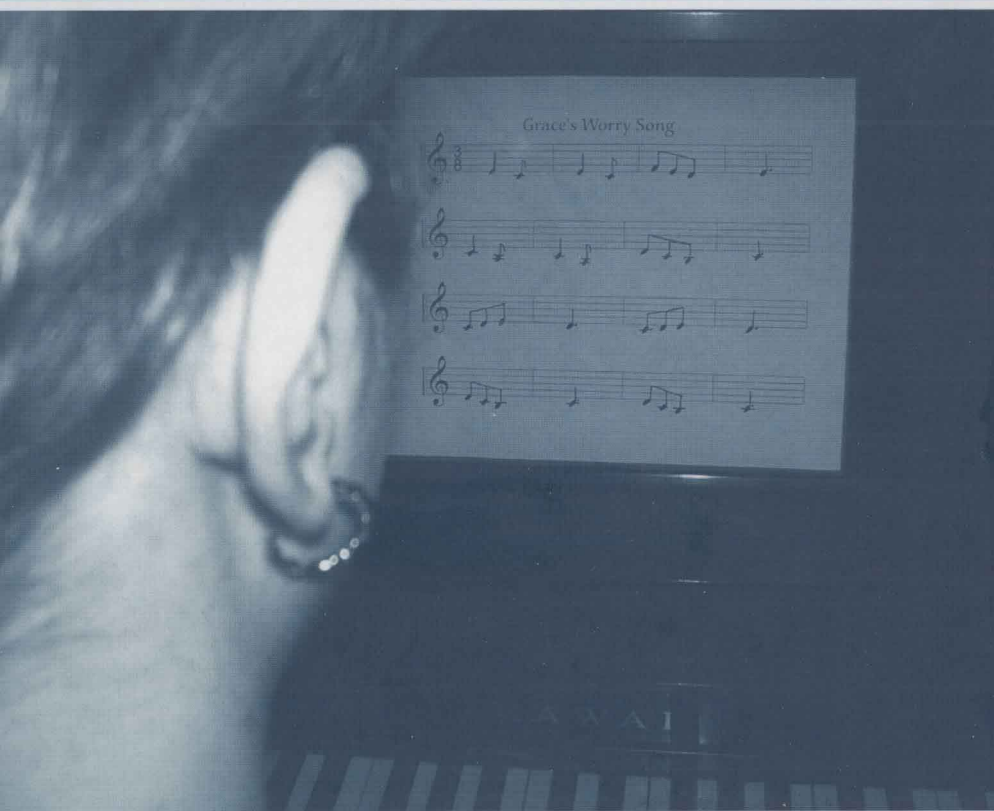


Post-Jazz Poetics

A Social History



Jennifer D. Ryan



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A SOCIAL HISTORY

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INTRODUCTION: HOW DO I MAKE THAT SOUND? A NEW FEMINIST POETICS

IN HIS BIOGRAPHY OF CLASSIC BLUES SINGER BESSIE SMITH, Chris Albertson tells the story of a 1928 party hosted by New York journalist Carl Van Vechten and his wife, dancer Fania Marinoff (141–46). Although Smith usually shunned events hosted by white devotees of black life like Van Vechten, she agreed to attend this gathering with niece Ruby Walker and composer Porter Grainger. After Smith sang several numbers, stopping for a drink after each one, Walker and Grainger decided it was time to leave. They liberated Smith from her place at the piano and began steering her toward the door, but Marinoff intervened, spreading her arms and demanding a kiss from Smith. The singer was so irritated by this display of polite white condescension that she shoved her hostess away and swore at her. Marinoff was visibly shocked by the rebuff; however, the trio managed to make their exit without further incident.

A few days later, Smith found the opportunity to entertain a more desirable audience. She and Ruby decided to spend the hours between the matinee and evening performances of their Lafayette Theater show at Percy Brown's, a local speakeasy. On the way back, after having regaled the other patrons with stories of the Van Vechten gathering, Smith was inspired to stage an impromptu musical. She positioned herself on a garbage can in an alley behind the Lafayette. As Ruby danced, enveloped in an oversized fur coat, Smith sang a song from the show's finale, drawing an enormous crowd of clapping, dancing listeners. The performance ended only when Jack Gee, Smith's husband, descended in a rage: Smith had purposely defied his dictum forbidding free public shows.

Bessie Smith's actions in these two instances illustrate her determination to bring her music to an audience already familiar with its themes

and history. Many women blues singers conceptualized the blues, even in the face of racial and sexual discrimination, in a manner similar to Smith's: as a forum for public communication, self-definition, and improvisatory performance. Such multifaceted strategies persist across a wide range of black women's artistic practices. In this book, I examine the jazz-influenced poetry of post-Black Arts writers Sherley Anne Williams, Sonia Sanchez, Jayne Cortez, Wanda Coleman, and Harryette Mullen. As conceptually and politically innovative poets, they tie the complexities of African-American feminism to the formal techniques and cultural allusiveness of not only jazz but also late modern experimental poetics. I examine their work's evolution and the implications it holds for the history of black radical poetics by following a genealogical approach. This organizational mode proceeds from what Ann Vickery has termed the "how and why," via social and literary analysis, of each poet and her work (14). Such analysis includes biographical information, the poets' own writings on literature, and theoretical scrutiny of the poetry and its cultural contexts. One essential element of this genealogy emerges from the unique jazz-poetic forms that these poets develop, in which they transform literary conventions through the infusion of social critiques via specific experimental techniques. My discussion also references other poets performing similar compositional experiments in order to illustrate the convergence of critique and form during particular historical moments. By aligning my literary analysis with contemporary developments in jazz and feminism, I locate each poet's work in a related but unique moment in the history of American avant-garde art.

The five poets featured in this study invoke Bessie Smith's signature flaunting of social conventions in their jazz-influenced pieces. Sherley Anne Williams, for example, redefines blues culture as a source for modern feminism by representing Smith's voice and body through demonstrations of agency rather than spectacular objectification. Sonia Sanchez, on the other hand, revises Black Power conceptions of African-American culture by creating recognizably feminist perspectives framed in the new jazz elegy and blues haiku forms. Jayne Cortez, another participant in Black Arts activities, highlights connections between musical performance and political critique through surrealist images of the abused environment. As a self-identified South Los Angeles poet, Wanda Coleman legitimizes the harsh details of a geography marked by unacknowledged deprivations, interrogating the ways in which the controlled publication and dissemination of texts collude in supporting persistent social problems. Finally, Harryette Mullen challenges the linguistic boundaries of poetic tradition through her work's references to Language poetics, women's participation in blues and jazz culture, and prose-poetic catalogues.

In spite of their revolutionary status within the history of Western poetry, these poets acknowledge and build upon the work of their artistic precedents. Their lineage includes Lucy Terry, who authored what critics believe to be the first poem published by an African American, "Bars Fight," in 1746, and Phillis Wheatley, who lived her entire life as a slave and published the first book of poetry by an African American, *Poems on Various Subjects*, in 1771. The history of twentieth-century African-American women's poetry extends these moments of innovation through such periods of intense creative activity as the Harlem Renaissance, when writers like Helene Johnson, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Gwendolyn Bennett, and Angelina Weld Grimké investigated racial politics through the lens of women's experiences. Their focus on socially charged topics like black women's physical beauty and sexual oppression gave rise to a new political poetry, one with its own set of compositional rules. This poetics was predicated on the rejection of structural conventions like meter, rhyme, and form at a time when many male Harlem Renaissance writers were producing sonnets and odes faithful to the European literary tradition. Important stylistic innovations thus resulted from rhetorical defiance.

These writers' preoccupation with giving creative voice to the peculiar social position in which black women found themselves in early twentieth-century America informed radical midcentury artistic movements as well. The Black Arts Movement, an effort in the second half of the 1960s and the early 1970s to organize African-American writers and artists around black nationalist politics, counted poets Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Carolyn Rodgers, and June Jordan among its most active participants. By developing a poetics based in political themes, confrontational rhetoric, and stylistic devices meant to imitate spoken-word performance, these women writers challenged the popular notion that Black Arts and Black Power, the concurrent political movement, were primarily led by men. Today, African-American women poets recognize their precedents' achievements while seeking out new methods by which to explore and add to black literary and social traditions.

HISTORY AND THE CULTURAL ROOTS OF INNOVATION

Although black women's poetry responds to many different cultural, literary, and historical factors, references to two major cultural events recur throughout the body of twentieth-century work: slavery and the evolution of jazz. Attempts to reconcile two such different thematic influences—an exploitative socioeconomic institution and a culturally specific art form—struggle with the basic contradictions that exist between their origins and their complex historical effects. This struggle

in itself helps to produce jazz poetry's unique structural and ideological elements. The added inflection of women's particular political concerns gives the poetry a unique position within dynamic African-American literary traditions.

Slavery and abolition provide vital source material for an overwhelming number of black writers; jazz poets acknowledge both literary forerunners and the social impetus behind the work in their references to this history. Indeed, evidence of the institution's influence over later social conditions has shaped the history of African-American literature as a whole. In Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), the narrator points out the particularly devastating effects that slavery wreaks on women and children: "[W]omen are considered of no value, unless they continually increase their owner's stock. They are put on a par with animals" (380). The ideological lessons imparted by such narratives appear in many later fictional accounts as well. Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986) considers the fate awaiting a young, pregnant slave woman imprisoned for fleeing her owner and finding refuge on a plantation owned by a white woman who is having an affair with one of her male slaves. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), perhaps the literature's most famous example, grows out of the real-life story of runaway slave Margaret Garner, who attempted to kill her own children rather than see them taken back into slavery. Such histories testify to the inescapable burden that slavery has placed upon both survivors and descendants. For women, that burden has been further complicated by the enforced absence of emotional, sexual, and biological self-determination.

Slavery's centuries of abuse and repression provided the social inspiration for jazz. As an art form, jazz derives from several different musical traditions, including African tribal rhythms, traditional Christian spirituals and hymns, gospel, and early forms of blues music. As a cultural practice, jazz has enabled communication, often subversive in nature, that challenges prevailing social norms. Jazz's origins can be traced back to the methods of communication that slaves used while working on plantations and in private homes. Their field hollers and ring shouts helped to preserve African heritage, convey plans for escape, and resist the social customs imposed on them by white slaveholders. Blues music, jazz's closest artistic relative, evolved from the call-and-response strategies of early African-American gospel music and the themes of loss and hope common to slavery-era songs. Blues performance then enabled economic freedom, social mobility, and expressive potential for some early-twentieth-century black women. Their lyrics explored social inequality, domestic abuse, sexual autonomy, and other controversial topics in the only public arena available to a severely marginalized group.

However, in spite of jazz's ongoing popularity in stages ranging from swing to fusion, its practitioners have repeatedly experienced racist social conditions and often found their talent exploited as well as rewarded by white audiences. These circumstances are compounded for black women in jazz, who have contended with patriarchal attitudes, sexual stereotyping, and economic disparities as well as racial discrimination. Linda Dahl points out, for instance, that many jazz artists considered their groups' black women singers the visually appealing "fronts" to a band rather than serious musicians (122). Beate Gersch argues that gender roles have helped to shape the direction and nature of developments in the history of jazz since "[j]azz performances . . . have been one of the few areas in American culture in which the black man has been able to exercise power and display his masculinity without threatening the assumed superiority of the white male" (46). While gender roles and racialized relationships have changed significantly since the early twentieth century and continue to shift in unpredictable ways, such mindsets persist in some quarters. Such attitudes also pervaded the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement, which attempted to redress racial injustice without considering the complex intersections of gender and sexuality. Many African-American women pursuing careers in jazz and literature have therefore endured a vexed relationship to political discourse and artistic craft. Their commitments to social justice and creative freedom, as well as the outsider status resulting from other groups' exclusionary attitudes, have motivated them to oppose historically established inequalities.

Black feminist critics understand this opposition as a necessary step toward defining an independent consciousness. Many writers agree, in fact, that their work depends upon a conceptualization of the multiple factors that impact black women's experiences. Deborah K. King labels such an interactive rather than additive notion of oppression "multiple jeopardy" (297), suggesting that "black women must develop a political ideology capable of interpreting and resisting that multiple jeopardy" instead of a conservative view of their experience (310). According to King, this resistance includes "the visibility of black women," their right to self-determination, challenges to mainstream social structures, and an acknowledgment that theory cannot fully account for the complexities of experience (312). Most black feminist critics recognize a need to theorize inclusively while accepting the specificities of personal experience. Patricia Hill Collins understands African-American feminist experience as dialectical in nature, engaged in fighting "the suppression of Black women's ideas" with "intellectual activism in the face of that suppression" (5–6). Rose M. Brewer points out that black feminism's attention to the concept of multiple jeopardy and the particular perspective of its theorists

distinguish it from other feminist traditions, rendering new conceptual frameworks necessary (236). This attention to intersecting social factors and specificity of theoretical perspective defines black feminist thought, the principal political stance that motivates African-American women's jazz poetics. At the same time, however, these writers acknowledge the "intersectionality of social movements," the fact that "privilege and oppression, and movements to defend and combat these relations, are not in fact singular" (Ferree 10). Their work seeks to address the broader spectrum of women's experiences with both creativity and deprivation.

Black women writers redefine traditional forms of creativity in order to underline the urgency of their challenges to mainstream ideologies. Their work often references domestic problems and intracultural disputes as well as issues of social policy. Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson detail, for instance, women's struggles with black men who vent frustration through sexual harassment and abuse (301). These women increasingly voice an awareness that the threat of rape and other forms of violence could come from black men's hands as well as white men's (Hine and Thompson 302). Divisions have also existed since the 1970s among black women, self-proclaimed feminists included, over sexual discrimination, racial conflicts, economic disadvantages, and the difficulties of defining worthy social roles. Michele Wallace's condemnation of relationships between black men and white women in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1978), for example, drew criticism from several quarters. Her argument that gender equality needs to be addressed before black women can address racial politics set her apart from many contemporaries. This situation articulated the tensions that often have accompanied black women's efforts to characterize their subject-positions.

Paula Giddings, writing a few years after Wallace, stakes out a contrasting position in her history of African-American women in the United States, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (1984). Her title comes from "The Status of Women in America," an 1892 essay by scholar-activist Anna Julia Cooper: "Only the black woman can say, 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole . . . race enters with me'" (qtd. in Giddings 13). This quotation illuminates Giddings's argument about the dual importance of sex and race in the history of African-American women's experiences as well as her belief that "racism is still the salient issue" (350). Her chapter on black America's ultimate failure to support the presidential campaign of black Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm also examines the particular kinds of sexism that black women face.

The contrasts in argument and rhetoric between Wallace and Giddings illustrate the potential for combustion that exists among different feminisms. While many black feminist writers acknowledge the need for progressive political stances when theorizing the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, class, and other identity factors, their conceptions of such paradigms take a potentially infinite number of forms. The jazz poets in this study create innovative, socially driven art that contributes to black feminism's dynamic perspectives on American society and culture.

THEORIZING JAZZ POETICS

Jazz poetry, as a theoretical term, accounts for the complexities and contradictions of both artistic innovation and social inequities. Unlike most other schools or movements in experimental poetics, it addresses specific cultural moments, seeking to transform the structures and connotations of language in order to reimagine the contexts of jazz performance and composition. Jazz poetry's links to both textual practice and musical performance blur conventional divisions between artistic categories. Music and text share compositional elements; a text's musical influences enable it to resonate within a wider range of cultural and literary traditions. As a subgenre of experimental poetics, jazz poetry incorporates compositional elements such as jazz-based metaphors, thematic tributes to legendary jazz performers or performances, textual imitations of the sound of jazz, textual imitations of the techniques used to compose or perform it, and references to social issues with which jazz has historically been associated.

Poets represent jazz as a performance strategy through nonreferential uses of language like sound poetry or via a combination of formal techniques such as scat syllables, anagrammatic rearrangements of words, unusual visual spacing, and the traditional AAB blues-lyrics song form, in which the speaker states a problem in the first line, repeats it, and then offers a solution or resolution in the third line. These compositional strategies, often inspired by specific performers or famous moments in the music's history, suggest that poets use jazz to address explicit cultural agendas. The poetry also evokes Carolyn Forché's concept of "the social," a key dimension of political poetry that she defines as the "space between the state and the supposedly safe havens of the personal" (31), through calls for social change, tributes to African-American cultural history, and recognition of others' artistic innovation. In their attention to the multiple jeopardy of black women's subject-positions, African-American women jazz poets situate their work in the context of other political interventions. Their exclusion from both the male performance spaces of

jazz and many largely white, mainstream feminist movements motivates their definition of a specifically black feminist jazz poetics.

As this formulation suggests, the poetry's political impulse emerges from the intersections of racial identity, feminism, and experimental art. This union of social, political, and artistic concerns defines the history of black women's musical creativity as unique among traditions of public expression. Linda Dahl argues that African-American women began working in minstrelsy, vaudeville, and musical comedies soon after the Civil War in order to take advantage of a rare form of social mobility (10). Angela Davis agrees with Dahl, pointing out the opportunities to travel that early blues singers like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith enjoyed. She identifies a newly "emancipatory quality about their music" that could be attributed to their physical freedom (Davis 72). In spite of poets' attention to these accomplishments, however, previous histories and analyses of jazz poetry have failed to take into account the innovations of women writers, just as the history of experimental poetics traditionally has neglected black work.

The history of written jazz poetry dates back to 1912, when Vachel Lindsay published "The Congo," a controversial portrait of so-called primitive elements that some contemporaries would come to associate with the Harlem Renaissance.¹ Since that time, the term "jazz poetry" itself has occupied a marginal yet tenacious position in American literary studies; critics have disagreed over accepted definitions of its formal elements and its position in the history of poetry. Sascha Feinstein, author of *A Bibliographic Guide to Jazz Poetry*, an annotated guide to nearly every jazz poem published in a magazine, journal, or book through 1997, lists a Carl Sandburg poem published in the 1916 collection *Chicago Poems* as the earliest jazz-influenced piece (77), though jazz poetry's frequent republication and anthologization make this fact difficult to confirm. Feinstein suggests that the earliest published example by an African-American man was Raymond Garfield Dandridge's 1920 poem "De Drum Majah" (*Bibliographic Guide* 23), though he labels Langston Hughes "the Father of Jazz Poetry" because of his work in *The Weary Blues* (1926) and because he became "one of the first writers to experiment with poetry read to jazz" (*Bibliographic Guide* 44).² While many otherwise well-known poets dabbled in jazz themes and forms in the early twentieth century—including Hart Crane, in "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen" (1926), and E. E. Cummings, in several poems from *&[Ampersand]* (1925)—Feinstein's bibliography accords precedence to those authors who wrote a significant number of jazz poems, who demonstrate a practical knowledge of the music in their work, who elegize lesser-known musicians, and, of course, who write what he considers well-crafted poetry.

This last criterion in particular demonstrates the subjectivity that has shaped writers' approaches to the history and definition of jazz poetry. Sascha Feinstein wrote the only book-length study of jazz poetry as an autonomous genre, *Jazz Poetry: From the 1920s to the Present* (1997), which renders his theory all the more relevant. He characterizes jazz poetry as "any poem that's been informed by jazz music" (2). Acknowledging the challenges of attempting to capture the sounds of performed jazz in concrete poetic imagery, he admits that so many types of jazz poems have been written that they defy clear categorization. Feinstein organized his book in a call-and-response fashion, alternating chapters on black work with those on white critique or reappropriation. This approach allows him to examine the discrepancies and moments of overlap between these groups (10).³ Although the rash of musicians' drug-related deaths during the bebop era sparked an increase in jazz-based elegies, Feinstein concludes that later jazz poetry has taken a "rather quiet and strongly narrative" turn that reflects an absence of revolutionary energy (164). Some of the poets Feinstein discusses exhibit this tendency; however, he omits mention of most women jazz poets, whose work, even in more recent decades, incorporates radical themes and compositional strategies.

Stephen Henderson's 1973 anthology of African-American poetry, *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References*, may be the most significant critical precedent to Feinstein's work. Henderson's introduction provides a thorough analysis of black experimental poetry that critics still cite today; the collection includes poetry by Margaret Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Danner, Sarah Webster Fabio, Mari Evans, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, Betty Gates, and several other black women poets. He argues that black literary accomplishment exists in both oral and written traditions ("Introduction" 3); like many black feminist theorists, he claims that "the ethnic roots of Black poetry . . . are ultimately understood only by Black people themselves" (7–8). Henderson also understands women's work as a key element of African-American poetic traditions, even if he does not define the specific thematic and structural elements that they have pioneered.

Although Henderson does not label the poems in his anthology "jazz poetry" per se, the volume's emphasis upon the theme of "black music" and its inclusion of several jazz-based poems used as illustrations suggest that he defines a poetics grounded in blues and jazz elements. His definition of black experimental work derives from three basic elements: theme, structure, and saturation.⁴ The poetry that he sees as truly "black," for example, often focuses on one of several broad themes: liberation, the developing "historical consciousness of the people," literacy, folk life, and

realistic depictions of contemporary society (13–14). African-American speech and music, including oral performance traditions, inform such poems' structures ("Introduction" 31).

In addition to the recurring themes that he identifies, Henderson analyzes the base elements of common structural techniques in some detail, including "virtuoso naming and enumerating," "jazzy rhythmic effects," "virtuoso free-rhyming," "hyperbolic imagery," "metaphysical imagery," "understatement," "compressed and cryptic imagery," and "worrying the line" (33–41).⁵ Black poetry also makes use of mascon words, which Henderson defines as "words and constructions [that] seem to carry an inordinate charge of emotional and psychological weight" and "have levels of meaning that seem to go back to our earliest grappling with the English language in a strange and hostile land." The word "mascon" derives from a NASA term for concentrated lunar matter that exerts a greater gravitational pull; Henderson identifies mascon words and phrases as those possessing "*a massive concentration of Black experiential energy*," for instance, "roll" (44–45; original italics). Mascon words contribute to a work's "saturation," the degree to which it contains identifiably black characteristics and ideas. The reader must possess an insider's knowledge of that blackness and be able to perceive "the *depth* and *quality* of experience which a given work may evoke" (Henderson 64; original italics).

Some more recent critics have explored the social and historical contexts of jazz writing in order to quantify more precisely the impact that jazz has had on black experimental texts. Aldon Nielsen stresses the political inclinations and artistic innovations of both jazz poets and musicians in *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism* (1997). Here he draws readers' attention to the work of lesser-known African-American writers, calling for a revision of the twentieth-century American literary canon through a recognition of "the suppressed Africanity of international modernism" (7).⁶ In his collection of essays entitled *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* (1993), Nathaniel Mackey glosses the title phrase as the "rickety, imperfect fit between word and world," analogous to the noise made by the block upon which a weaving loom sits. This description of the sounds that creation makes derives from the weaving metaphor central to the mythology of the African Dogon tribe (19). Mackey adopts it as a means of explaining both the historically situated nature of black experimental poetry and the influence of jazz in African-American writing and criticism.⁷ He understands jazz as a major factor in several poetic situations that arise out of the need to scrutinize social inequalities from new perspectives: plays between content and form manifested in a