

Keren Omry

# Cross-Rhythms

*Jazz Aesthetics in African-American Literature*



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# Cross-Rhythms

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## Jazz Aesthetics in African-American Literature

Keren Omry



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And to new beginnings.

# Introduction

The rhythms of this book are manifold: the break-neck and dead-slow beat of race, the spurts, blasts and hum of jazz, and the inevitable drums of history; the tip tap tat of the keyboard, the buses screeching and heels clacking in outside noise, inside mind churning, pages turning, books thumping, kettle gurgling, these all meet and intersect to compose the soundtrack of *Cross-Rhythms*. This book aspires to contemplate and comment on how culture functions crucially in the reality that is our lives: personal investment in the music is inseparable from its historicity and its vitality. Exposing these links and junctures, locating ourselves at these crossroads, reveals their absolute criticality and offers ways of understanding history and presence and art and politics.

This project investigates how African-American writers have used blues and jazz as conceptual reference points in their works in order to explore the aesthetics of ethnic identity-making processes. I concentrate on seven writers who engage in a literary project that seeks to represent, realize and/or articulate the complex histories of African-American experience. The legacy of trauma inherited from these narratives is problematized in the texts as much as their imaginative and aesthetic contexts are informed by it. It is through their turn to blues and jazz that the conflicting impulses are reconciled.<sup>1</sup> To theorize the political and aesthetic possibilities of a musical-literary sensibility, I incorporate the socio-musicological models laid out by Theodor W. Adorno regarding classical music into the foundation of my analysis. (Ironically, Adorno himself was a harsh critic of jazz; I discuss his criticisms as well as my own decision to use his work despite this, at further length below.)

Jazz in all its manifestations (musical but also cultural and political) emerged in the twentieth century and is clearly its product, spawned from the dramatic shifts in American culture and political ideology of the nineteenth century. A relatively new form and a highly fluid one, jazz embodies the culmination of historical trends, corresponding directly to the social and cultural shifts throughout the 1900s. Jazz, moreover, has always been linked to African-American experience and the construction of racial and ethnic identities. However, it is important to emphasize that, this link notwithstanding, jazz has never been divorced from white-American experience and is very much the result of the interaction of black and white individuals and communities. Throughout its



development, jazz has been critically affected by reviews of white critics, demands of white audiences and decision-making policies of white-run businesses, and has, moreover, for our purposes, been deeply influential on countless white-American authors.<sup>2</sup> And yet, much as jazz is and always has been intimately linked to the evolving definitions of race and ethnic identity in America, in general, it is its function within shifting notions of blackness in particular that concerns us here. It is for this reason (rather than any troubling presumed organic or biological affiliations) that I have selected only texts written by African-American writers for critical investigation in *Cross-Rhythms*.

## Race

The genealogy of the terms *race* and *ethnicity* and the relationship between them is well established but warrants a brief run through. European ideas defining race through biology and/or language, and linking it with a hierarchically ordered cultural nationalism, shaped racial ideas in North America from the nineteenth century, specifically as they culminate in the American myth of a manifest destiny.<sup>3</sup> In the United States, this ideology of essentialist cultural nationhood was manipulated as a means of violent social division whose defining logic of exclusivity changed with the shifting explications of race. Indeed, a confused connection between race and language persisted, often serving as a clear racial marker. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the connection was already accepted as established fact and was transformed from a tool of inclusion, to one of exclusion. As will be seen in what follows, language becomes a central trope in African-American culture which, in the twentieth century, effectively inverts the racist denigrations based on perceived linguistic incompetence. Instead, linguistic differences tend to be privileged as a subversive vernacular that verifies ethnic authenticity.

Audrey Smedley, in her history of the development of racial thought in the United States, *Race and North America* (1993), defines *ethnicity* as 'all those traditions, customs, activities, beliefs, and practices that pertain to a particular group of people who see themselves and are seen by others as having distinct cultural features, a separate history, and a specific sociocultural identity' (30–1). 'Race,' in contrast, 'signifies rigidity and permanences of position / status within a ranking order that is based on what is believed to be the unalterable reality of innate biological differences' (32). In other words, *ethnicity* signifies learned behaviour and *race* denotes inherited genealogy.

Werner Sollors's study of ethnicity in contemporary American society, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (1986), offered new terms with which to formulate these concepts. Recognizing the tensions associated with a discussion of ethnicity, Sollors prefers to strip the expression of its emotional dressing, reconfiguring it to represent an interactive process between what he

calls *descent* and *consent*. *Descent* suggests an unassailable and essential self and social identification; *consent*, in contrast, signifies a conscious act of affiliation. Sollors suggests that modern ethnic identification can be traced back to the etymological roots of *ethnicity*. Etymologically, *ethnicity* derives from the Greek *ethnos*, or *ethnikos*, which means 'otherness'. Sollors describes this 'otherness' in religious terms where the so-called *other* represented the heathen, as set apart from the chosen people. There are countless examples of how this formulation of an elect which is posited against an antagonistic *other* (frequently clothed in religious rhetoric) has been applied in modern societies. As Sollors shows, this religious metaphor has been adopted in various ways by both white-American and African-American communities. Thus, this ethnic identification becomes a highly subjective and flexible process of categorization. Sollors recognizes that the apparently natural social fragmentation into identifiable groups – recognizable as ethnic in twentieth-century America – is transformed into a political and ideological tool through its ability to take into account the diversity it contains and still preserve a coherent category.

Contemporary efforts to recreate an ethnic self-definition (a phenomenon Sollors attributes to what he calls the third-generation ethnic Americans) is not a reversion to ethnic gestures – conflating ethnicity to a two-dimensional mask of traditions which can be symbolically recognized at will. Rather, it is a modern, dynamic and creative process which integrates contemporary black experience with American culture and the distinct ethnic heritage. In ever-shifting relation to the American social landscape, these neo-traditions (such as afro hairstyle) may be interpreted as reactions to what was seen as an American melting pot. In a marriage of the notions of descent and consent, the process of ethnic identification during the second half of the twentieth century has been redefined through the creation of new traditions and by appropriating distinctly American motifs. Thus the acceptance of America as a homeland, literally and imaginatively, in all its manifestations, has been central in reconceptualizing the process of ethnic identification.

Acknowledging a tradition of communal differentiation between white Americans and African Americans, and accepting the historical imperative to recognize the violence which has defined this differentiation, in this project I use both *race* and *ethnicity* as terms which strive to understand these processes. My own definitions of these expressions grow out of the ideas of Smedley, Sollors and others (including Reginald Horsman, Paul Gilroy, Kwame Appiah and Henry Louis Gates), and are specifically related to the historical, political and social contexts of the United States. With *race*, I refer to that socio-genetic concept: the artificially constructed idea that accepts certain genetic physical or behavioural attributes as a method of statically categorizing communities. This definition strains to bear the weight of miscegenation and interracial relationships that defy any notion of racial purity in America. Nevertheless, the idea of some intrinsic racial identity has been central to American ideologies. In the

absence of racial purity, the choice to associate with a particular cultural system is, in my usage, precisely what defines ethnic identity. *Ethnicity* involves a mixture of biological association (as defined by race) and conscious emotional, intellectual and cultural affiliation to a group.

The struggle to pin down this evasive notion has created a system of reference that acknowledges its own impossible referent. Ethnicity is effectively transformed into a metaphor which, in light of the endlessly changing point of reference, becomes privileged in itself. Thus, the importance of symbolism in ethnic definition points to the relation of modern ethnic identity to the aesthetic imagination of the ethnic group, art playing a defining role in the constant process of ethnic reconfiguration. Examining the manifestation of this process in African-American aesthetics suggests that a key method to reach, sustain and manifest a balance between consent and descent is precisely through art.

## Jazz

The term *jazz*, whether referring to a musical style, a cultural phenomenon, an historical period, or a political and social feature, resists any simple definition. The name has been used in innumerable various ways: from the defining term of a very specific musical style within a particular geographical and historical moment, to a broad, even rhetorical, conceptualization of a culture that crosses centuries and oceans. Krin Gabbard, in his introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Jazz* (2002) has described the colourful and evasive histories of the word itself; its root associated with sources varying from the French *chaser* to the more risqué *jism*, possibly an allusion to its Storyville origins. Although difficult to pin down, Peter Townsend attempts to define the term and provides a detailed discussion of the varied uses and the vague boundaries of *jazz* in the preface to his perceptive book, *Jazz in American Culture* (2000). He is able to pick out key defining elements of the music:

These are improvisation, rhythm, repertoire, and instrumental sound and technique. Where an instrumentalist is improvising on a certain repertoire, with a certain approach to rhythm, instrumental sound and technique, the result is likely to be what a majority of listeners would agree to call “jazz”. (2–3)

In my own attempts to narrow this evasive term down to practical dimensions, Ludwig Wittgenstein’s distinction between a search for the essence of meaning in words and the more useful notion of a *family* of meaning, a genealogy which enables communication, is illuminating (1968: sections 67, 108, 116–20). On this, Townsend writes: ‘rather than an “essential” jazz that a definition should try to isolate, what there has been in actuality is a “family” of musical styles

closely related enough for one generic term to be applied to them all' (2000: 2). Certain traits of this family of styles can be traced back to the musical structures found in the African tribes whence the slaves were taken, though the impact on the history of jazz of the experience on the American continent and within the history of the United States cannot be underestimated.

From its inception, the story of jazz development has defied consensus, with musicologists and historiographers offering widely differing accounts and emphases in their descriptions of jazz.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, there are key moments in the development of jazz which are recognized as central in virtually all of these narratives. Whichever story we subscribe to they are all characterized by an ebb and flow of racial rhetoric, variously blurring or emphasizing distinctions between black and white. Indeed, generally setting itself as distinctly apart, the form itself of jazz remains fluid precisely as it variously appropriates, rejects or responds to European musical forms and traditions (increasingly, from the 1950s, jazz responds to traditions from other parts of the globe as well). Slave work-songs, which literally responded to the fact and experience of being black in America, can be identified as the first African-American musical form.<sup>5</sup> With the gradual Christianization of the slaves, the emerging religious songs became a second uniquely black-American musical form. These were generally more melodic than the earlier music, and manifested the complex relation of the slaves to their double cultural contexts. As LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) describes: 'Rhythmic syncopation, polyphony, and shifted accents, as well as the altered timbral qualities and diverse vibrato effects of African music were all used by the Negro to transform most of the "white hymns" into Negro spirituals' (1963: 47).

Work songs and early spirituals stand as the pivotal precursors to what became known as the blues, a rich and diverse form widely understood as related crucially to jazz, though the precise nature of that relation is endlessly debated. The themes of the early blues revolved around much more personal issues than previously explored in work songs or in spirituals, issues that were enabled by shifting personal and financial circumstances of many African Americans at the turn of the nineteenth century. As in the religious songs, these early blues demonstrated the confluence of divergent factors: the very first form of the blues 'utilized the structure of the early English ballad, and sometimes these songs were eight, ten or sixteen bars'. However, as will be elaborated in what follows, this was, as Jones points out, rapidly replaced by the 'patently non-Western form' of twelve-bar, three-line, AAB structure, the recognizable form of standard blues (62, 69). As the opportunities for individual expression increased, so did the freedom which exercised in the musical forms, further deepening the complexity of the relation to both cultural contexts (improved technologies of travel increased exposure to European instruments and rhythms, adding additional layers of influence).

With the growing autonomy at the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a general but discernible shift away from European forms in the music, and

a concentrated musical experimentation emerged that eventually led to early but recognizable forms of jazz. Ragged notes of ragtime, the jubilant celebrations of dixieland or the increasingly formalized blues all crossed and re-crossed these racialized lines of culture as black subjects sought to articulate their changing experiences and realize their changing position in American society. The black marching bands of New Orleans at the turn of the century embodied a virtual microcosm of this development as they used European instruments, African rhythms and American themes to physically move through the town, avidly affirming both communal and individualized selves. In this early jazz form, the balance between forces that are seemingly external (European standards) and internal (African-American culture) is offset by the desire of the creating subject to explore the possibilities of expression. Thus, by using the forms of European music, the early jazz artists tested the boundaries of these structures, focusing on their subjective application. This subject is not necessarily the individual, but, particularly in this context, it becomes the communal subject functioning within the objectifying landscape of white European musical and physical space (the translation of this subject-object reformulation into spatial terms is apparent as the early jazz bands literally marched through the streets). Through these dynamic processes, the music actively provided a cohesive communal force, with early jazz fusing the divisive forces and representing one kind of balance within the community. Classic blues represents another, much broader one.

With the development of recording technologies, and with the increasing mobility and the growing urbanization of African Americans in the beginning of the twentieth century, what has been called *primitive blues* or *traditional blues*, segued into what is often referred to as *classic blues*. Unlike primitive blues, classic blues took on a much more formal and self-conscious form that recognized its own market value. As will be further described in Chapter 1, the classic blues successfully merged a vernacular and individualized form with the capital needs of a burgeoning music industry, and served to formalize an increasingly rich musical structure that remains influential today for countless styles.

Concomitant with the growing popularity of the classic blues was the popularization of ragtime, a form which soon became a favourite with white audiences and performers. Although it itself did not include improvisation, in its emphasis on syncopated rhythms and its blends of classical and marching band musics, ragtime, already popular at the end of the nineteenth century, set the framework for some of the musical features privileged in jazz to come. It was, moreover, itself directly related to traditions of minstrelsy and vaudeville, was an important catalyst in the professionalization of African-American music (as it was one of the first forms of quasi-black music to be published, performed and popularized with the early rags of the 1890s). While the highly popularized form soon became apparently formulaic, it is valuable to consider the actual complexity of

ragtime and its position in African-American culture. The white parody of black culture does not only seek to ridicule African Americans, but also signals the recognition of their possible humanity. Moreover, it is an exploration of the predetermined boundaries of white reality: by posing as black caricatures, white culture seeks to define itself through contrast. Topics which were generally taboo in the mainstream of American culture, primarily sexuality, could be explored in these forms. Furthermore, black performers who then imitated the white performers imitating themselves provided subtle but pointed criticism of white *inauthenticity*, but also inevitably reflected back on their own modes of authenticity. These masks of masks reveal the dynamic relationships between preconfigured identities of an *other* and one's own exploration of self. In light of these racialized complexities, then, it becomes clear how while the material of the blues was generally unavailable to white America 'as if these materials were secret and obscure, and blues a kind of ethno-historic rite as basic as blood', jazz, on the other hand 'was a music capable of reflecting not only the Negro and a black America but a white America as well' (Jones, 1963: 148–9). Ragtime, then paid its dues to the demands of a mainly white audience, arguably taming the potency of its own aesthetic to suit the larger market.

By the 1930s there was a proliferation of different African-American musical voices, paying more or less regard to the demands of the market. Jazz bands that had grown to marching-band dimensions became smaller, the guitar and the violin gradually disappeared while the piano became a prominent fixture of jazz ensembles. Jelly Roll Morton was one of the first successful jazz pianists, with his 'Jelly Roll Blues' of 1915 arguably the first jazz composition to be published. Contentiously dubbed the 'Originator of Jazz', his style was an important influence on musicians such as James P. Johnson and other future greats of the stride piano – a pioneering jazz piano technique. Louis Armstrong, who began his career playing second cornet in King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band in New Orleans, was one of the first musicians who fully experimented with the individual solo improvisation (rather than a group improvisation on a piece), a feature that soon became a definitive characteristic of jazz.

The solo spoke singly of a collective music, and because of the emergence of the great soloists ([Louis] Armstrong, [Coleman] Hawkins, [Earl] Hines, [Jimmy] Harrison), even forced the great bands ([Fletcher] Henderson's, [Duke] Ellington's, and later [Count] Basie's) into wonderfully extended versions of that communal expression. (Jones, 1963: 158)

And yet we must always bear in mind the ebb and flow of racial politics that crucially affected the developments in jazz. What is considered the very first recording of jazz, for example, was that of the white Original Dixieland Jazz Band (O.D.J.B.). Although these young jazz artists had been heavily influenced

by the music of bands such as King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band, not unlike the history of ragtime it was only their initial popularity in white America that paved the road for the African-American musicians.

Soon after the beginning of the famously dubbed Jazz Age of the 1920s, the highly popularized swing swept across the country capturing the public ear. Once again, this was led by white musicians, such as Benny Goodman – dubbed the 'King of Swing', and followed much the same pattern of market development and aesthetic commercialization as ragtime.<sup>6</sup> Swing was first and foremost a dance music and it played on structures inherited from plantation and urban African-American cultures (e.g. the cakewalk, the charleston and the breakaway), and familiar from the popular vaudeville and minstrel shows, creating a space of movement for African Americans and a subversive location of activity for white patrons stifled by the realities of World War I and the Depression Era. From the popular mode of swing, which – through its popular commercialization in the 1930s – brought about the increasing standardization of the jazz idiom, emerged some musical innovators who successfully generated ways of salvaging the creative impulse in jazz. Count Basie and Duke Ellington are two notable examples. Basie's big-band used a riff-solo structure that integrated the blues tradition of call and response and the more popular forms of the big bands in the Swing era. LeRoi Jones suggests that 'In a sense the riff-solo structure was a perfect adaptation of the old African antiphonal vocal music as well as the Afro-American work song and spiritual' (183). Along with musicians such as pianist-composer Duke Ellington and Lester Young, one of the first musicians to carve out an autonomous and specific role for the tenor saxophone in jazz, Count Basie began redefining the boundaries of jazz expression. These musicians of the 1930s laid the groundwork for the experimentation and exploration of music and identity in the 1940s, that came to be known as *bebop*.

A central factor in these later musical developments is the wider context of American financial and political history. In the 1930s, the dire economic situation of the Great Depression led to a dramatic decrease in the market appeal of blues. Moreover, the integrated war effort during World War II strengthened the patriotism within African-American communities and infused hopes of social and legal equality, making the blues a less acceptable form of expression in the wider market. Only in the 1940s, after the war, when it became clear that little had changed despite African-American participation in the war effort, did that hesitant conciliatory attitude began shifting. Thus the 1940s saw the beginnings of the Black Power movements and the more forceful search for ethnic self-definition.

Bebop marks the emergence of an African-American musical form that, through its aggressive autonomy from popular demands, paradoxically asserts its own ethnicizing force while rejecting its social functionality in favour of a (modernist) concentration on the aesthetic value of the music. Eric Lott writes that 'bebop was intimately if indirectly related to the militancy of its moment.

Militancy and music were undergirded by the same social facts; the music attempted to resolve at the level of style what the militancy combatted in the streets' (Lott, 1988: 599). In the late 1940s–early 1950s, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker and Thelonious Monk and embodied a new generation of young musicians who began considering their music a serious art, subordinating the value of the performance to the value of expression. While the boppers of the 1940s were experimenters and innovators, however, it must be remembered that they were also unequivocally rooted in African-American musical tradition. Their music was a subjective exploration of form that tested the existing boundaries of jazz, and yet it intimately addressed the content of collective consciousness in which that subject functioned.

The emphasis on experimentalism reached its height with the development of free jazz, a jazz aesthetic that progressively shed all predetermined limitations and constraining factors. As the music became freer, alternative and arguably more palatable jazz styles proliferated in a by-now vast and highly diverse musical category. There seem to have always been parallel streams of jazz, one pursuing an individualizing, more introspective and self-conscious mode of expression, and the other veering towards increasing homogenization by seeking to accommodate the market forces. (A *very* rough schematic explication of this can be represented in the following pairings: New Orleans jazz – ragtime; classic blues – swing; bebop – Tin Pan Alley; free jazz – soul music.) In the second half of the twentieth century, however, jazz begins to splinter into countless streams: progressive jazz which was the recommercialization of the genre; cool jazz, or West Coast jazz; avant-garde modal jazz, pioneered by Miles Davis; funk and soul jazz; the re-emergence of Hard Bop with Horace Silver, Cannonball Adderley and Elvin Jones, for example, or East Coast jazz with Davis and John Coltrane who were also associated with funk and with free jazz; Third-stream jazz; fusion; and the progress of avant-garde, with such musicians as Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor and Steve Lacy.

## Adorno's jazz

In this book, I shall be focussing on four musical styles: classic blues, bebop, modal jazz and free jazz. Each of these styles signals a dramatic transition in the music, offering insight into the nature of jazz and its relation to its social and cultural contexts. The classic blues mark the first widespread acknowledgement of African-American aesthetic expression as a significant aspect of the American cultural landscape. Bebop became the first primarily African-American musical form to assert its own integrity as a force that empowered the subject within the realm of art, forging its positioning within the wider context of American aesthetics. Then, modal jazz, in its struggle to break free from inherited limitations, rejects the very notion of a totalizing scheme of authority, concentrating,



instead, on countermanding this notion by structuring its search along a shifting modal foundation. Finally, the innovations of free jazz explore the implications of rejecting the idea of history, as conventionally formulated, and – through its focus on spontaneity and collective improvisation – uncompromisingly demand an immediate engagement with its process of reinvention, reformulating the relation of the subject and the object: the relationship keeps being reinvented in the here-and-now of the piece. Unlike earlier forms of jazz where the subject tended to be subordinate to or patently liberated from the object, here a balance is constantly disturbed and re-established.

The shifting manifestations of a jazz aesthetic, dramatically different musical and conceptual approaches to the object-subject relationship that preserve recognizable and fundamental jazz attributes, can be successfully theorized using the work of Theodor W. Adorno. Although a vehement and unrelenting critic of jazz himself, his thorough and extensive exploration into the philosophy of music and its social and artistic expressions offers a surprisingly productive analytical medium with which to consider the far-reaching implications of jazz.

Theodor W. Adorno was a musician and a composer, but was probably better known as a musicologist, philosopher, sociologist and psychologist. What makes his work particularly useful for my purposes is his appropriation of music and all it entails as a manifestation of many of his social philosophies. He perceived music as a pure and autonomous microcosm containing the social forces at play on a larger scale in the community.<sup>7</sup> These forces were collated into a philosophy of aesthetics that sought to explain the relation of music and society.

In his fiercely critical article, 'On the fetish character in music and the regression of listening' (1938), Adorno wrote about the modern plight of the subject:

Until the end of prehistory, the musical balance between partial stimulus and totality, between expression and synthesis, between the surface and the underlying, remains as unstable as the moments of balance between supply and demand in the capitalist economy. (32)

But in the twentieth century, which Adorno describes as capitalist times, he argues that '[i]mpulse, subjectivity and profanation, the old adversaries of materialistic alienation, now succumb to it' (32). In other words, if, before, a delicate balance between the part and the whole was successfully (if tenuously) sustained, today the subject succumbs to the totality of the whole, to the commercialization of the market. Jazz, as I will discuss shortly, is according to Adorno a case in point. Adorno, writing mainly in the 1930s and 1940s, collapses the various manifestations of the jazz aesthetic (the more and the less popular forms) into an evil embodiment of the Culture Industry and the culmination of the subjugating forces of twentieth-century mass culture. He claims that in the twentieth century not only is the subject so weakened as to be incapable of contending with the objective force of the collective, but the market has so

overpowered aesthetics as to prevent any real variety to choose from (with choice and variety being central prerequisites to the autonomy of the subject). The purity of the modern collective, which thus overpowers the individual, virtually disables that social critique which Adorno believes is essential for the truth-value of the artwork.

Positing a notion of truth-value as the primary quality by which music (or any subjective expression) becomes worthy of serious expression, Adorno specified a number of closely-related conditions for its fulfilment. The first demanded specificity: a musical piece needs to generate a truth relating to that particular work and not to simply reveal any generalized sweeping universalism. The second condition was that art be socially contextualized, stemming from the social, cultural and even political landscapes in which it was created. Thirdly, music needed to have a purpose, to fulfil some function. This concept of functionality, which seems to be an expression of Adorno's Marxism, excluded vapid, commercially generated, meaningless, popular forms from Adorno's consideration. Historicity was the fourth condition of the fulfilment of truth-value in art: pieces should not be expressions existing on an isolated temporal plane, but should have a development: a past, a present and a future (Paddison, 1996: 3). Finally, however, for Adorno, the ultimate aim of the art project was to refer the part back to the whole: understanding of the social forces for the sake of communicating them and the truths they entail. Jazz, according to Adorno, which is an output (or, he claims, the embodiment) of the modern collective forces, then, is unable to rise to the challenge of social critique and thus fails to contain that essential social truth through which art is realized.

Writing about jazz in no less than six different pieces, Adorno was a harsh and inflexible critic of jazz, an approach which warrants explication and demands contextualization.<sup>8</sup> Any response to Adorno's criticism must take into account the kind of music to which he himself was responding. In a rather surprising narrowness of perspective, Adorno's critique centrally addresses a very particular kind of German jazz and commercialized swing that was most popular in the late 1930s–50s. Adorno's reductionist approach does not recognize the diversity of jazz structures and remains blind to the subjectivizing possibilities inherent in the jazz form, finding no social or subjective integrity in this music that would make it relevant to his discussion on music and society.

Writing on the commodification of the arts and of social and cultural sensibilities, in 'On the fetish character' (1938), Adorno comments that 'Marx defines the fetish character of the commodity as the veneration of the thing made by oneself which, as exchange-value, simultaneously alienates itself from producer to consumer – "human beings"' (38). Although pertinent for some versions of jazz, Adorno's unqualified alignment of jazz with the fetish commodity offers a highly limiting response which wilfully ignores the social investment and individualizing processes inextricable from jazz aesthetics. Contrary to Adorno's own limiting definition of jazz as an unredeemably

commodified form and popular force, the subjectivity whence jazz emerges provides the humanizing solution to the problem of modern fetishization – re-focusing on the role of the producer as integral to the finished product.

Ironically, Adorno implicitly recognizes the individualizing history of jazz while ardently denying it. In his essay, ‘Perennial fashion – jazz’, Adorno posits popular art against what he calls authentic art; he writes that through its own establishment of jazz structures jazz ceases to offer space for spontaneous expression of a community, becoming instead a reified and increasingly hypostatized, hence ominously manipulative, form. ‘Contrariness has changed into second-degree “smoothness” and the jazz-form of reaction has become so entrenched that an entire generation of youth hears only syncopations without being aware of the original conflict between it and the basic metre’ (1953: 121). It is, he suggests, through this lack of awareness that the audience can be directed by the controlling force. Thus, this lament over what he deems to be an overarching and detrimental change in jazz suggests, through its very opposition, the possibility of an authentic and true expression of jazz.

Paradoxically, using Adorno’s own conditions for truth value set out in ‘On the fetish character’, to evaluate the importance of jazz, serves to unpick Adorno’s objections to it. Initially, the subjectivity of jazz and of each jazz moment ensures its specificity in time and content. Furthermore, the frequent reference to different musical pieces, and the continuous self-reflexivity of jazz – in the varied iterations of musical themes that underlie that music – fulfils the condition of historicity. These tendencies also contextualize the music by presuming a common basis of knowledge that exists in that environment. Moreover, the active participation of the jazz audience strengthens this common link by providing a cohesive expression representing the shared experience. The dynamic and fluid expression changes with performance, constantly creating a new here-and-now to which future musicians can refer.

Adorno suggests that the only way that light music and ‘the usual commercial jazz’ are able to thus exist popularly is through the inattentiveness of listeners (1938: 49). The wide appeal of jazz, he claims, comes from the formulaic dissonance and structure that is identified by the audience who mistake recognition for appeal. It also comes, he suggests, from mimicry: jazz adeptly imitates, or caricatures, fundamental human emotions, which, again, are easily recognized by the listener (53–4). Contrary to Adorno’s condemnation, however, I argue that it is precisely the combination of recognition and repetition which infuses new meaning into the jazz expression.<sup>9</sup> By weaving together familiar and alien elements, jazz musicians disrupt the listening experience and force the listener out of that complacent notion of enjoyment so detrimental, Adorno decries, to musical authenticity. By manipulating those jazz structures which Adorno characterizes as formulaic, even through so basic an activity as reiteration, jazz interrupts the comfort of familiarity and relocates the music into a dialogical engagement between the immediate musical moment and the mediated past iterations.<sup>10</sup>

The literary texts which I consider here function in similar ways. Incorporating elements of jazz and blues into a literary aesthetic gives the reader the pleasure of recognition but one that demands an active engagement with the text. This is not the inattentive complacency of which Adorno complained but a deliberate challenge imposed on the reader's experience. Although outward looking through its external frame of reference, it necessarily draws the reader in, as the familiar elements are recontextualized. Even when those jazz structures inform the immediate experience of the work (as in, for example, Langston Hughes's blues poetry where the structure of the verse on the page is already suggestive of a blues inflection) the startling displacement demands an active engagement with the poetic structures, an attentive activity that redeems the text from the banality which Adorno condemns.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, despite his own aversion to jazz culture, in order to investigate these ethno-literary projects I have adopted some of the theoretical and sociological ideas developed by Adorno regarding Western art music. Although not necessarily an obvious choice, as will be demonstrated throughout *Cross-Rhythms* Adorno's work is remarkably useful as a paradigm which illuminates the complex relationship between society and aesthetics. Using his ideas as a prism with which to consider these African-American works serves to complicate the all-too-easy and highly dangerous binaries which so often function in racialized discourse. Using Adorno's European theoretical foundation as a basis for considering African-American literary texts, I realize that I risk prolonging those white-dominated power structures which heavily influenced black experiences and aesthetic sensibilities to begin with. This is a danger acknowledged and warned against by numerous literary critics who, with various degrees of urgency, have called for an African-American critical method for African-American aesthetic outputs.<sup>12</sup> However, rather than presuming to superimpose an alien conceptual model onto autonomous creative expression, I suggest that by consciously and carefully juxtaposing the two realms, the distance between them can be transformed into a productive and creative force. As has already been shown and will be further elaborated upon in the chapters to follow, reducing ethnic identity to the comprehensible and totalizing ideology of race in which two distinct and definable entities interact singly and simply is a stultifying and dangerous activity. When considering jazz constructs (musical, social or political) with relation to Adorno's rich philosophical writing, the dangers of such oppositions proffered by the ideology of race is demonstrated. My intent and my methodology, then, do not involve colonizing black art into subordination by white, European aesthetic ideals. Instead, I hope to illustrate how a cautious disassociation of each from the emotio-political burdens of history, in an attempt to see how they may (and indeed, do) work together, offers an enhanced understanding of each separately. Examining jazz through Adornian critical models implicitly acknowledges the inescapable influence and infiltration of so-called *whiteness* into *blackness* and vice versa, while also offering a new critical understanding of the relationship between aesthetics and society.