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Title: Primitivism and Jazz Poetry: Hearing Bodies of Sound in the Avant-Garde

Things are beginning to get out of hand. The other day Ralph Gleason, the jazz critic, said to me that he expected any day to see ads in the trade papers: "JAZZ POET: blues, ballad, upbeat, free verse or rhyme. Have tux. Will travel." And T.S. Eliot touring the kerosene circuit with Little Richard and the Harlem Globetrotters. Crazes are usually pretty empty, sterile things. It would be a pity if incompetents looking for a fast buck turned this into a temporary social disease like pee-wee golf or swallowing goldfish. – Kenneth Rexroth

The early twentieth century post-World War I saw modernity arrive on both sides of the Atlantic and unloose the avant-garde in search of recourse against convention. The contemporaneous rise of jazz from the 1920's to the 1950's alongside new poetic approaches to the syntax and parataxis of words as verbal music, then, would be complicated by the aural stereotypes established under the standards of European and American Primitivism, among which included polyrhythmic repetition, the continued iteration of units of metric and timbric patterns, and variations on modalities and non-diatonicism.

With an ear to the linguistic reification, refutation, and recycling of these aural stereotypes that Kenneth Rexroth's works perform, I intend to examine how the Africanist and Orientalist aesthetic pursued by the modernist milieu in which the San Francisco Renaissance emerged engages problematically and productively with jazz poetry in a manner that often racializes the sound of the body within the works of the

avant-garde. By drawing on Fred Moten and Jacque Leqoc in order to conclude with Bruce Andrews, I hope to set the stage for an investigation into how the enterprise of sounding the body poetic in Rexroth's poetry could shape critical practices applied to the formal and theoretical investments of the contemporary African American/Asian American literary avant-garde.

Primitivism, Modernism, and the Experiencing of the Body

In order to foreground the significance and consequences of the Primitivist interest in sound, I must emphasize that Primitivism's longing for an aesthetic simplicity intimately associated with the corporeal falls under the umbrella of a larger interest (self-disguised as a re-interest) in ideals concerning the representation of the unmediated body. Furthermore, its fetishization of the organic, the natural and the spontaneous was in many senses fueled by passionately rejecting the notion of premeditated value in a historical narrative of progressive decay. Robert Kern observes in his reading of William Carlos Williams' nationalism that "…to be an American is an opportunity to be fully modern, and to be modern is not to be in the vanguard of history but to be permanently at the beginning of history, to be pre-historic: to be new, that is, in the sense of 'first' rather than 'latest'" (49). Kern places Williams' work in the service of achieving "a novelty that will not stale", a formulation that echoes Pound's characterization of literature as "news that STAYS news" (47, 52). The Imagist interest in the nongiven immediacy of the image – which is inseparably bound up with the Beat interest in the spontaneous sound of the avant-garde – emerged contextualized with this emphasis on performing a taxidermy of the present, a reduction to the static and immortal as opposed to the

dynamism of flux.

In syncopation with this backdrop, the Futurists and Dadaists, whose body of work testifies to an increasingly dissolute relationship between a legacy of oral tradition rooted in the comprehension of semantic meaning and the kind of sonic poetry with which to assail the politics of their day, concerned themselves with jazz and unpremeditated performance in a way that Rexroth, spearheading the San Francisco Renaissance, would come to espouse. Here I bring Fred Moten and his comments on the weight of improvisation to bear on the formalistic disavowal of the cadences of the voice belonging to the poetic body and its audible or silent subjectivity as another angle from which to interrogate the notion that orality and textuality converge in an audible "lyric 'I'" that evinces the othering of the body marked by the sight of racial difference: "No need to dismiss the sound that emerges from the mouth as the mark of a separation. It was always the whole body that emitted sound: instrument and fingers, bend. Your ass is in what you sing. Dedicated to the movement of hips, dedicated by that movement, the harmolodically rhythmic body" (41). Moten's reclaiming of the entirety of the corporeal begs this question: How is it that the intimate relationship of the body to sound can figure both as the impetus for an essentialist appropriation of the racialized subject's body as imagined avatar for the justified production of exoticizing literature – and – in the same gesture of movement – suggest the body as an instrument of production for a sonic text whose performance remains unbound by semantic meaning?

I invoke Jacque Lecoq, founder of the eponymous school of physical movement and theater, and his pedagogy of the poetic body in order to perform a retrograde of it in my approach to Rexroth's works. Lecoq's pupil, Giovanni Fusetti, recapitulates his teacher's work on mime thus:

> somebody who can take an impression of the world in his body and then represent it through gestures…The performer must feed himself with the rhythm, movement and dynamic spaces of nature, and then he can use them in his poetical vision. The body is trained to represent life, and to transform it into poetry, which is based on synthesis and transposition. (93)

The training of the physical body – to be not only a medium which receives the material experience of sonic motion and a reverbed spatiality but one which acknowledges its production as the constellating of representations in an overtly mediated process – presents itself in conjunction with Moten's formulation as a viable stance from which to interrogate some of the constructions through which the sight or invisibility of the racialized body is sounded out in Rexroth's poems. However, I extend and invert them in my analysis to suggest that sound, of which poetry is a representation, is itself a body experiencing a particular proprioception within the realms of both critical performance and poetic practice.

What is jazz poetry?

This is a question to which many disparate answers have been proposed, and it is neither my place nor an aim of mine to say what it is or is not and thus do away with its protective ambiguity. My supposition is that jazz poetry eludes easy categorization so well because poetry's transformations of prose and the language of the everyday likewise derive from its sonic form, which can in some instances render the distinctions between jazz poetry and all other kinds of poetry blurred. Enumerating its many incarnations – from poetry sounded in dialogue with jazz, to poetry whose content includes jazz

references, to a particular mode of poetry whose state of auditory existence embodies a materiality of sonic texture that might, in a variety of configurations, be considered itself jazz – only re-stresses what the “addition” of the word “jazz” to the category of poetry does to (re)call attention to the fundamentally amorphous flux that poetics has always undergone. Rexroth specifies his inclination for the first of these definitions:

> It isn’t anything very complicated to understand. It is the reciting of suitable poetry with the music of a jazz band, usually small and comparatively quiet. Most emphatically, it is not recitation with “background” music. The voice is integrally wedded to the music and, although it does not sing notes, is treated as another instrument, with its own solos and ensemble passages, and with solo and ensemble work by the band alone. (*World Outside the Window* 69)

Indeed, recordings of works like “Two Jazz Poems” demonstrate that Rexroth does attempt to bear out such a praxis of poetic practice through performance. However, I present a consideration of the sound of the text itself as a musical entity arranged fictively into the shape of a racialized “lyric ‘I’”, contextualized by a selection from Rexroth’s contemporaneous “Heart’s Garden, Garden’s Heart” in order to illustrate a certain polarity in the poetic sound of his work between a tokenism associating jazz with an “African American” aesthetic of syncopation idealized by the polyrhythms of Primitivism and an Orientalist pursuit of metaphysical transcendence by the modernist avant-garde. ’

Two of Rexroth’s jazz poems in particular, titled “State and 32nd, Cold Morning Blues” and “Married Blues,” perform a symmetry of rhythmic fracture. Though relying

on scansion to classify exact downbeats, upbeats, accents, or pick-ups is of dubious value when applied to Rexroth's verse, "State and 32nd" does at least suggest a strategically placed swing in the motion of its anapests, the centrifugal weight of the last stress juxtaposed against the fleeting lightness of its two short beats (for instance, "in a torn," "by a dir-" and "in the street" in the first stanza; "in the gut –" of the second stanza; "of the first" in the sixth stanza) that ricochets off the iambs and trochees surrounding (*Collected Shorter Poems*). The terseness of the line breaks and frequency of periodic pauses further interrupt the syllabic flow, silhouetting the motion within each line by outlining the discontinuity. "State and 32nd"'s performance of a sonic stereotype associated with jazz syncs up in an interesting (though not necessarily exactly aligned) manner with the grit of lower class urban poverty and crime contained in the semantic meaning of the words ("A girl in a torn chemise/Weeps by a dirty window./Jaws are punched in the street", "Dice girls going home. Whores eating chop suey"), implying a class-ification of the raced body evoked by the constructed constraints of sound arranged into an imitative representation of jazz.

"Married Blues" continues in a similar vein of aural-semantic embodiment as "State and 32nd", though initially its use of commas to create a binary structure within the first two stanzas, as well as the stark alternation of stresses between monosyllabic words such as those in line 2 ("Now you've got it you don't like it.") renders the rhythmic interface of the line breaks more aggressively peevish before falling back into much the same pace as "State and 32nd". The voices of "you", "I", and "we" are conscripted into the appearance of affirming the independent speech when in fact their presence serves as mere reminders echoing the negative repetition of "can't" in each stanza ("You can't get out of it now."/"There's nothing we can do."/"We can't do anything about it."/"Nobody can

change it."/"We can't get away with it."/"It will never be any different."). Despite "Married Blues"' introduction of pronouns and the illusion of perspective agency, the subjectivity belonging to the body of a lyric "I" is emptied out by the traces of sonic racialization borne out by the poem's insistent return to the same imitative representation of jazz of "State and 32nd".

Even so, the extent to which these two jazz poems transform representations of the body of the visible marked racial subject by performing a constructed body of sound is better understood in comparison with a selection from "The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart". Though not explicitly branded by Rexroth as jazz poetry, "The Heart's Garden" also exists in a Lecoq-esue relationship to racial representation and the corporeal in its receiving of an impression of a musico-linguistic Orientalism. The broken brevity of sounded motion in "Two Jazz Poems" comes into sharper audibility when heard against the enjambment and lengthier extensions of flowing verse across line breaks in "Heart's Garden" ("But if you sit by the pool/Below the waterfall, full/Of calling voices all chanting/The turmoil of peace,/It communicates itself") (Rexroth 18). In this aspect, "Heart's Garden" is strongly evocative of unmediated breath, despite being strikingly devoid of bodily senses ("You cannot see it or feel it"). The sonic aesthetic it reflects denies the syncopated tension present in "Two Jazz Poems"; one might even call it expressive of a rhythm without measures, a poem which seeks to minimize any disruptions of a smooth aural experience. Unlike "Two Jazz Poems", the semantic meaning in "Heart's Garden" avoids admission to conveying a sense of chronological progress or decay; it advertises itself as unable to be placed into a civilized time with its strong emphasis on the natural elements unsoiled by class systems (though the discrepancy of diction between the two poems in terms of the formal and the colloquial

gives away a particular "dignity" of "proper" speech) and the general malaise of "the blues" brought on by the constraints of societal stagnancy. However, though the body of sound represented by "Heart's Garden" seems to exist in counterpoint to the stereotype heard from "Two Jazz Poems", the former's suggestive "But/Nothing can stop it. No one/Can see it" evokes the "No one can change it" of the latter, inviting the reader to reconsider the aural subjectivity of the racialized body's sound in both these works as a distorted modernist echo.

Certainly these Rexroth works are not the last to wrestle with the nuanced relationship between jazz poetry and the notion of a transformative poetics based in the body as an instrument for aural representation. However, they provide a foundational angle from which to broach the question of not only how to interpret an aural legacy of sound wrought with xenocentric thought but how to merge such an interpretation with critical practices applied to later key figures in the African American and Asian American avant-garde who directly address, reinscribe, invert, subvert such a legacy, Amiri Baraka and Lawson Fusao Inada among others. The praxis of the sort of intervention I have applied towards an analysis of Rexroth's works is best expressed by Bruce Andrews in the question "What parallels can we draw (abstractly, even ventriloquially) between theorizing about change and theorizing aesthetically about radical art – here, keyed to the question of sound in contemporary writing?" (73). In the methods through which I have attempted to integrate Moten and Lecoq in my reading of Rexroth, I have sought to suggest that first examining and then performing an corporeal approach to the analysis of auditory poetics might move together beyond the reductive representations to which theorizing about the historical avant-garde is all too easily bound, in tandem towards a sonar reverberated by a body of sound scholarship.

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Representations of the "unmediated" (read: exoticized) body situated in its "natural" surroundings might include, for instance, Gauguin's Tahiti nudes.

David Amram recalls of the performance of poetry and music ensemble in his 1957 collaborations with Kerouac that: "We never once rehearsed. We did listen intently to one another. Jazz is all about listening and sharing. I never drowned out one word of whatever Jack was reading or making up on the spot." ("David Amram Remembers")

For an example of Dadaist work based on the sound of jazz ensemble, Jed Rasula suggests the Futurist Fillia's "Mechanical Sensuality" (15). Rasula, who argues that jazz as decal figures much more prominently in the development of modernism than given credit for to date, also notes of the composers during that period that "Schulhoff's interests were typical of the time in their seamless transition from Dada to jazz—and, like so many other classical composers (Stravinsky, Hindemith, Martinu, Poulenc, Milhaud), from jazz to neoclassicism. Jazz marked a ritual threshold over which avant-garde composers had to pass, to pass *as* avant-garde" (12).

The emergence of ragtime out of African polyrhythms was popularized by the same entertainers who either donned blackface or reinscribed its racist tropes through coon songs, which often incorporated the ragtime effect (Peress 39).

This transcendent escape from the corporeal was particularly sought after by avant-garde composers in the 1950's; Douglas Kahn writes that John Cage's appropriation of Zen in his music is intersticed with the valorization of "disinterestedness", which in turn derives its momentum from the pursuit of the myth of objective purity (**566**).