



Cadenza: Jazz as a Model for Writing

"I mean, I'll have a lot of studying to do, and I'll have to study everything, but, I mean, I want to play with—jazz musicians."

—James Baldwin (189)

Couldn't I try. . . . Naturally, it wouldn't be a question of a tune . . . but couldn't I, in another medium? . . . It would have to be a book: I don't know how to do anything else.

—Jean-Paul Sartre (178)

Warming up a Riff

Everyone must know this anecdote. A socialite asked Louis Armstrong to define jazz. He replied, "Lady, if you gotta ask what it is, you'll never know."

No other story that brings or, rather, that refuses to bring jazz into language has attained wider currency. Within the realm of jazz discourse, it is endlessly repeated and evoked. It enjoys the status of proverb, imparting a simple but profound truth: Jazz defies circumscription. And it resists inscription, foiling those who would encode it as words, as images on TV and movie screens, or as graphic notations on musical scores. Jazz even thwarts those who attempt to capture it on magnetic tape. (As cognoscenti are apt to remind us, recordings only indicate a faint trace of what jazz giants actually sounded like.) In short, jazz is paradoxically represented as music that inevitably eludes representation. It needs no apologist, says Louis Armstrong. It prefers to speak for itself—thank you.

Or as Elvis Costello once said in a remark now widely quoted,

"Writing about music is like dancing about architecture. It's a really stupid thing to want to do" (qtd. in Goodwin, 1). Costello's wit is notoriously barbed, which ensures that interviews with him are always thoroughly enjoyable. But his sentiments, echoing and extending Armstrong's, are diametrically opposed to mine. First, as a side point, I'd jump at the chance to see dancing about architecture. Second, writing about music is hardly any more problematic than writing about any other subject.

Nevertheless, this book isn't, strictly speaking, "writing about music." It's not an attempt to describe what jazz is. Its subject is *jazzography*: what people say jazz is. It shifts the focus of study from music to representations of music, although I readily admit that jazz and its representations are ultimately inseparable. Just as jazzography (a neologism referring to all writing about jazz) relies on jazz for its existence, jazz is shaped and sustained by texts that bring it into language. Certainly, these texts include the instructions of a master improviser to a neophyte, recordings and radio transmissions, and charts or arrangements for bands. But they also include musicological and ethnomusicological studies as well as television programs, movies, and literary works. I plan to pay special attention to this latter group of texts.

In this respect, *Drifting on a Read* resembles Hayden White's *Metahistory* and Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Like the authors of these books, I theorize a group of texts that constitutes a body of knowledge. My attention is thus directed toward "style, figures of speech, setting, narrative devices, historical and social circumstances, *not* the correctness of the representation nor its fidelity to some great original" (Said, 21). White's work characterizes the central historical texts of the nineteenth century as "*formalizations* of poetic insights," and it elaborates a schema that systematically graphs how these insights became rhetorical tropes and, eventually, plots, arguments, and ideologies of history (xii). Said's work regards *Orientalism* as "*a distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts, . . . an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction . . . but also of a whole series of 'interests'" (12). My conceptualization of jazzography follows the lead of these two scholars, but my emphasis differs from theirs. White foregrounds the logic of consciousness: how historical thinkers chose conceptual, rhetorical strategies for explaining and representing data (x). Said foregrounds the logic of ideology: how "intellectual, aesthetic, scholarly, and cultural energies" make an imperialist tradition (15). I foreground writing, the "logic" of the signifier: how the dis-

course of jazz models or projects jazz music to this culture by granting jazz a voice and organizing it on a highly abstract level.

So we begin with this basic question: When people refuse to let jazz “speak for itself”—when they knowingly violate interdictions forbidding representation—what do they say? Answered simply, they say that jazz is a topic worth arguing about. While detractors may dispute its value (Theodor Adorno is infamous on this account), no one questions the cultural significance of jazz. It provided modernism with a soundtrack, and the United States with a popular art form and a coveted export. It shaped the music of this country (jazz/blues and country/ballads form the double helix of American popular music), and it affected the world’s music in a manner analogous to Hollywood’s effect on world cinema. Today, there are jazz bands in virtually every country, and the methodology of jazz, like the methodology of Hollywood (continuity editing), has been assimilated by musics as dissimilar as the Argentinean tango and South African mbaqanga.

Good enough. Because jazz is important, its representations are also worthy of study. But what have people said that jazz is? As one might expect, arguments regarding the essential characteristics of the music abound, but nobody has constructed a definition that satisfies everybody. That’s hardly surprising. Still, on one primary point there’s consensus. Jazz is always understood as dependent on improvisation. It is music that drifts on a read. It starts with what is given and spins off new melodies, rhythms, and harmonies. That’s the main reason modernists—especially artists associated with surrealism and the Harlem Renaissance—found it attractive. That’s also why it later found favor with Beats in the ‘50s and black radicals in the ‘60s. All of these groups heard jazz as “authentic,” redolent of some essence, but they also believed that it posed an alternative to “classical” ways of thinking, writing, and producing art. Jazz has historically modeled generalizable strategies for invention, strategies we might characterize collectively as *tropes*.

Out of the Tropics

The word “trope” refers to “turns” or “tricks” of language, but it’s also a musical term that, used loosely, signifies “any interpolation of text, music, or both into a liturgical chant” (Randel, 523). As readers might recall, most medievalists hold that it was from tropes—specifically, the *Quem quaeritis* texts—that medieval drama developed. David Bevington writes:

According to a ninth-century monk from St. Gall named Notker Babulus, “tropes” had begun as wordless musical sequences with which the singers in the choir would embellish the vowel sounds of certain important words in the service. One such word, for example, was the *alleluia* in the introit (opening processional chant) of the Easter mass. Babulus reports that musical tropes of this sort had become so elaborate in the ninth century that words were added to make the sequences easier to memorize. (21–22)

On the most basic level, tropes were amplifications of holy texts: the liturgy and the scriptures. As signifiers of excess, they marked a fissure or a potential weak spot in the Church’s hegemony. Taken collectively, tropes tended toward glossolalia or plurality. They allowed—some might say they encouraged—the rhetorical figure of catachresis (literally “misuse”), “the manifestly absurd metaphor designed to inspire ironic second thoughts about the nature of the thing characterized or the inadequacy of the characterization itself” (White, 37). Just as surely as the Protestant Reformation did (in 1517 Luther affixed his 95 theses to the Schlosskirche at Wittenberg), tropes opened up the possibility of aberrant readings. They implied that scripture was not a closed book. It was subject to interpretation. It could be added to, commented on, in short, endlessly glossed. The Bible, playwright Alfred Jarry later claimed, “can be made to ‘mean all things equivocally’” (qtd. in Shattuck, 241). And still later, expanding on this notion, Walter Benjamin wrote: “Any person, object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else” (1977:175). Troping, it turns out, is a condition of language. It makes communication simultaneously possible—and impossible. This observation is the basis for deconstruction’s doctrine of textuality.

The traditional or common-sense meaning of a text, then, has no more exclusive claim to be the *true* meaning than any other that can be found in the same words. All interpretations are on a par, are equivalent. (Shattuck, 241)

As a means to invention within the liturgy, troping “flourished from the 10th through the 12th centuries” (Randel, 524). Then, the implications of what we might call “tropological promiscuity” or “the logic of embellishment” began to grate upon the Church Fathers and, finally, proved too much to bear. At the Coun-

cil of Trent (1545–63), the culmination of the Counter-Reformation, the church considered abolishing “all music in the service other than plainsong” and ended up suppressing “all but four tropes and sequences” (121). This regulation, an affirmation of promised renewals and reforms, helped seal the triumph of the Papacy over “those Catholics who wished for conciliation with the Protestants” (Livingstone, 133). In effect, it served notice: Catholics don’t trope.

But jazzmen do. If classical music is the Roman Catholic Church, then Louis Armstrong is Martin Luther. The music he championed, jazz, is always represented as an art form devoted to following the Law of the Trope. It is conceptualized as a more-or-less conscious deployment of iterability, the possibility of endlessly reconfiguring musical materials. Put historically, the development of classical music is conventionally understood as dependent upon writing, especially the ideographic inscriptions of standard notation. Jazz is represented as alien to the order of notation. It arose in orality, was shunned by literate culture, and flourished in electronic culture. What is essential to jazz is, as I have already mentioned, traditionally regarded as untranscribable. But think again. Jazz is commonly understood as a generative method for making music from music. It is a metamusic devoted to the systematic exploration of the conditions that give rise to inscription. More verb than noun, jazz has been regarded for years as a paradigm of invention (Mackey, 1992:52).

Jazz and poststructuralist theory share a generally unexplored kinship. They both signal a shift from *reading as referendum* (the work of interpretation) to *writing as troping* (the play of invention). Or stated even more hyperbolically, learning the methods of classical music demands that one learn to *reread* (what has already been written). Learning the methods of jazz demands that one learn to *read perversely* (the already written). Rereading is the essence of careful scholarship; perverse or aberrant reading is the essence of creativity, a skill that our educational institutions have, for the most part, neglected to teach. Most students know how to reread poorly, how to read aberrantly not at all.

Making Pops Talk

Let’s return to where we started—back to Louis Armstrong’s exchange with the socialite. I want to stage an experiment. What might result if I, on paper, treated this mythic anecdote as jazz musicians treat the products of Tin Pan Alley? Instead of assuming



FIGURE 1.1

Louis Armstrong (courtesy of Columbia/Legacy Records)

that it speaks for itself, that its meaning is self-evident, what if I ran changes on its surfaces? What if I read it perversely? Perhaps the trick is to emulate tenor saxophonist Paul Gonsalves, who at the 1956 Newport Festival prompted mass hysteria when he soloed for twenty-seven choruses. A poststructuralist with a horn, he employed "Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue," a relatively simple blues, as text. To him, the piece meant nothing absolutely.

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Therefore, it could—at least theoretically—mean absolutely anything. It provided an occasion for invention because it implied the ceaseless play of signification. So without further ado, we look again (and again) at Armstrong's terse reply to an anonymous socialite's query. *One-two / One-two-three-four*:

1. Armstrong the Zen Master ("If you must, ask; you'll never know"). To this Armstrong, speculation—merely entertaining the need to ask what jazz is—precludes knowing. Or try another scenario. Let's imagine we asked the (long-deceased) trumpet master why he responded to the lady's question as he did. His answer might take the form of an infinite regress, a *mise en abyme* of his initial response: something like, "If you gotta ask why I said what I said, then you'll never know—that is, either why I said what I did or why I didn't say what I can't and still won't." Maybe, though, he'd smile upon us and bless us with a completely straight answer; in which case aren't we still left wondering, not about the point of this new statement, for let's pretend that it is "completely straight," but about its relationship to the earlier utterance? By what law or logic could he (or we) substitute or clarify one statement with another? Cf. John Cage, *Diary: How to improve the World (You will only make Matters worse)* (eight compact discs, Wergo).

2. Armstrong the Phenomenologist ("I can't deal it; you gotta feel it"). Jazz has no existence except in the "coordinates of pure consciousness" (Holman, 329). Thus it is of the order of experiencing (examining *phenomena*), not the order of knowing (inspecting *noumena*). Armstrong fears that the act of verbalizing jazz will alter (one's consciousness of) jazz. Or to borrow Lawrence Grossberg's phrase: "too much intellectual legitimation will redefine the possibilities of its effectiveness; it will become increasingly a meaningful form to be interpreted rather than a popular form to be felt on one's body and to be lived passionately and emotionally" (Grossberg, 79). Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

3. Armstrong the Saussurean ("I'm jazz, and you're not"). Asking "What is jazz?" can only be answered by delineating what we do *not* mean by the sign "jazz." "Jazz" is defined not by knowing it, and all that it involves, but through an awareness of all that is excluded in constructing the set *jazz*, that is, in the relational difference between the set of signs the particular sign "jazz" includes and the set of signs it excludes (that is, everything from acoustic phenomena to styles of clothes). The socialite who asks Armstrong

to define jazz cannot know jazz; she is, by definition, one of the "signs," one of the absences, that structures jazz. Cf. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*.

4. Armstrong the Metaphysical Poet ("*Had we but world enough, and time,/This coyness, Lady, were no crime*"). Given the obscene etymology—or the well-known connotations—of the word "jazz," the socialite's question becomes a euphemism for asking: "What is fucking?" But what can be said of Armstrong's answer? Ask a coy question, you get a coy answer? Sure, but is it brazenly flirtatious or strategically evasive? Is it the opening move in a (copulative) sexual game or a sly admission? Armstrong doesn't need the woman. He has a horn. And keep this in mind: The jazzman's musical play, like the writing "games" of poststructuralists, is routinely criticized as self-indulgent, as a variety of masturbation. Armstrong denies nothing. His response is a steady-rolling forward look to imminent pleasure. Cf. Alan P. Merriam and Fradley H. Garner, "Jazz—The Word."

5. Armstrong the Modernist ("*Lady, maybe Ezra Pound said it best when he noticed that 'definition always moves away from the simple things' a man knows perfectly well; 'it recedes into an unknown region, that is a region of remoter and progressively remoter abstraction'*"—19). Jazz isn't a commodity. You don't acquire it then exchange it as if it were a Persian rug. It's a tradition. "If you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense . . . and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence" (Eliot, 38). The proper method for understanding a jazz solo is the method of science, "'which is the method of poetry,' as distinct from that of 'philosophic discussion'" (Pound, 20). You examine the solo firsthand by comparing it with other solos. Cf. Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*.

6. Armstrong the Structuralist ("*Excuse me, are you some kind of android?*"). In his Overture to *The Raw and the Cooked*, Claude Lévi-Strauss echoes Armstrong. He declares that music is "the only language with the contradictory attributes of being at once intelligible and untranslatable" (Lévi-Strauss, 1969:18). It cannot be "the object of linguistic discourse, when its peculiar quality is to express what can be said in no other way" (31). Hence, we notice that the discourse of music abounds with examples of cat-achresis: synaesthesia ("blue note," "hot jazz," "sweet jazz," and "hard bop") and oxymorons ("musical sign" and "sound object"). Still, couldn't one side with Stéphane Mallarmé? He claimed:

"Mystery is said to be Music's domain. But the written word also lays claim to it" (Mallarmé, 32). Ultimately, aren't all languages, in the broadest sense of the word, intelligible and untranslatable? And isn't translation both an impossibility and a precondition of language, whether one is mapping painting onto linguistic discourse, English onto Chinese, or the thoughts in my brain onto the printed words of this page? "No," says Lévi-Strauss, and he, too, calls upon a French poet to help make his point. Charles Baudelaire, Lévi-Strauss recalls, once made the profound remark that while each listener reacts to a given work in his own particular way, it is nevertheless noticeable that "music arouses similar ideas in different brains." If this is true, then the intelligibility of music is hardly an effect produced by intersemiotic mapping. Music, like myth, appeals to mental structures that we all have in common (26). Both music and mythology, Lévi-Strauss maintains, are natural systems, automatically intelligible, because they are expressions of the *a priori* conditions that make communication possible. They are originary languages. Everyone understands them (for they constitute the conditions for understanding); no one can translate them. Or stated differently, "when the mind [individual or corporate] is left to commune with itself and no longer has to come to terms with objects, it is in a sense reduced to imitating itself as object" (10). The product of such self-reflexive objectification is music (individually produced) or mythology (socially produced). Therefore, we understand music and mythology because these isomorphic, original languages mimic—actually model—the structures of the human mind. This is why Lévi-Strauss can declare, "music has its being in me, and I listen to myself through it" (17). Demonstrate the logical operations that govern music and mythology, and you reveal the pattern of basic and universal laws that govern human beings. This is, in effect, the overarching goal of structuralism. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.

7. Armstrong the Deconstructor ("What it [jazz] is is a question of what is is"). If we presume to ask the question "What is jazz?" we have already assumed the validity of, and the possibility of a recoverable answer to, the recursive question, "What is is?" That is, we have already linked our inquiry to a preestablished conception of negativity (nonbeing) as absence and hence cast our lot with the certainty of reappropriating being (in some form of truth) as presence. Thus it is that the initial (characteristically Western metaphysical) question of *isness* assumes too much: namely, that jazz *is*, and that it is a system—a tradition or construct—that we

can know from a position outside this system (outside textuality). Armstrong's statement—which cunningly and parasitically mimes the operations of a metaphysics of presence—defers representation of being and, thereby, conjures both the absence and the imminent return of mimesis, the (im)possibility of representing jazz. It exemplifies a politics of indirection (through a ruse, it teases out ontological presuppositions), and it deconstructs jazz (as a transcendental signified) by suggesting that it is a textual effect generated by and conceived as a refusal to define: since, ultimately, nondefinition—structurally indistinguishable from definition—sets in motion what we might call “being effects” by predicating a fundamental gap between words and things. Cf. Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Blindness,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*.

8. Armstrong the Ironic Historian (“*I can't tell you, because you can't believe a word I say*”). Building on the work of modern theorists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roman Jakobson, Hayden White contends that a historical text results when data are linguistically expressed—given voice or imaged—by employing one of four basic tropes: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. The Armstrong anecdote provides a limit case of historicizing in the ironic mode, in that it refers to, but at the same time summarily refuses to define or sanction, an accepted body of knowledge about jazz. It is “‘sentimental’ (in Schiller’s sense of ‘self-conscious’)” or artificial, pointing to the “capacity of language to obscure more than it clarifies in any act of verbal figuration” (White, 31, 37). In other words, through the rhetorical figure of *aporia* (literally “doubt”), Armstrong brings jazz, albeit fleetingly, into language and imbues it with an ironic voice that tacitly alludes to an inarticulable body of knowledge and an ever-receding epistemology, all for the express purpose of warranting an authoritative, but highly problematic, withdrawal from historical discourse. Cf. Hayden White, *Metahistory*.

9. Armstrong the Home-Spun Philosopher (“*Ask a silly question, you get a smart answer*”). Abraham Lincoln, if we trust material given in “The Query,” a short play written by Woody Allen, was once asked, “Mr. President, how long must a man’s legs be?” He replied, “Long enough to reach the ground” (113–21). The witty rejoinder, which subordinates logic to common sense, always takes aesthetic not moral deficiency as its satiric target. Repeated (and it always is), it gains recognition as a proverb and gives up its status as the exclusive product of a single consciousness. Proverbs express the

doxa. For the materialist, they are products of ideology; for the metaphysician, utterances of truth. Therefore, elevating (or lowering) Louis Armstrong's rejoinder to the level of proverb paradoxically reduces (or raises) its author to one—and not even the first—in a series visiting an “already-written” topic. Repetition retrospectively transforms Armstrong into a metonym: the collective, anonymous voice of jazz (Barthes, 1974:18). Cf. Horace, *Satires*.

10. Armstrong the Feminist (“*Lady, if you're a woman, why do you ask me!*”). In her study of the discourse of film music, Carol Flinn observes a widespread “tendency to align music in general with the feminine” (57–58). Indeed, music is traditionally characterized as “irrational,” “unrepresentable,” “largely unknowable and mysterious.” It metaphorically inhabits a female body. For example, novelist Fatima Shaik, in *The Mayor of New Orleans*, has her character, Walter, declare, “Music and love is both women and truth is too” (10). She thus reiterates Nietzsche's formula: “Truth is a woman.” Duke Ellington, on the other hand, is more psychoanalytic in his orientation. He imagines the drum as a woman: “its form a womb, its skin a maidenhead” (Ellington in Morton, 12). In a poem from his autobiography, *Music Is My Mistress*, he writes:

Music is a beautiful woman in her prime,
 Music is a scrubwoman, clearing away the dirt and grime,
 Music is a girl child
 Simple, sweet and beaming,
 A thousand years old,
 Cold as sleet, and scheming. (Ellington, 39–40)

Granted, this stanza is awful, enough to make one glad that, as a rule, Ellington resisted the Muse of poetry, but it is also helpful, because it reveals the context of Armstrong's remark. In fact, the point of the remark becomes gender (sexual difference) as the social context for musical reception. By subtly but effectively revealing the questioning woman as a transvestite (she does not know “naturally” what she should), it exposes the gender codes that structure jazz. Then again, is Armstrong the woman? Tradition, of course, says otherwise (he was called “Pops,” though he never fathered biological children). Nonetheless, in this anecdote, he occupies the position and plays out the role of music-as-woman. Cf. Honoré de Balzac, *Sarrasine*.

11. Armstrong the Castraphobe (“*If you gotta ax, I gotta go*”). The lady lacks what Armstrong has: knowledge, a trumpet, a penis.

And "she's gotta have it." That's hardly surprising. "If it is true," writes Krin Gabbard, "that no one ever possesses the phallus of the father—the first phallus that anyone desires—then all of us, male and female alike, are castrated. The trumpet can then be conceptualized as a compensatory, even hysterical mechanism to ward off castration" (1992b:45). Speculate further and what do we get? "Armstrong [who never knew his biological father] regularly used his trumpet to express phallic masculinity along with a great deal of the sexual innuendo that was already an essential element of jazz performance" (44). He undoubtedly perceived the lady—a stand-in for what? woman? white people? the ruling class? the culture industry?—as a potential threat, an agent of emasculation. Cf. Krin Gabbard, "Signifyin(g) the Phallus: *Mo' Better Blues* and Representations of the Jazz Trumpet."

12. Armstrong the Itinerant Musician ("Just whom or what do you think I am?"). Coming from the most sanguine of entertainers, one detractors accused of obsequiousness (charged with playing the role of Uncle Tom), Armstrong's rejoinder seems uncharacteristically curt. It fractures his received image, sounds like something Miles Davis would say. And that forces a choice. Do we recoup or revise our Armstrong? (A) Maybe we should dismiss his comment altogether and, thus, restore his image to its former plenitude. We're reading too much into an innocent remark. Probably, Armstrong was clowning around. ("*Old Louis, he a good boy, massa. Shucks, he jus playin' witcha.*") Or, perhaps, he was frustrated: his lip was cracked and hurting, he missed New Orleans, he needed some marijuana, he had smoked some marijuana, and so on. (B) Then again, maybe our picture of Armstrong needs adjusting. We have two options. First, we could synthesize a "new" Armstrong by revising our "old" image to accommodate new information. Or second, we could reverse the received view of Armstrong: peel back *persona* from real man, dismiss the shuck-and-jiver and affirm a sly, old fox. (A third option, to live with a radically divided Armstrong, is to live without a picture.) In their net result, then, the strategies of recouping and revising share one aim: the construction of a unified subjectivity to control disruptive textual effects, that is, dissemination. Pursuing Armstrong's irretrievable motivations becomes the *raison d'être* for speculation (about the text's "outside"), holding forth the promise of locating meaning but, paradoxically, proliferating meanings. And the remark comes to signify nothing except the infinitely explorable conditions that could have prompted its utterance. Cf. Irvin Ehrenpreis, "Per-

sonae," in *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Literature: Essays in Honor of Alan Dugald McKillop*.

13. Armstrong the Lacanian ("Jazz exists for the Gaze"). Insofar as jazz appears in jazz (and I am well aware of my scopocentrism), it appears not so much in what gets played or even in what is left unplayed, but in hesitations, the unsettling interruptions, and the possibilities that, according to Craig Saper, "open onto a void or an impasse" (1991:51). This is what I (Jarrett) find so arresting (J'arrête)—simultaneously menacing and stimulating—in Armstrong's cadenza to "West End Blues" and in the anecdote associated with him. They don't model Jacques Lacan's notion of the gaze; they don't entangle themselves in a project of demystification. Rather, they model creation through the gaze. Their nervousness—the flutter of missing intentions—makes me stumble; it "unsettles empiricism and sets in motion the (re)appearance of gaps, fadings, and flickerings in . . . perception and understanding" (43). Cf. Craig Saper, "A Nervous Theory: The Troubling Gaze of Psychoanalysis in Media Studies."

14. Armstrong the African American ("Hey white girl, whatcha doing uptown?"). In a radio interview broadcast on National Public Radio, Ice-T told *Fresh Air's* Terry Gross, "Rap music is black music that's being sent back and forth to us in the ghetto. White America picked up the phone and listened to it, and said, 'Ah, how can they talk like this!' This is just how we talk. Put the phone down. . . . White America just won't understand it, but I'm just going to have to say, 'It's a black thing.'" Substitute "jazz" for "rap" and "play" for "talk," and the gangsta rapper becomes little more than the fulfillment of the promise latent in every note Pops blew. Cf. Greg Tate, *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America*.

15. Armstrong the Marxist ("Them that ask have got to go"). Seizing upon the term "socialite" might not be the only way to find Marx—and class struggle—in the Armstrong anecdote, but it is certainly the fastest way to accrue hermeneutic capital from the exchange of lady and jazzman. In resisting the ruling class—its attempts to alienate him from the meaning of his labor—Armstrong models the revolutionary act and, paradoxically, defines jazz. It is musical liberation, freedom: interesting not because it represents consensus, a common unified ethos, but because it is the accumulated record of passionate conflicts. It represents achievement *out* of conflict, not a sublime rising above (Greenblatt, in Begley, 1993:36). Cf. LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*.

16. Armstrong the Hipster (“*Sorry, the only way I could have answered you was if you didn’t ask*”). Armstrong’s response to the lady is, in effect, a pronouncement: “You’re so square (and baby, I do care).” Because it conveniently divides the world into asymmetrical halves—those who do not know what jazz is and those who no longer ask—it implies a jazz version of Calvinism where the elect automatically know the truth, and the preterits are damned to try and figure out things for themselves—but without asking. Or perhaps more kindly, the lady presents Armstrong with an impossible task. Her question is so elemental—so outside the world of jazz—that it bars Armstrong from the only discourse he knows: a vocabulary fully capable of addressing the lady’s question but not in words she can understand. Therefore, he stands before her mute. The body of knowledge that differentiates him from the larger culture, marking him as a prominent member of a subculture, has also decisively cut him off. He has purchased identity at the expense of communication. Cf. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*.

17. Armstrong the Ethnomusicologist (“*Hey, don’t you listen to records or the radio?*”). For the sake of his music, Armstrong lays claim to this double enigma: one can neither represent jazz in words, nor in symbolic-graphic form on a score. Jazz is incommensurate with standard methods of graphic representation: translation or mapping capture only that which is common to both it and notation. That which is specific to jazz eludes translation. Unlike classical music, which began in orality (for example, with the early plainchant of monks) but came to share a reciprocal relationship with notation (literacy), jazz arose in orality (for example, with the field hollers of slaves) but developed in the modern world of “secondary orality.” It is a consequence of electronics: as imbricated with radio and phonography as classical music is with writing and printing. An ethnomusicology of jazz might, therefore, begin with Armstrong’s rejection of analytico-rational explanation—adequate for the study of art during the Gutenberg era (literacy)—and explore ways of writing in the Edison era (that is, writing with electronic culture). It could also profit by politicizing (critically reexamining) that notion of musical literacy. Cf. Gregory Ulmer, *Teleteory: Grammatology in the Age of Video and Heuristics: The Logic of Invention*.

And so on, and so on. This speculative cadenza is designed to introduce a variety of motifs explored in subsequent chapters, but it is also calculated to teach a lesson about writing. The lesson—

what we might call the law of signification—states that any attempt to delineate what a text means (to circumscribe its set of possibilities) will always obtain the opposite effect. Rereading—the push and shove of interpretation—opens up the text. Jazz musicians and poststructuralists, rather than working against this law, seek to exploit it as a means of invention.

Still, it's probable that plenty of people must wonder: Is drifting on a read—or at least the sort of troping that characterizes post-structuralist experiments with language—worth doing? Should such play be encouraged, or should it be discouraged as an extreme case of scholarship become self-indulgent and pretentious? Does the jazz method—troping—have any practical lessons to teach writing and thinking? Obviously, I believe so.

However much it may seem like a *tour de force* of flashy theorizing (signifying nothing), the preceding experiment was not created *ex nihilo*. It follows well-established methods of aberrant or perverse reading, methods that can be generalized for critical/theoretical writing. Notice, for example, that all of the towering geniuses of jazz, no matter how unique their styles, patterned inventive ways of playing that countless others adopted and employed. My performance—which recalls Sonny Stitt more than Charlie Parker—was jazz-derived. It was learned. My intention, in the pages that follow, is to show readers how to transfer jazz strategies of perverse—no, make that creative—reading to the realm of scholarship and the cultural-studies classroom. I want to demonstrate that the tropes organizing jazz and jazzography (identified through interpretation or hermeneutics) are also useful for grammatological invention (what I call heuristics). But there is a problem. Inventive techniques that are *de rigueur* ("normal science") among jazz musicians are often discouraged among scholars. They are banished to the realm of poetics, to the creative-writing classroom. I believe that the techniques of troping should be disseminated. My bet is that they could revitalize and popularize writing in the humanities.

Instead of assuming that music and language are different expressions of similar conditions (the formalism espoused by T. S. Eliot) or isomorphic systems that can be grasped through some especially sufficient metadiscourse (the structuralism exemplified by Claude Lévi-Strauss), this study of jazzography suggests that debates over referentiality can be displaced by a model of textual production that imagines language and music as the play of several tropes (grammatology). The reason for this shift of theoretical ori-

entation is not metaphysical—"to get things right this time"—but pragmatic. Although I am not afraid of "getting things right," generating what we might call "truth effects" (the flip side of "understanding effects"), my goal here is less to explain than to stage a demonstration of applied grammatology oriented toward the pleasures of theory. I want to show readers how to turn (or trope) an art form into a paradigm for creative invention. Jazz as it is represented by jazzography will serve as a test case. My goals, therefore, are pedagogical. My interests are far more personal. I want to write about jazzography because I love jazz and think that it has much to offer critical theory.

Thriving on a Riff

Outside of institutional sites—schools, churches, courts, and the media—where "trained" exegetes make sense of things for us, we are seldom bothered by hermeneutical anxiety. Even if we believe otherwise, we tend to behave as if things simply mean what they mean (which, in effect, means that we have just internalized what "trained" exegetes have taught us). That's why my elaborate explication of an oft-repeated anecdote about Louis Armstrong might strike many as, at best, parodic (scholarship become academic camp), or at worst, pedantic (scholarship become academic kitsch). First, the labor of exposition imbues the story with value: treats it as a means of teasing out a whole world of ideologically assigned suppositions. Exposition exposes assumptions about what does and does not merit attention ("*It isn't a line by Pope or Keats! It's Louis Armstrong talking, for crying out loud, not Schoenberg!*"). And second, exposition violates a widely held but tacit interdiction that forbids speculation. It undercuts the assurance that things are exactly what they seem to be, and it thus opposes any notion of a "correct" or "definitive" interpretation ("*Pops—Mr. Louis Armstrong to you—meant just what he said! Asking what he could have meant is crazy, almost as wrongheaded as somebody asking what jazz means*"). "The meanings I find in a sign," writes semiotician John Fiske, "derive from the ideology within which the sign and I exist: by finding these meanings I define myself in relation to the ideology and in relation to my society" (151). Or as Fredric Jameson puts it:

we never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself. Rather, texts come before us as

always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or—if the text is brand-new—through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions. (9)

I picture jazz as the musical dissemination of four monster metaphors: *satura*, *obligato*, *rhapsody*, and *charivari*. They are the images that organize jazzography, allowing us to recognize jazz as music (and as a music with particular meanings). As readers have already seen, I call monster metaphors “tropes,” but they also go by other names. Robert Ray calls them “constitutive words” (1988:163). The Situationists favored “grammologues” and “magical floating words” (Hugo Ball, in Marcus, 221). Roland Barthes assigned them the term “symbolic codes.” He understood these words as the linguistic equivalent of radioactive isotopes: codes that bundle together contradictory connotations. Early in his career, Barthes emphasized the cultural labor directed toward governing the connotations of such codes. This governance, he theorized, constructs ideology. Explication is, therefore, always potentially threatening to power structures because, by exposing the polysemy or plurality that underlies culturally manufactured codes, it reveals that

denotation [truth, objectivity, the law] is not the first meaning, but pretends to be so; under this illusion, it is ultimately no more than the *last* of the connotations (the one which seems both to establish and to close the reading), the superior myth by which the text pretends to return to the nature of language, to language as nature. (1974:9)

In subordinating denotation to connotation, in reintroducing meanings that were banished for the sake of insuring univocality (banished ineffectually, because plurality cannot be sent “outside” ideology), Barthes effectively transformed the goal of literary criticism and theory. He substituted a model of textual production for the classic model of representation (4–7). Or let me put it this way. Barthes, who as far as I know cared nothing for jazz, redefined the scholar’s role as remarkably like that of the jazz musician. Toward the end of his life, he didn’t interpret texts so much as bootstrap off them: employing “primary” works to create texts of his own.

Barthes first made a name for himself when he forsook “the path of the object,” which studies the “objective” structures of

texts, for "the path of the subject," which foregrounds the interpretive categories or codes through which we read and receive texts (Jameson, 9). In the middle of his career, however, Barthes seemed weary or suspicious of this latter path. Its goal turned out to be completely consistent with the overarching goal of traditional humanistic pedagogy: increase ideological sensitivity by spreading (disseminating and popularizing) myths of demythification. "[D]enunciation, demystification (or demythification)," Barthes wrote, "has itself become discourse, stock of phrases, catechistic declaration" (1977b:166). The challenge, therefore, wasn't how to deconstruct culturally manufactured codes (that's done by laying bare the rhetorical-philosophical means by which institutions exclude connotations in order to achieve closure and hegemony). No, the challenge is to employ deconstruction as but a necessary step on the way to constructing new myths. At the end of his career, the time of *Roland Barthes* (1977) and *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1978), Barthes was writing texts that, while not abandoning demystification as a vital pedagogical effect, experimented with the possibilities of employing the suppressed connotations of culturally endorsed codes as paradigms for new modes of composition.

This is what draws Barthes and Jacques Derrida together. In addition to formulating a history of writing ("logocentrism") and a theory of writing ("grammatology"), they consistently pushed toward application: the development of alternatives to mimesis, hermeneutics, and critique. Most scholars interested in Barthes, Derrida, and other postmodern textualists have elucidated their historical-philosophical agenda. Gregory Ulmer has focused on and developed their compositional program. He calls it *heuretics* and identifies it with the avant-garde's use of theory as a "generative" device (Ulmer, 1991:3). For example, risking oversimplification for the sake of clarification, we might notice that Sophocles told a story about Oedipus (he produced a mimetic or realistic effect). Freud interpreted this story (he produced a hermeneutic or truth effect). Feminism critiqued it (producing a political or ideological effect). And surrealist André Breton—extrapolating from Freud's theories—used it to make poetry (he produced a heuritic or inventive effect). If contemporary scholarship wishes to renew itself, loosen the burden of interpretation and critique, Ulmer suggests that it might reverse the direction of conventional scholarship: assume a position of ignorance (play student instead of teacher) and apply art strategies, such as Breton's, to the writing of theory. My

work heeds this suggestion. It starts with the observation that Breton and other surrealists heard jazz as an artistic validation of the generative potential of psychoanalytic insights. Jazz was psychoanalysis by other means. It had already accomplished in music what the surrealists wanted to do in other mediums. My aims are similar to theirs. Without forsaking representation, explanation, and critique as rhetorical effects, I want to use the four tropes of jazz as a way to bootstrap theory, to learn heuristics from jazz.

Composting

Bedouin Hornbook, Nathaniel Mackey's epistolary novel, suggests an entry point for such a project. In one of its scenes the protagonist—known simply as N.—wakes from a dream and writes to his correspondent, the Angel of Dust:

I awoke to the even more radical realization that it's not enough that a composer skillfully cover his tracks, that he erase the echo of "imposition" composition can't help but be haunted by. In a certain sense, I realized, to do so only makes matters worse. The question I was left with, of course, was: What can one do to outmaneuver the inertia both of what one knows and of what one feels or presumes to feel? There must be some way, I'm convinced, to invest in the ever so slight suggestion of "compost" I continue to get from the word compose. (1986:78–79)

N. is a founding member of a musical collective known as the Mystic Horn Society, an aggregation redolent of the Sun Ra Arkestra and the Art Ensemble of Chicago. His aesthetic, like the music of another one of this novel's characters, manifests a "somewhat French-inflected sense of African drumming" (144). His insight—that one might invest in the barely motivated relationship connecting "compost" and "compose"—results from a conjunction of jazz and critical theory. It amounts to a central clue in solving the grammatological problem: How to divert interpretation (rereading) into invention (aberrant readings)?

Although N. writes that he hasn't quite figured out how to realize his insight, he also declares that he's actively working toward a solution. He's spending a lot of time listening to *Coltrane Live at the Village Vanguard Again!* and he admits that he has probably assumed the goal John Coltrane stated in the album's liner

notes. N., like the famous tenor saxophonist, is "trying to work out a kind of writing that will allow for more plasticity, more viability, more room for improvisation in the statement of the melody itself" (79). What N. hears in Coltrane's improvisations is the sound of songs composting. Or rather, he smells shit. Composters, both those who play music and those who write theory, *maneuver* their basic materials into a kind of textual heap from which other texts can grow (manure is, by the way, etymologically linked to the Old French *manoeuvre*, to work with the hands, cultivate). "Hence *decomposition* is here contrary to *destruction*" (Barthes, 1977a:63). Decomposters are saprophytes; they regenerate by feeding "off the decay of tradition" (Ulmer, 1983:106).

Composting, like deconstruction, is the discourse equivalent of reversing the direction of sublation (the lifting up of the "sensible" into the conceptual). For example, when N. detects the ever-so-slight whiff of "compost" in the word "compose," he has, in fact, begun the work of returning composition, a master trope of Western thought, to the bodily image (or *alloseme*) from which the concept (or *philosopheme*) grew. What distinguishes composting from deconstructing, then, is mainly a matter of connotation. Composting is a way to picture in one word both aspects of *grammatology*. Put specifically, I compost jazzography into its tropes, first, for exegetical reasons. They provide tools for explaining or *writing about jazz* (tropes used pedagogically, as a means to create effects of demystification, correspond most directly to popular conceptions of deconstruction). But composting can also support research. The tropes of jazz provide tools for invention, for *writing with jazz* (tropes used heuristically, as a means to create new myths for problem solving, draw attention to a neglected side of *grammatology*) (Ray, 1988:163). As pedagogical tools, jazz tropes teach us a lesson about the discourse of jazz; as heuristical tools, these tropes suggest methods for writing creative theory.

For the Record

The following four chapters are similarly structured. All except chapter 1 have six sections. They start with an extended definition, introducing a trope that structures jazz. Then, they provide a list of recordings, a ninety-minute soundtrack for illustrating or, better, for potentially making audible and material the jazz trope under discussion. The third section of all chapters is devoted to exposition; tropes are employed as ways to open up the discourse of