, its only real justification" (Greenberg 1977: 87). By contrast, Adorno considers the key value of the avant-garde work to be its authenticity: its resistance to commodification, its engagement with the crisis of meaning, its capacity – through the structural consistency of the expressive Subject's struggle to shape the most advanced aesthetic material – to serve as a message in a bottle, whose enigmatic character "seems to keep alive at least the idea of emancipation in what Adorno calls 'the administered world'" (Paddison 1996: 77). By embodying in the fragmentation of its content and the "immanent law" of its form the contradictions of modern bourgeois society, the authentic avant-garde artwork reveals the mystifications of ideology and offers "a mute protest against the false consciousness which prevents a better world" (Paddison 1993: 56).

Despite their clear divergence on the specific criteria of value, Greenberg and Adorno both locate it within the artwork itself, as an immanent quality amenable to critical determination within the existing institution of art. This paradigm's broad historical sweep and institutionally sanctioned narrative of progress – as well as Adorno's influential role as the Darmstadt School's main critical advocate – probably facilitated the application of the term "avant-garde" to post-war modernist composition, which, in turn, no doubt influenced its later extension to the subsequently recognized jazz vanguard. A brief survey of early works by Coltrane ("Moment's Notice"), Taylor ("Song"), Sun Ra ("Future"), Coleman ("The Blessing") should give an idea of the innovative late fifties styles to which the Jazz Review crowd were listening and responding, in more or less these terms (albeit closer to Greenberg than Adorno). **[Montage 1]** 🎧

Socio-aesthetic perspectives

Whereas formal aesthetic definitions conceptualize the avant-garde in terms of qualitative considerations situating a given artwork within the context of other artworks, socio-aesthetic definitions place greater emphasis on the effect of the artwork upon its audience, and tend to shift the focus toward the artist in relation to other artists and society at large. Renato Poggioli, who published the first general theory of avant-garde art, treated the phenomenon "not so much as an aesthetic fact as a sociological one," examining it "primarily in terms of psychology and ideology" and reconstructing its poetics as "aesthetic corollaries" of these (1968: 3-5). He identifies four key attitudes or "moments" characteristic of the avant-garde movement: activism or "acting for the sake of acting" (1968: 61), that is, "the tendency ... to act without heeding plans or programs ... for the mere sake of doing something ..." (1968: 27); antagonism or "acting by negative reaction" (1968:61), that is, the "spirit of hostility and opposition" (1968: 26); nihilism or "attaining nonaction by acting," whose essence "lies in destructive, not constructive, labor" (1968: 61-62); and agonism or "the spirit of sacrifice" (1968: 131), which "ignores even its own catastrophe and perdition" and "even welcomes and accepts this self-ruin as an obscure or unknown sacrifice to the success of future movements" (1968: 26). To these he adds the additional moment of futurism, "the present subordinated to the future" (1968: 131), stemming from agonism, and the state of alienation, "the tortured awareness of the artist's situation in modern society"(1968: 99), which he considers a "central formula" summing up all these various concepts (1968: 226).¹⁷


Of all these characteristic attitudes, art-critic Rosenberg regards what Poggioli terms agonistic futurism as sine qua non of the avant-garde, and finds it reified in the characteristic quality of "freshness" he associates with avant-garde artworks. "Every avant-garde," he asserts, "embodies an attempt at prophesy. It wagers its survival on the relevance of its intuition of the future, of which its creations are presented as models" (1969/73: 75). In the context of jazz, this prophetic stance manifests itself quite clearly in the titles of early recordings by Cecil Taylor (Jazz Advance, Looking Ahead), Ornette Coleman (Tomorrow is the Question, The Shape of Jazz to Come), and Sun Ra (Futuristic Sounds of Sun Ra). The agonistic side of the equation becomes clearly audible by the early sixties, if contemporaneous works by such artists (e.g. Coltrane's "Chasin' the Trane," Taylor's "Pots," Sun Ra's "What's That," and Coleman's "Free Jazz") are any indication, in the intensification of stylistic transgressions despite – or perhaps due to – critical condemnations attributing activist, antagonistic, or even nihilistic motives to such programs of aesthetic innovation. **[Montage 2]** 🎧

Critical-theoretical perspectives

Both the formal aesthetic and socio-aesthetic paradigms tend to collapse the distinctions between modernism and the avant-garde. While Greenberg and Adorno, on the one hand, tend to characterize all of what they consider valid modernist work as avant-garde,¹⁸ Rosenberg and Poggioli, on the other, end up attributing avant-garde sensibilities to many of the most prominent artists in the modernist canon.¹⁹ Thus, all of them ultimately come to regard "modern genius" in Poggioli's words, as "essentially avant-gardistic" (1968: 224).²⁰ By

contrast, critical-theoretical approaches to the avant-garde by Peter Bürger (1974/84) and Richard Murphy (1999) sharply distinguish it from modernism, strictly delimiting its socio-historical scope to a select few aesthetic movements from the first half of the twentieth century: primarily Dada, Surrealism, and (at least in Murphy's case) Expressionism.²¹ This allows them to shift the focus of study away from the formal aesthetic properties of artworks or the ideological and psychological tendencies of the artists who create them, and toward the art-world within which they work and function, an "institution of art" which, for Bürger, includes not only "the productive and distributive apparatus" but also "the ideas about art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works" (1974/84: 22).

In his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Bürger contends that the endeavor to criticize, attack, and negate art as an institution – that is, as an autonomous sphere in bourgeois society set apart from everyday life – represents the defining characteristic of avant-garde movements (1974/84: 22, 36, 49, 53). In support of this position, he develops a critique of aesthetic autonomy as an inherently contradictory category, encompassing both art's triumph over "the coercion of means-end rationality" and its ideological co-optation through the hypostatization of this detachment from practical life as the very essence of art (1974/84: 41, 46). On this basis, he further argues that the enduring contemporary significance of the historical avant-gardes lies not in their failure to "destroy art as an institution" and thereby "reintegrate art in the praxis of life," but rather in their success in destroying "the possibility that a given school can present itself with the claim to universal validity" by making the institution of art and its ideologies visible, and thus rendering its institutionalized power to determine "the real social effect of individual works" recognizable (1974/84: 83, 86, 87).

Bürger's insights hold clear and critical implications for the theorization of a jazz avant-garde. Whether or not any of the jazz vanguardists actually meant to attack the institutions of jazz or contemporary music,²² their actions clearly rendered them visible as an ideologically defined entities, and challenged the jazz establishment's subsequent attempts to dictate the aesthetic norms of particular schools as universally valid. Moreover, the extent to which this challenge rested on a bold assertion of aesthetic autonomy, belied by dependence on the commercial music industry for patronage, reveals a good deal about the political economy of jazz. Certainly, the development of some measure of autonomy status in jazz represents quite an achievement – albeit one fiercely contested by Adorno (1933/2002; 1936/2002; 1953/67) – insofar as it calls into question Bürger's automatic relegation of mass-mediated cultural production to the realm of "false sublation of art as an institution" (1974/84: 50, 54). In fact, in its historical trajectory – from the collective production of New Orleans polyphony and collective (sociable) reception in the dance-halls, to the individualistic primacy of improvised solos in bebop and their individualized appreciation by enthusiasts and record collectors – jazz recapitulates key aspects of Bürger's schema of the emergence of aesthetic autonomy in European society (1974/84: 47-49). Moreover, by the mid-sixties, the impact of its avant-garde upon the institutions of jazz and concert music reverberates most clearly in the mature works of Coltrane ("Ascension"), Taylor ("Steps"), Sun Ra ("Other Worlds"), and Coleman ("Riddle"). **[Montage 3]** 

Large ensemble improvisations such as those featured in "Ascension" and "Other Worlds" strongly suggest that, while modern jazz may have provided compelling representations of bourgeois individualism in twentieth-century American society, it never entirely divorced itself from socializing ritual functions of music in African-American expressive cultural traditions. As a result, the jazz avant-garde's "attempt to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art" (Bürger 1974/84: 49) drew not only upon the competitive paradigms of bebop practice but also upon the communitarian ethos of the black church, which provided a model for the transcendence of the opposition between the individual and the collective.²³

This last observation points toward an important characteristic feature of avant-gardes more generally: the key, necessary role played by progressive cultural institutions and ideologies of

engagement in mediating the inevitable tensions arising from an avant-garde's constitution as a "group manifestation" (Poggioli 1968: 17) composed of, by, and for radical individualists, united less by common stylistic affinities (as a "school") than by a shared commitment to transformation of the social order through aesthetic practice (as a "movement"). Positing the centrality of such engagement, in light of Bürger's conceptualization of the "nonorganic (avant-gardiste) work" (Bürger 1974/84: 70; 55-92), suggests that avant-garde works achieve their characteristic shock or alienation effects by challenging the receptive reader, viewer, or listener to assume a critical stance, not only vis-à-vis the aesthetic value of the object or experience (in the manner described by Benjamin 1936/68: 228-241) or the institution of art which ultimately determines that value (as proposed by Bürger 1974/84: 22-54), but also, and most importantly in relation to bourgeois society, whose autonomy principle of "art for art's sake" cannot entirely contain the work's confrontational critique of the ideologically overdetermined practices of everyday life. Clearly, then, the collective recognition and concerted pursuit of such critical positioning effects – whether achieved through the fragmentation and montage techniques considered by Benjamin and Bürger or otherwise – cannot but play a pivotal role in the formation of any "historical avant-garde."

Articulating the meanings of avant-garde jazz practice

According to Richard Murphy's recent theorization, the diverse responses of avant-garde artists to this socio-aesthetic challenge fall into two broadly conceived categories: positive or idealistic movements, which raise the mundane world up to the sublime level of art by offering utopian models of how "the chaotic, violent or tragic aspects of life may be 'mastered'" in aesthetic form; and negative or cynical movements which "[bring] art down to the banal level of reality, [by] fragmenting artistic form, dismantling the syntax of poetic language and destroying any lingering sense of aesthetic harmony and of organic structuring" (Murphy 1999: 34). Considered not as mutually exclusive classifications but rather as two divergent tendencies, Murphy's positive and negative avant-gardes lend themselves quite readily to explication of salient differences between the idealistic positions articulated by New York creative musicians with whom I worked and conducted research at the Vision Festival, and the more dadaistic inclinations observed among their downtown improvisational colleagues on the rival Knitting Factory scene, all within an overarching conceptual framework of avant-gardism.

At the time of its emergence in the mid 1950s – as dated from the debut releases of such artists as Cecil Taylor and Sun Ra – the jazz avant-garde lent itself quite readily to formal-aesthetic characterization, after the fashion of Greenberg or even Adorno, as a vaguely defined experimentalist movement pushing the envelope of received tradition, a "Jazz Advance" on the fringes of the assimilationist Third Stream movement perhaps, but hardly a revolution. By the end of the decade, however, reactionary criticism sparked by the music of Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane had provoked heated polemical controversy, whose polarizing effects facilitated the consolidation of a more cohesive avant-garde, in a socio-aesthetic sense, drawn together by a shared agonistic commitment to a radically futuristic agenda of the sort envisioned by Rosenberg and Poggioli.²⁴ Although at that stage no unifying ideology had emerged yet as dominant, an alienating climate of intensifying racial strife, along with Baraka's vehement advocacy, led many prominent first and second generation jazz avant-gardists – including Archie Shepp and Bill Dixon, as well as Sun Ra – to embrace and espouse black cultural nationalist positions by the mid 1960s. Although its proximate cause had little to do with race, the mid-decade collapse of the Jazz Composers Guild – which in the wake of the waning Third Stream movement represented perhaps the last great integrated initiative of the 1960s – marked a critical juncture in the definitive transformation of the jazz avant-garde around the aesthetics of New Black Music and the ideals of the Black Arts movement.²⁵ Clearly recognizable by this point in the strong socio-historical sense advanced by Bürger and Murphy, the jazz avant-garde self-consciously expressed its new ethos of engaged aesthetic action in what many on both sides characterized as an all-out assault on the institution of jazz, complete with manifestos and manifestations recalling the radical

heydays of Dada and Surrealism.²⁶

At this point, standard theory-narratives of the avant-garde would begin to turn from its bold triumph toward its foreordained doom, whether coming in the form of a heroic act of suicide (Dada) or of a tragic death by a thousand cuts (Surrealism), followed in either case by its inevitable recuperation by the institution of art. Here however, the general contours of jazz history (in the West) fail to conform to the teleologies of modernism, and the narrative coherence of its avant-garde myth begins to break down.²⁷ The epitaphs and eulogies that had begun appearing by the 1970s prematurely lamented the passing of jazz in its entirety, not just that of its avant-garde. Perhaps because the autonomy status of jazz – ever fragile to begin with – found itself seriously compromised by the industry-wide changes occasioned by rock music's rise to overwhelming commercial dominance that fueled the ascendancy of fusion, the jazz avant-garde never exactly died, but instead drifted off toward a netherworld of vital obscurity at the margins. Notwithstanding a brief rapprochement with the mainstream on the New York loft scene of the early-mid '70s, avant-gardism never became "the second nature of all modern" jazz (to paraphrase Poggioli 1968: 230).

Despite its partial recuperation by the inclusion of key figures like Coleman and Taylor in emerging jazz canons under construction by influential critics, the avant-garde found itself excluded from the academy by a near unanimous pedagogical consensus against the teaching of its free improvisational practices in school.²⁸ Although this exclusion from the only remaining autonomous sector of any significance in the field of jazz production seriously eroded the avant-garde's patronage base, casting it beyond the pale of conventional practice allowed it to maintain and sharpen its subversive edge, even as the demise of the revolutionary movements it had once embraced left it without otherwise vital ideological support. By the time the neo-traditionalists proclaimed the end of jazz history, the triumph of stasis over progress, the avant-garde had long since abandoned any institutionalized role as antagonist gadfly spurring on modernism's perpetual advance: for all intents and purposes, it had already gone underground. Here, at last, the wildly extemporized narrative of the jazz vanguard returns to the certainties of a well-defined theoretical script, arriving at the last stage of the avant-garde afterlife Paul Mann envisions as "an unprecedented refusal" beneath the pluralistically defined surface of postmodernity:


Atomization, decentering, and hence both a reorganization effort and a few strange disappearances. ... the avant-garde abandons its traditional dialectic and rhetoric and seeks other modes. Dispersion of arts districts, proliferation of undergrounds, of margins, of microdiscourses, carried out in public but sometimes too as a marginalization without display (Mann 1991: 65-66).

While this somewhat romanticized postmodernist account of the avant-garde's survival successfully captures many of the most salient aspects of the contemporary downtown New York City scenes, its reference to "microdiscourses" calls attention – if only in passing – to the otherwise unexamined issue of meaning. Without any antagonistically defined institutional significance or ideologically predicated social relevance, what, if anything, does avant-garde improvisation mean? With respect to addressing this problem of meaning, the avant-garde theories surveyed above can offer only limited guidance, inasmuch as most tend rather to champion what they consider meaninglessness. They generally view the conventional structures of meaning – such as linear, chronological narrative or naturalistic, perspectival representation – characteristic of "organic" works of art with a good deal of suspicion, on the grounds that these serve ideologically affirmative and compensatory social functions by producing the "aesthetic illusion" of a "harmonious world into which the individual can be integrated effortlessly" and thus engendering an "artificial sense of unity" (Murphy 1999: 16-17). By contrast, they believe disorienting formal techniques, like fragmentation and montage, allow "non-organic" works to expose social contradictions, by fostering and focusing a sense of aesthetic alienation that presumably transforms itself spontaneously into socio-political

alienation (Bürger 1974/84: 86).

Unfortunately, even stipulating the arguable premise here that the form of a work rather than its content (to the extent that clear and meaningful distinctions between the two can be drawn) ultimately determines its socio-political impact, applying this organic/non-organic dualism to avant-garde jazz improvisation probably creates more problems than it solves. Although certain disjunctive techniques – e.g. melodic angularity, interrupted rhythmic flow, abrupt changes of mood, tempo, texture, etc. – can create a feeling of fragmentation, this does not inevitably correlate with listener alienation. In 1959, the music of Thelonious Monk as well as Cecil Taylor employed such techniques liberally, but it was the organically developing “motivic chain” improvisations of Ornette Coleman that produced the greatest controversy. Nonetheless, Murphy does manage to reformulate this avant-garde aesthetic of meaninglessness in a manner more conducive to application in this regard. Arguing that “the dominant social discourses, as well as the institutionalized forms of art corresponding to them, have the effect of establishing particular patterns of perception, and of projecting as “reality” the products of these limited and historically specific forms of seeing, he contends that:

... the avant-garde’s attack is directed more than anything else against the bourgeois construction of social reality in all its guises. The avant-garde exerts a resistance against this restrictive and all-encompassing social imaginary through the development of oppositional discourses or “counter-texts” which explode these constraining experiential constructions and open them up to alternatives (Murphy 1999: 260-261).

By shifting analytic focus away from the rigid criterion of organicity – whose applicability seems dubious in any case – and toward the more expansive notions of oppositional discourses and counter-texts, Murphy facilitates a more productive consideration of the aesthetic strategies by which various avant-garde improvisational approaches contest the “representational conventions and social signifying practices through which social experience is organized and given meaning” (Murphy 1999: 48) in accordance with dominant ideological worldviews. Furthermore, his notions of cynical vs. idealist avant-gardes, as discussed earlier, can help in identifying and classifying the characteristic tendencies of various New York City avant-garde scenes. Whereas many downtown Knitting Factory vanguardists like John Zorn more frequently illustrate the deconstructive cynical aspects of this dynamic, through neo-dadaistic practices of sonic disjuncture that disrupt dominant systems of signification, most of the Vision Festival’s creative-music avant-gardists typically foreground the constructive, idealistic side of the equation, with quasi-surrealistic rituals of musical automatism that postulate alternative modes of meaning production – as epitomized, for example, by the David S. Ware Quartet performance at the 1997 Vision Festival. **[video]** 

Reconceptualizing the avant-garde from a jazz perspective

Rather than drawing any hard and fast conclusions at this point, I would like instead to end with a summary application of the reconceptualization of avant-garde theory I have presented today to the vanguardist jazz tradition at the center of my ongoing ethnographic research for over a decade now. The perspective outlined here would clearly recognize the Vision Festival as the latest manifestation of a perennial jazz avant-garde, not merely because it merits such an honorific by virtue of its status as heir apparent to the legacy of jazz-historical movements successively embodying the criteria enumerated above, but also, and most crucially, because of the manner in which its artist-organizers view the challenge of their counter-texts and oppositional discourses to the conventional construction of social reality as central to the meaning of their aesthetic praxis. I have argued elsewhere that the festival’s ritual framing of performances such as David S. Ware’s helps direct audience members to a preferred subject position, from which the musical interactions on stage can be understood as allegories for alternative utopian models of social interaction in the outside world. As noted above, however, these socio-sonic utopias bespeak, in their individually expressive communitarian ethos, the strong structuring influence of African American traditions of charismatic spirituality forged in

the struggle to maintain a transcendent belief in the possibility of human redemption amid the dehumanizing horrors of plantation slavery.

This recognition brings us around full circle back to where we began, with Fred Moten's poetic account of black avant-garde production as rooted in embodied aesthetic responses to racial terror and slave-market capitalism, a perspective that points in a very fruitful direction: away from commodity exchange-value and toward use-value. His focus on what he calls the "resistance of the object," suggests not an Adornoesque resistance to commodity form, and thus exchange-value – doomed to futility the moment a work enters the market that supports its production – but rather its resistance to total appropriation through consumption. The avant-garde work, by this account, can never be possessed entirely by its owner, some significant part of its use-value remains always (already) at the disposal of its ostensible creator – hence the notion that it might exist "*au service de la revolution*." Whatever sensual pleasure it may provide, or social distinction it may confer – even the intellectual gratification derived from grappling with its "puzzle character" – carries the subversive edge of the conflicts, tensions, and ambiguities it embraces and symbolizes.

While such a perspective might appear either to suggest some fuzzy notion of object agency or to imply some simplistic imputation of intentionality, it does not actually require making such conceptual leaps. Rather, the less controversial ideas of aesthetic production as a form of social action, and art-works as embodiments of complex intentionalities that mediate social agency (e.g. by influencing the thoughts and actions of variously situated agents) suffice for present purposes without introducing too many additional problems. Whether by accident or design, the complex and often contradictory significations of avant-garde art works create problems for their audiences, insofar as the subject positions from which their meanings can most readily be grasped subvert or conflict with those defined by normative subjectivities and dominant ideologies.

A reconceptualization along these lines would thus vest avant-gardeness not in the formal properties of a work, nor in its relationship to any geo-historically particular institution of art, but instead in the socially – and that is to say institutionally – mediated relationships between a work and its audiences. While this conceptual move would probably not dramatically alter the scope of the term's application within canonical Modernist art worlds, it could helpfully serve to highlight the substantial but otherwise hard-to-account-for areas of consensus among the various competing formal-aesthetic, socio-aesthetic, and socio-political definitions in that regard. Moreover, by invoking alienated subjectivity – rather than vague criteria of novelty, inorganicity, or the like – as the key to the avant-garde work's counter-affirmative character, it lends support to Moten's provocative assertions that "the avant-garde is a black thing" and "blackness is an avant-garde thing" (32-33), in a manner with significant and far-reaching implications for an understanding of avant-garde jazz as such.

Among other things, it renders conceivable the otherwise oxymoronic notion of an avant-garde tradition: less Rosenberg's "tradition of the new," premised solely on ceaseless innovation, than a tradition of the Other, of aesthetic subversion, centered on the production of irresistible resistive objects and experiences that engage through innovation and recruit through alienation. Based on my field experiences as a scholar and performer on the scene, I submit that the perennial underground of avant-garde jazz, as manifest in New York City's Vision Festival, represents exactly such a site of aesthetic resistance, dedicated to the production of dramaturgically structured extemporized performances, in which audience identification with the musical personae artists improvise on stage serves to position them in concert with the radical agenda of the festival's organizers, just as surely as turns of the head and responses of "who, me?" to policemen's calls of "hey, you!" subject them to authority of the dominant powers that be.

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¹ The avant-garde epithet had been applied previously by Marshall Stearns (1950) to the earlier cadre of jazz artists – including Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie – whose “bebop” innovations had become the basis of modern jazz. While Paul Lopes (2002) notes this usage without comment, Scott Deveaux (1997) considers critically, if briefly, the implications of applying this term to bebop in light of Peter Bürger's influential Theory of the Avant-Garde (1974/84). However, as the following analysis will demonstrate, compelling grounds exist to dispute Deveaux's conclusion that “Bürger's interpretation of the avant-garde has limited applicability to jazz if only because the black American musician has (until very recently) been granted no privileged position in officially sanctioned culture from which to carry out such an assault” (1997: 22-23), or at least delimit the historical scope of its possible validity to the early modern jazz traditions he examines. Even here, Lopes' account of the coalescence of a “jazz art world” strongly suggests that bebop artists' ability to subsist (if only barely) on the performance of a musician's music, for audiences of artistic peers and suitably initiated connoisseurs, became possible through the creation and institutionalization of a quasi-autonomous space for jazz within the music industries. As I will contend, the subversive ferment of jazz modernism fostered by this fragile autonomy provided the context for the emergence of a jazz avant-garde fully conceivable in terms of Bürger's theory.

² E.g. Hentoff's (1958/91) approving citation of William's application of the term to Cecil Taylor.

³ Toward this end, the *Jazz Review* published articles by leading jazz artists, including a review by Cecil Taylor (1959) of John Coltrane's *Soultrane* LP (Prestige 7142).

⁴ Gunther Schuller, who coined the term “Third Stream” circa 1957 (Schuller 1961/86), was an early advocate of both Cecil Taylor and Ornette Coleman: he transcribed and analyzed Taylor's early work in the *Jazz Review* (Schuller 1959/86), and composed a third-stream work to feature a saxophone improvisation by Coleman (“Abstractions,” scored for guitar, double basses, drums, and string quartet). Another prominent third-stream figure, the Modern Jazz Quartet's pianist/composer John Lewis, was also one of Coleman's earliest supporters, recommending him to Nesuhi Ertegun for a recording contract on the Atlantic label, arranging for him to make his East Coast debut at the Lenox School of Jazz, and featuring him in a composition he presented at the 1959 Monterey Jazz Festival (Litweiler 1992/94: 65-70).

⁵ Ironically, Tynan had previously penned and published some of Coleman's earliest critical accolades in *Down Beat* magazine, giving his debut album a four-star review and voting for him as “Alto Saxophone New Star” in the magazine's 1958 Critics' Poll (Litweiler 1992/94: 60-61).

⁶ The roster of artists Baraka provided to substantiate this claim (1961/67: 73) reflects the *Jazz Review* editorial consensus (which he probably participated in shaping), inasmuch as almost all the artists listed – with the exceptions of Oliver Nelson, Wayne Shorter, and Wilbur Ware – had made notable recordings under the leadership of Cecil Taylor or Ornette Coleman.

⁷ The question “what is jazz?” – one of the perennial problems of jazz scholarship – acquires a certain salience with regard my own research, since neither of the communities in which I conducted my ethnographic fieldwork necessarily embraces “jazz” as the preferred category for its musical activities. Many musicians on New York's Lower East Side, especially William Parker, prefer “creative music, while most Berliners favor “improvised music.” Nonetheless, insofar as musicians from both camps perform together, as well as separately, at the same venues and festivals (predominantly jazz nightclubs and jazz festivals), the pragmatic value of finding some term to embrace both seems clear enough. “Creative improvised music,” the obvious compound of the two, suffers from redundancy on the one hand – it's hard to think of any form of improvisation that could not be considered creative on some level – and potentially exclusionary imprecision on the other—since it is not intended here to encompass the many non-Western forms of creative improvisation. “Free music,” which seems even vaguer, is rarely used outside Germany, and even then often connotes the specific styles associated with FMP events, artists, and recordings. Other commonly employed

terms—all of which make explicit reference to jazz – all suffer as well from significant shortcomings. “Free jazz,” generally unpopular among musicians in the States, is most often used in Berlin to refer to a particular type of “improvised music,” corresponding to the styles of the American “energy music” players of the mid-late 1960’s (e.g. Albert Ayler) and the German “first hour” improvising musicians (e.g. Peter Brötzmann) who emerged around the same time. Alternatives like “ecstatic jazz” and “avant jazz” advanced by Vision Festival promoters during the period of my research do not seem to have established themselves even within that community, most likely because the former term did not seem a fitting characterization of all the diverse types of music produced there and the latter contraction merely referred back to avant-garde jazz.

⁸ Such “first-hour” West German musicians as Alexander von Schlippenbach and Peter Brötzmann readily acknowledge the seminal influence of American avant-garde jazz musicians like Cecil Taylor and Albert Ayler upon the development of their own styles, as do many of their counterparts from the East including Ernst-Ludwig Petrowski and Ulrich Gumpert, who make no secret of their stylistic roots in the music of Ornette Coleman and Charles Mingus. Moreover, the fact that successful collaborations between American and European improvising artists continue to occur so often with so little (if any) preparation or even planning argues strongly for the existence of a common practice, which could only have arisen within the context of the jazz tradition. Notwithstanding their influence upon improvising musicians—especially in “live electronics” and *geräuschmusik* scenes—the brief flirtations of noted modernist composers like Lukas Foss (Improvisation Chamber Ensemble, c. 1957–61), Larry Austin (“open style,” c. 1963–66), Karlheinz Stockhausen (“intuitive music,” c. 1968–70), and Krzysztof Penderecki (*Actions*, 1971) with improvisation never advanced much beyond the level of short-lived idiosyncratic experimentation, and thus laid no solid alternative basis for widely shared improvisational practice. In fact, the very brevity of such experimentation with improvisation and its lack of lasting influence on the subsequent development of late/post-modernist composition point toward political-economic criteria that support the identification of improvised music with jazz rather than “concert music.”

⁹ The Donaueschingen new music festival represents the notable exception that proves this rule. After presenting a few third-stream works in 1957 and 1961, and the early Globe Unity Orchestra in 1967, the festival began presenting improvisational works by European, American, and Asian musicians annually in its SWF-Jazz-Session series. The near-total lack of significant new-music/jazz crossover, or presentation of improvisational works outside this jazz category after 1972, suggests that even the most sympathetic figures in the contemporary-music establishment have considered European improvised music a form of jazz, distinct from other “serious” forms of concert music.

¹⁰ E.g. Călinescu’s characterization: “avant-garde tends to become a primarily historical category, grouping the most extreme movements that emerged during the first half of our century” (1987: 118).

¹¹ See, for example, Dahlhaus’ characterization of Boulez, Stockhausen, Nono, Kagel, and Ligeti as “composers who can reasonably be described as avant-garde” (1966/87: 22)

¹² Eysteinsonn does note, however, that “in the 1960s, ‘modernism’ was frequently used to refer to a paradigm of the past, whereas ‘avant-garde’ signified current experimental activity” (1990: 143).

¹³ Theodor Adorno’s critique of Igor Stravinsky’s brief association with Dadaism (1948/94: 168-169), and subsequent turn to neo-classicism (1948/94: 203-212), underscores this point; by contrast, his earlier characterization of Kurt Weill as a surrealist (Adorno 1932/2002: 396-97) appears idiosyncratic.

¹⁴ See, for example, Greenberg (1968): “Not that the avant-garde ever really meant revolution. ... a break with the past, a new start, and all that. The avant-garde’s principal reason for being is, on the contrary, to maintain continuity: continuity of standards of quality – the standards, if you please, of the Old Masters.” Typically more difficult to pin down, and much more ambivalent about tradition, Adorno at times nonetheless hints at much the same position: “The innovators, Schoenberg, Bartók, Stravinsky, Webern, Berg, even Hindemith, were all raised on traditional music. Their idiom, their critical stance, their resistance, all crystallized around that tradition” (1955/2002: 196); “The attitude of contemporary art toward tradition, usually reviled as a loss of tradition, is predicated on the inner transformation of the category of tradition itself” (1970/97: 20-21); “In unshakeable faith in tradition, the tradition is dissolved by its own consequence” (1948/94: 169, n. 24).

¹⁵ Greenberg (1971) attacks these movements for their embrace of what he terms “avantgardeness” and “avant-gardism,” the emphasis on shock, scandal, and originality as ends in themselves subversive of the “genuinely avant-garde” pursuit of aesthetic quality. In Adorno’s case, Bürger (1991) has gone so far as to accuse him of “anti-avant-gardism,” based on themes emerging from Adorno’s critique of Walter Benjamin and criticism of Stravinsky.

¹⁶ Unfortunately, Adorno’s notion of avant-garde, the only one of the three developed and applied specifically in relation to music, is also the most obscure. His apparent tendency to use the term more or less interchangeably with cognate words and phrases like “progressive,” “radical,” “most advanced,” and “the modern” (e.g. “the most recent music from the viewpoint of production – in other words ... the avant-garde works of our time” [1962/76: 178]) suggests that avant-garde for Adorno does not represent a separate category but rather an integral part of modern art – specifically the one he judges valid or authentic. This authenticity arises not only from its resistance to commodification, but its position at “the most advanced stage of [the] historical dialectic” (quoted in Paddison 1993: 117) between “expressive needs and technical means” (Paddison 1996: 64), its critical embodiment of the “inherent [historical] tendency of musical material” (Adorno 1948/94: 32). The explicitly invoked trope of progress here amounts to an assertion that the authenticity of the various resources of form and content available to a composer in any given time and place depends upon the extent to which they manifest of some sort of socio-historical inevitability, necessity, or determination. See also Adorno’s further development of this notion of material in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970/97: 147-149).

¹⁷ The arguments Poggioli advances in his discussion of alienation to support his contention that “avant-garde art can flourish only under a liberal regime” (1968: 103) do not find any support from my own research into East German improvised music.

¹⁸ See, for example, Greenberg (1971: 16): “[E]very major painter since Manet, and every major poet since Baudelaire (at least in France), entered the maturity of his art as a ‘member’ of the avantgarde.”

¹⁹ Thus both Rosenberg (1969/73: 85) and Poggioli (1968: 224) include Picasso (fringe for Rosenberg), Joyce, and Eliot in their avant-gardes, with Poggioli’s adding Pound and Stravinsky as well and Rosenberg’s extending as far back as impressionism (1969/73: 76).

²⁰ Greenberg and Rosenberg’s convergence in this respect probably accounts for Călinescu’s contention that “[i]n American criticism ... avant-garde is generally a synonym for modernism” (Călinescu 1987: 118), although, as the foregoing survey illustrates, this rough synonymy extends to scholarship as well as criticism, from both sides of the Atlantic.

²¹ See Bürger (1974/84: 109, n. 4): “The concept of the historical avant-garde used here applies primarily to Dadaism and early Surrealism but also and equally to the Russian avant-garde after the October revolution. Partly significant differences between them notwithstanding, a common feature of all these movements is that they do not reject individual artistic techniques and procedures of earlier art but reject that art in its entirety, thus bringing about a radical break with tradition. In their most extreme manifestations, their primary target is art as an institution such as it has developed in bourgeois society. With certain limitations that would have to be determined through concrete analyses, this is also true of Italian Futurism and German Expressionism.”

²² This was the contention of critics like John Tynan (Tynan 1961; Welding and Tynan 1962), who called their music anti-jazz.

²³ On this point, see Hersch (1995) and Radano (1992).

²⁴ It seems well worth noting here that critics’ attribution of militant political agendas (i.e. nihilism, anarchism) and radical avant-garde significance (e.g. “anti-jazz,” echoing Marcel Duchamp’s “anti-art”) to free jazz improvisation predated any widespread embrace of militant or radical positions by the artists themselves.

²⁵ The Jazz Composers Orchestra continued as an integrated ensemble under the leadership of Mike Mantler and Carla Bley, but pursued what appears to have been a relatively apolitical modernistic program, far removed, to judge from its output, from the fiery partisan passions that had spawned, animated, and ultimately destroyed the Guild, and relatively peripheral to developments in the second half of the decade.

²⁶ As Jason Robinson has recently pointed out, even moderate critics grasped the fundamentally avant-garde character of the New Black Music, and the problems it posed for the institution of jazz: “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’” (Robinson 2005; quote from Heckman 1967: 24).

²⁷ Poggioli, among others, would consider the inclusion of Eastern bloc movements in any narrative of the avant-garde to be problematic at best: “avant-garde art is by its nature incapable of surviving not only the persecution, but even the protection or the official patronage of a totalitarian state and a collective society” (1968: 95). Clearly, in East Germany, where contesting the social order meant challenging the Party and the State (often at great personal risk) rather than the bourgeoisie, the overtly confrontational stance of Western avant-gardes did not flourish. Nonetheless, despite the DDR jazz avant-garde’s partial recuperation by the communist regime’s cultural apparatus – and even a certain degree of alleged collaboration – the utopian values manifest in its free improvisational practices carried relatively clear, if covert, critical and perhaps even vaguely subversive connotations for many artists and audience members.

²⁸ In Germany, a flourishing circuit of jazz workshops held outside formal academic settings helped to mitigate this marginalization. In America, the few toeholds avant-gardists managed to find in academia – notably Cecil Taylor’s brief residencies at Antioch College and the University of Wisconsin, and Bill Dixon’s founding of the Black Music Division at Bennington College – played a significant role in transmitting their aesthetic ideals and practices to a younger generation of improvisers, many of whom went on to play significant roles in the Lower East Side (Vision Festival) scene. Sparse impressions gleaned from my New York based fieldwork suggest that later positions held by Anthony Braxton at Mills College and Wesleyan University, as well as by George Lewis at the University of California / San Diego and Columbia University, may have similar catalyzing effects.