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978-0-521-44453-8 - Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and
Experimental Writing

Nathaniel Mackey

Excerpt

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*Introduction**And All the Birds Sing Bass*

I

These essays address work by a number of authors not normally grouped under a common rubric – black writers from the United States and the Caribbean and the so-called Black Mountain poets for the most part. The latter became known by that name because of their association during the 1950s with Black Mountain College in North Carolina, the experimental college founded in 1933 by John Andrew Rice and other dissident professors dismissed from Rollins College in Florida. Not coincidentally, dissidence and experimentation figure prominently among the concerns touched on by these essays, and can be said to tie them together, though I make no large claims for a single, unifying argument running throughout. The title I have given this introduction lends itself to that tie while alluding to another Black Mountain, the one that gives its name to “Black Mountain Blues.” Written by J. C. Johnson, the song was recorded by Bessie Smith in July 1930 (the same month and year Rice was hired at Rollins), and it begins:

Back in Black Mountain a child will slap your face,
Back in Black Mountain a child will slap your face,
Babies cryin’ for liquor and all the birds sing bass.

What I mean to suggest is that in the “bass notes” bottoming the work of these various writers – writers who, poet or novelist, black or white, from the United States or from the Caribbean, produce work of a refractory, oppositional sort – one hears the rumblings of some such “place” of insubordination.

Marginality might be another name for that “place.” I have been concerned not only with the play between content and form but also with the impact of marginalized context on such play – the weight borne and the wobble introduced by positions peripheral to a contested center.

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Nowadays, thanks to critical theory, the very notion of center is admitted to be problematic and, along with margin, increasingly relativized, but one finds Amiri Baraka making much the same point twenty-five years ago:

. . . there are now a great many young black writers in America who do realize that their customary isolation from the mainstream is a valuable way into any description they might make of an America. In fact, it is just this alienation that could serve to make a very powerful American literature, since its hypothetical writers function in many senses within the main structure of the American society as well. . . . Being black in a society where such a state is an extreme liability is the most extreme form of nonconformity available. The point is, of course, that this nonconformity should be put to use. The vantage point is classically perfect – outside and inside at the same time.¹

And in another essay published about the same time, “The Myth of a ‘Negro Literature,’ ” Baraka points to Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday as models black writers should turn to, cases in point of how black nonconformity should be used:

No poetry has come out of England of major importance for forty years, yet there are would-be Negro poets who reject the gaudy excellence of 20th century American poetry in favor of disembowelled Academic models of second-rate English poetry, with the notion that somehow it is the only way poetry should be written. It would be better if such a poet listened to Bessie Smith sing *Gimme A Pigfoot*, or listened to the tragic verse of a Billie Holiday, than be content to imperfectly imitate the bad poetry of the ruined minds of Europe. (*H*, 113)

He quickly goes on to argue their relevance to white writers as well:

For an American, black or white, to say that some hideous imitation of Alexander Pope means more to him, emotionally, than the blues of Ray Charles or Lightnin’ Hopkins, it would be required for him to have completely disappeared into the American Academy’s vision of a Europeanized and colonial American culture, or to be lying. (*H*, 113)

The implied correspondence between such music and “the gaudy excellence of 20th century American poetry” lends itself to the title I’ve chosen for this introduction, as do the references to Bessie Smith in *Man Orchid*, one of the works addressed in this book.

Still, the title is figurative. Indeed, rather than let this go unremarked,

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I wish to call attention to it. The recourse to figurativity, to the fortuitous convergence “Black Mountain” affords, highlights the inadequacy of existing rubrics, brings the problematics of categorization to the fore. It will be seen that I frequently read the writers whose works these essays address in relationship to one another, bring their writings into dialogue and juxtaposition with one another. That such correspondence, counterpoint, and relevance to one another exist among authors otherwise separated by ethnic and regional boundaries is worth accenting in the context of current debates over canon formation and canon reformation. This fact is especially relevant to the current institutionalization of an African-American canon and the frequent assumption that black critics are to write only about black writers and that black writers are to be discussed only in relation to other black writers. Cornel West, in his essay “Minority Discourse and the Pitfalls of Canon Formation,” offers a caveat with which I heartily agree. He argues that “the major twentieth-century Afro-American literary artists” have not been served well by such assumptions, that their contributions have tended to be diminished by too parochial an approach:

Such diminishment takes place because these authors arbitrarily get lumped with a group of black writers or associated with a particular theme in Afro-American intellectual history, which obscures their literary profundity and accents their less important aspects.

For instance, Toomer’s ingenious modernist formal innovations and his chilling encounter with black southern culture in *Cane* are masked by associating him with the assertion of pride by the “new Negro” in the twenties. Ellison’s existentialist blues novelistic practices, with their deep sources in Afro-American music, folklore, Western literary humanism, and American pluralist ideology, are concealed by subsuming him under a “post-Wright school of black writing.” Baldwin’s masterful and memorable essays that mix Jamesian prose with black sermonic rhythms are similarly treated. Toni Morrison’s magic realist portrayal of forms of Afro-American cultural disruption and transformation links her more closely to contemporary Latin American literary treatments of the arrested agency of colonized peoples than with American feminist preoccupations with self-fulfillment and sisterhood. Last, Ishmael Reed’s bizarre and brilliant postmodernist stories fall well outside black literary lineages and genealogies.²

Creative kinship and the lines of affinity it effects are much more complex, jagged, and indissociable than the totalizing pretensions of canon formation tend to acknowledge. My recourse to a figurative rubric admits

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that in our taxonomic practices, as Foucault has pointed out via Borges, we stand on poetic – that is, made-up – ground.

The problem, then, is not peculiar to African-American literature, however much the ghettoization to which black writers tend to be subjected exacerbates and gives a particular pungency to the more general problematics of categorization. We need not look far for another example. Casually applied to writers as different from one another as Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and Robert Duncan, the Black Mountain rubric itself provides a good one. Olson complained in 1968: “I think that whole ‘Black Mountain poet’ thing is a lot of bullshit. I mean, actually, it was created by the editor, the famous editor of that anthology for Grove Press, Mr. Allen, where he divided – he did a very – but it was a terrible mistake made. He created those sections – Black Mountain, San Francisco, Beat, New York, New, Young, huh?”³ The reference is to Donald M. Allen’s *The New American Poetry: 1945–1960*, whose divisions, Allen himself admits, “are somewhat arbitrary and cannot be taken as rigid categories.”⁴ This becomes especially clear in the case of Duncan, whom Allen includes in the Black Mountain group while acknowledging that he could have been placed, with equal justification, in the San Francisco section. At a time when attention to the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign has occasioned epochal paradigm shifts in literary and cultural studies, surely the arbitrariness of the rubric warrants a grain of relativizing salt.

Some such grain is not inconsistent with key preoccupations that emerge in the essays that follow. The dialectical wholism espoused most notably by Robert Duncan and the Guyanese author Wilson Harris is especially germane. Duncan’s idea of “a symposium of the whole,” in which “all the old excluded orders must be included,” nonetheless acknowledges that “not only the experience of unity but the experience of separation is the mother of man.”⁵ This leads to apprehensions regarding the unities we construct, a calling into question of the coherences we otherwise tend to take for granted. “Praise then the interruption of our composure,” Duncan writes in the introduction to *Bending the Bow*.⁶ We see an openness to disturbance not only in his readiness to quarrel with Olsonian doxy while at Black Mountain College but in the conception of a world-poem in which “there is no composure but a life-spring of dissatisfaction” (*BB*, x), a poem we see, as he puts it in “The Continent,” “moving in rifts, churning, enjambling, / drifting feature from feature.”⁷

The simultaneity of integrative and disintegrative tendencies attendant upon the pursuit of a wholeness admitted to be out of reach is a dynamic about which Harris too has had much to say. A man of mixed racial antecedents born in a country considered Caribbean though situated in South America, Harris is well aware of the arbitrariness of categories

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and of the exclusionary, conquistadorial uses to which classificatory schemes tend to be put. Sandra E. Drake, in her study *Wilson Harris and the Modern Tradition: A New Architecture of the World*, rightly identifies the hybrid, heterogeneous character of Harris's work with what the Cuban poet José Martí called "nuestra América mestiza" (our mixed America). His writings constitute, among other things, a long meditation on the legacies of conquest that have plagued not only the region from which he comes but, of course, the entire world, the subjugation and the marginalization of heterogeneity by self-centralizing, monolithic models. These legacies lie behind the much discussed and debated problem of Caribbean identity, a problem rooted in the imposition of models of sameness upon a reality characterized by hybridity, diversity, mix. In a 1985 interview, Harris responded to a question concerning "the search for identity, for wholeness," and "the theme of the broken individual" in Caribbean literature by suggesting the relevance of a centrifugal poetics. Key to this is his notion of the partial image, the therapeutic work of a play of images around the acknowledgment of a partiality one strives to overcome:

Well, as I tend to see it at this point in time, there is a kind of wholeness, but one can't structure that wholeness. One knows it's there and one moves into it ceaselessly, but all the time one moves with partial images. Now the partial image has within it a degree of bias but it also represents a part of something else, so that there is a kind of ceaseless *expedition* into wholeness which has to do with the ways in which one consumes – metaphysically consumes – the bias in the partial image and releases that image as a part of something else which one may not be immediately aware of in that context – one may not be immediately aware of how the partial image links up with another partial image until the centre of being in an imaginative work breaks or moves and the illusory centrality of the partial image is enriched in creative paradox. So that I think in the Caribbean and in the South Americas, because of the residue of cultures and what has happened in the past, that kind of approach seems to be of significance.⁸

Harris situates his practice in what the Martinican writer Edouard Glissant calls the Other America. The partial image relativizes itself, very much in keeping with the relativization Glissant sees as the "realization" of a "new man":

The issue . . . is the appearance of a new man, whom I would define, with reference to his "realization" in literature, as a man who is able to live the relative after having suffered the absolute. When I

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say *relative*, I mean the Diverse, the obscure need to accept the other's difference; and when I say *absolute* I refer to the dramatic endeavor to impose a truth on the Other. I feel that the man from the Other America "merges" with this new man, who lives the relative; and that the struggles of peoples who try to survive in the American continent bear witness to this new creation.⁹

This passage occurs in an essay under the heading "Cross-Cultural Poetics." Harris has written a critical book called *The Womb of Space: The Cross-Cultural Imagination*. The book's aim is "to highlight variables of dialogue that tend to be suppressed in so-called normal classifications of fiction and poetry within regional scholarship."¹⁰ I think of the mix these essays advance as a contribution to a cross-cultural poetics, plots upon an alternative map, one on which the Other America has begun to emerge.

II

Black music provides a reference point in several of these essays, most extensively in "The Changing Same: Black Music in the Poetry of Amiri Baraka," "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol," and "Other: From Noun to Verb." This is so in part because it does the same for some of the writers about whose work I have written. The outside/inside position Baraka refers to, for example, is nowhere more evident than in black music's infiltration of the dominant society, an infiltration that has been going on for some time. Reverend Samuel Davies, a white minister in the South during the colonial period, wrote effusively of the slaves' contribution to church services, their relegation to a segregated section notwithstanding:

I can hardly express the pleasure it affords me to turn to that part of the Gallery where they sit, and see so many of them with their Psalm or Hymn Books, turning to the part then sung, and assisting their fellows who are beginners, to find the place; and then all breaking out in a torrent of sacred harmony, enough to bear away the whole congregation to heaven.

Similarly, Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, the French immigrant who settled in New York in the mid-1700s, remarked in his *Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America*: "If we have not the gorgeous balls, the harmonious concerts, the shrill horn of Europe, yet we dilate our hearts as well with the simple Negro fiddle."¹¹ That black music, longer and more resoundingly than any other native product, has put the United States on the world-cultural map is by now a commonplace observation. For

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this and other reasons it serves many black writers as both a model and a highwater mark of black authority, a testament to black powers of self-styling as well as to the ability of such powers to influence others.

As we've seen in the passages quoted here, Amiri Baraka has long held black music to be a relevant model for a truly black writing, for a truly American writing. "The Changing Same: Black Music in the Poetry of Amiri Baraka" looks at the ways in which his writings embrace the music as a liberatory index of possibility, as a stimulus to an extramusical pursuit of innovative authority – poetic and political authority. The essay deals with the presence of black music in his writing not only as content – references to songs, musicians, musical practices, and so forth – but also as form – technical and stylistic tendencies deriving from an attempt to emulate the music. The essay also situates Baraka's work and its relationship to black music in the context of the cultural and social movements of which he was a part from the late fifties to the mid-seventies – the bohemian scene in Greenwich Village and the "New American Poetry," Black Nationalism, and the "Black Arts Movement," his more recent Marxist-Leninist position.

During that first period – the late fifties through the mid-sixties – Baraka was involved with the various "schools" of the "New American Poetry," Beat to Black Mountain. He is, then, among other things, a bridge figure, the only black writer associated with the Black Mountain group – M.L. Rosenthal, in *The New Poets*, discusses his first two volumes of poetry in Chapter IV, "The 'Projectivist' Movement"¹² – and, as he himself would later complain, the only black writer included in Donald Allen's anthology. In *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* he writes of this involvement in terms of overlapping marginalities:

I had come into poetry from a wide-open perspective – anti-academic because of my experience, my social history and predilections. Obviously, as an African American I had a cultural history that should give me certain aesthetic proclivities. . . . The open and implied rebellion – of form and content. Aesthetic as well as social and political. But I saw most of it as Art, and the social statement as merely our lives as dropouts from the mainstream. I could see the young white boys and girls in their pronouncement of disillusion with and "removal" from society as being related to the black experience. That made us colleagues of the spirit. . . . the connection could be made because I was black and that made me, as Wright's novel asserted, an *outsider*. (To some extent, even inside those "outsider" circles.)¹³

His characterization of the poetic tendencies with which he was involved insists upon the link between ethnicity and formal innovation, social

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marginality and aesthetic marginality (a link that Werner Sollors, in *Beyond Ethnicity*, argues has not been sufficiently acknowledged in traditional notions of literary “growth”¹⁴):

The various “schools” of poetry we related to were themselves all linked together by the ingenuous. They were a point of departure from the academic, from the Eliotic model of rhetoric, formalism, and iambics.

Under the broad banner of our objective and subjective “united front” of poetry, I characterized the various schools: the Jewish Apocalyptic; biblical, long crashing rhythms of spiritual song. *Howl* and *Kaddish* are the best examples. Kerouac’s “Spontaneous Bop Prosody” is an attempt to buy into the “heaven in the head” of religious apocalypse, which Ginsberg inherited from his rabbinical sources (and his historical models, Christopher Smart, Blake, Whitman). It is a hyped-up version of Joyce with a nod in the direction of black improvisational music. . . .

The Black Mountain people linked me to a kind of Anglo-Germanic School, more accessible than the academics, but still favoring hard-edged, structured forms. Olson and Creeley were its twin prophets, but Olson had the broader sword, the most “prophetic” stance. His concerns touched me deeply. Creeley was closer to the William Carlos Williams style – sparse and near-conversational, though much more stylized than Williams and influenced by Mallarmé in his tendency toward using the language so denotatively it became abstract in its concreteness. (ALJ, 158)

The voice of discontent Baraka hears in black music, what he terms its “anti-assimilationist” sound, relates it to Black Nationalism and to Marxist-Leninist dissent as well as to, as we see here, Beat/bohemian “revolt.”

The impact of black music on U.S. culture at large is particularly evident in the tradition of which Baraka partakes, the music’s longstanding status as a symbol of dissent, of a divergence from conventional attitudes and behavior. Prod and precedent for nonconformist tendencies, the music has repeatedly been embraced by centrifugal impulses within white society (all too often, however, with condescending, romantic-racist, appropriative attitudes that have done nothing to radically challenge the country’s founding racial assumptions). This embrace has tended to promote divergent aesthetic practices in a variety of art forms. The Jazz Age and the Beats offer the best known examples, but the Projectivists can be seen to have been touched as well. Olson, in the interview from which I quoted earlier, remarked: “And that there was a poetics? Ha ha. Boy, there was no poetic. It was Charlie Parker. Literally, it was Charlie Parker. He

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was the Bob Dylan of the Fifties” (*M*, 71). Robert Creeley, whose book of stories *The Gold Diggers* is the subject of one of these essays, noted in 1966:

I have, at times, made reference to my own interest when younger (and continually) in the music of Charlie Parker – an intensive variation on “foursquare” patterns such as “I’ve Got Rhythm.” Listening to him play, I found he lengthened the experience of time, or shortened it, gained a very subtle experience of “weight,” all some decision made within the context of what was called “improvisation” – but what I should rather call the experience of possibility within the limits of his materials (sounds and durations) and their environment. . . . There’s an interview with Dizzy Gillespie . . . in which he speaks of rhythm particularly in a way I very much respect. If *time* is measure of *change*, our sense of it becomes what we can apprehend as significant condition of *change* – in poetry as well as in music.¹⁵

And in prose. Though “Robert Creeley’s *The Gold Diggers: Projective Prose*” deals primarily with the relationship of Creeley’s stories to Projectivist poetics, the affinity between the latter and black improvisatory music on which the Baraka essay touches is touched on again, albeit lightly, in the attention to the “bop” aspects of Creeley’s prose, its syncopated, “offbeat” quality, the stuttering or stumbling displacements by which it proceeds.

The interplay between writing and music is given a more extended treatment in “Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol,” an essay that deals with work by Jean Toomer, William Carlos Williams, Ralph Ellison, and Wilson Harris. Arguing that these instances of writing that alludes to or seeks to ally itself with music do so as a way of reaching toward an alternate reality, the essay treats music as a form of social and epistemological dissent. It gives further attention to the sense of stuttering, stumbling, and limping broached in the Creeley and Baraka essays, that of them as marks of both damage and philosophic divergence (deprivation on the one hand, epistemological dilation or would-be dilation on the other). In this divergence and dissent one hears the voice of the orphan, the outsider, the excluded. Music and the writing that embraces it are something like the *icno-cuicatl* or orphan song of ancient Mexico, which, as Gordon Brotherston explains, “explores feelings of cosmic abandonment and the precariousness of mortal life before the unknown.”¹⁶ This includes abandonment and precariousness in their most immediately social aspects as well. Moreover, writing that emulates music is orphan song in another sense: Words are of the realm of the orphan insofar as they are severed from that to which they refer. (Think of Addie Bundren’s mistrust of language in Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*: “. . . words

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that are not deeds, that are just the gaps in people's lacks, coming down like the cries of the geese out of the wild darkness in the old terrible nights, fumbling at the deeds like orphans to whom are pointed out in a crowd two faces and told, That is your father, your mother."¹⁷) The notion of orphan song the essay advances relies heavily on Steven Feld's *Sound and Sentiment*, a study of the way in which the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea conceptualize music and poetic language. Central to this is their myth of a boy who, denied kinship, social sustenance, turns into a bird, a kind of fruitdove called a *muni* bird. The essay examines the connection between the orphan's ordeal of being left out and the writer's or the musician's recourse to divergent practices and precepts, "outside" practices and precepts. Jack Spicer, in a passage that could serve as an epigraph to the essay, gets at this connection in his poem for Charlie Parker: "So Bird and I sing / Outside your window."¹⁸

The voice of "the boy who became a *muni* bird," the voice of the orphan, figuratively embodies and continues a concern we see in some of the earlier essays: the sounding of an apocalyptic undertone or note, the "bass note" I referred to earlier, a note of alarm at the exclusions by which coherencies tend to be supported. All the writers dealt with in these essays, in differing ways and to varying degrees, have recourse to this note. An awareness of the exclusions to which the ordering impulse, whether collective or individual, is prone leads them to an attempt to allow for, include, or at least allude to what is excluded. A line from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* that I quote in "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol" says it well: "The mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived."¹⁹ I quote it in an earlier essay as well, "To Define An Ultimate Dimness: The Poetry of Clarence Major." This piece looks at the ways in which a "return of the repressed" enters Major's work of the early seventies both as content or theme and as form/deformation, working its disruptions into what the poems say and into the way – grammatically, syntactically, typographically – they say it.

Major is best known, perhaps, as a novelist. As Charles Johnson notes in *Being and Race: Black Writing since 1970*: "For twenty years Major and his colleagues in the Fiction Collective, a cooperative publishing venture started in the early 1970s by a handful of 'experimental' writers (among them Ronald Sukenick, Jonathan Baumbach, and Raymond Federman), have been on the cutting edge of nontraditional fiction in America."²⁰ The Surfictionist project with which he is associated aims to foreground the constructedness of the work, to make the arrangements and the premises whereby it proceeds unignorable, opaque, something not to be looked through (overlooked) but looked into, looked at. This process