

**For Cecil Taylor: A Research-Creation and Paracritical Approach to
Analyzing Free Music**

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Statement of Contribution

All articles and writing in this dissertation are the sole authorship of the Principal Investigator.

Advisor and Supervisor contributions include editing, revision suggestions, and methodological advice.

Abstract

This creative dissertation offers a new method for analyzing Free Music (sometimes referred to as Free Jazz, Free Improvisation and Creative Music). With the musician-poet-dancer Cecil Taylor as a case study, the analysis uses a hypothetical double bass audition for Taylor's ensemble (The Unit) to discover what traits Taylor would have desired in a bassist to more fully understand his musical aesthetic. The dissertation is comprised of six chapters. The first outlines the theoretical framework of the dissertation used to explore Taylor's music: feminist research-creation and paracritical writing (Mackey 2018). The second chapter situates the dissertation within Cecil Taylor studies. Chapters three and four are the analyses of Taylor's music itself, and the fifth contains the author's poems followed by an open-ended conclusion. Chapter three begins the analysis with an explanation of how Taylor's method of making music (Unit Structures) functions. This chapter also includes audio examples demonstrating the author's interpretation of approaches to Taylor's music on the double bass. Chapter four, "Letters to Cecil," consists of hypothetical letters written to Taylor that are inspired by poet-scholar Nathaniel Mackey's letter format from his *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*. These letters serve as the theoretical gloss that pairs with the author's musical tracks, and together comprise the audition for Taylor's unit. They also serve as a speculative approach to understanding both the poetics and aesthetics of his music: Percussive School of Double Bass, Bowing as Breath, Duende, Being Astral in and all Registers, and Dancing. The dissertation ends with the author's own poems titled "For Cecil Taylor: Before and Around Midnight" that are inspired by Taylor and Mackey's poetry. The letters, therefore, explore major themes the author has found in Taylor's music as derived from close engagement with Taylor's music and poetry.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

In this dissertation, I apply Joe Morris's model of interpretation, synthesis, and invention to my own practice as a free music musician who plays double bass. Using Cecil Taylor's Unit Structures methodology (a term Morris uses to describe Taylor's methodology of improvising, which is named after his 1966 album titled *Unit Structures*), I demonstrate my interpretation of Taylor's music, synthesizing it with my musical practice, to thicken current understandings of Cecil Taylor's music and further free music in general.¹ Free Music is a term used to describe an approach to an open-ended form of musical creation. Morris describes Free Music as an ontology comprised of differing and sometimes conflicting approaches to improvisation. This shift in thinking rectifies any confusion surrounding alternative labels such as free jazz, free improvisation, creative music etc., all which are related although sometimes are used as naming practices to distance one's practice from that of another.² Furthermore, this conception of free music allows for practices that use written material as well as practices that only use free improvisation (improvisation with no set rules or previously decided on material) in the same context. Morris articulates that all free music musicians engage in a process of Interpretation, Synthesis, and Invention: "All Free Music is some version of, or combination of, these three

¹ Thick description is an approach to analyzing aspects of cultural actions and/or products explored in Geertz's chapter "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973) 3-30. Such a description aims to bring more nuance and layers to cultural analysis rather than take ethnographic data as mere fact, which can lead to reductive, ethnocentric conclusions. Today, scholars Donna Haraway often use the term to describe a nuanced understanding of a topic from an insider's perspective.

² Joe Morris. *Perpetual Frontier: The Properties of Free Music*. Riti Publishing, 2012.

actions. There is no obligation to attempt to abide by any one in particular.”³ The musician interprets an already established free music methodology, synthesises it with another methodology, and through this synthesis invents a new methodology, or a new way of playing an existent methodology. For Morris, this process of interpretation, synthesis, and invention marks Free Music as a perpetual frontier wherein there is a never-ending number of ways to create new forms of free music.⁴

Taylor was a complex figure who, in addition to composing at and playing the piano wrote and delivered poetry and often used dance in his performances.⁵ Taylor’s musical system is vast and, as this dissertation demonstrates, requires addressing his words (both what he said in interviews and his poetry) to interpret *Unit Structures*. Indeed, his 1966 album *Unit Structures* is accompanied by a poem (in the form of liner notes) entitled “Sound Structure of Subculture Becoming Major Breath/Naked Fire Gesture” which details aspects of his musical methodology and aesthetics. My interpretation of *Unit Structures* in this dissertation examines the poetics of Taylor’s music in part through his poetry. This dissertation is, therefore, a work of research-creation wherein I demonstrate my interpretation of Taylor’s music and create music in the form of an audition tape for his ensemble as well as through hypothetical letters.⁶ Through research-creation, this dissertation thus contributes new knowledge to music history, experimental musics, free music, and jazz studies.

³ Morris, *Perpetual Frontier*, 39.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Cecil Taylor (1929-2018) For detailed biography, see *Four Lives in the Bebop Business* A.B. Spellman, Fourth Limelight Edition: 1994 and *In the Brewing Luminous: The Life and Music of Cecil Taylor* Philip Freeman Wolke Verlag 2024.

⁶ Research-Creation is defined by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council as “an approach to research that combines creative and academic research practices and supports the development of knowledge and innovation through artistic expression, scholarly investigation, and experimentation.” “SSHRC Terminology” <https://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/programs-programmes/definitions-eng.aspx>

Background

I have spent my life improvising. As a young child and throughout my adolescence, I was involved in a theatre program with a heavy emphasis on improvisation. I spent a brief period in my early teens being paid to improvise as a European style clown. As a result, when I first began playing the double bass, improvisation was something that I immediately began to do. My early experiments with improvising were what might be referred to as free improvisation. I would pick up my double bass and improvise music based on what would occur to me in the moment. At the time, I did not know that there was a music that some refer to as free improvisation; I was just generally curious about experimenting in this way and was something I enjoyed doing.

I was originally trained in what might be called the western art tradition. My listening habits tended towards 20th-century music, so from as early as my secondary school education, I was listening to composers such as John Cage, Krzysztof Penderecki, Olivier Messiaen, etc. The so-called extended techniques and scale systems used by these composers were especially interesting to me, and I would often incorporate them into my playing. In late high school, I joined the school's jazz band, and, to keep up with the more experienced players, I spent the summer listening to a list of albums that I must have found on the internet. The two albums that really spoke to me were Charles Mingus's 1959 *Mingus Ah Um* and John Coltrane 1965 *A Love Supreme*. At the time, I did not know about the association of these albums with what is called free jazz.⁷

⁷ Free Jazz is a contested term (named after Ornette Coleman's 1961 album *Free Jazz*) to describe "jazz" that did away with some of the expected performance practices of jazz playing such as using standard song structures. In Ekkehard Jost's study on Free Jazz, *Free Jazz* (Vienna: Da Capo Press, 1974) he links Coltrane and Mingus's music to the development of free jazz.

Coltrane's *Love Supreme* had a major effect on me, something akin to a spiritual awakening. I listened to it obsessively, and I made it a goal to make music in that vein for my life career. Although my undergraduate degree was in orchestral performance, I continued to experiment with improvisation and listened to Trane's playing (and soon Dolphy and others) and tried to incorporate into my own practice what I was hearing in theirs. I attended the Longy School of Music (Cambridge Massachusetts) for my Masters in Music with the explicit aim to fuse my passion for 20th-century music, so-called free jazz, and composition. I was fortunate enough to audit many classes in what was then called "Modern American Music Program" in which I was able to play in multiple "jazz" combos. This experience allowed for learning how to play over changes, accent 2 and 4 etc. At the end of my time in Cambridge MA, I discovered the music of William Parker, specifically his duo records with Hamid Drake. Those albums catalyzed an even deeper desire to discover new ways of playing music. During my PhD, I made the conscious decision to focus my artistic energies explicitly on free music.

My first step was listening to more free music and discovering what free music is. I had heard the term free improvisation and free jazz, but reading Morris's above-mentioned book gave me a framework to understand that free improvisation and free jazz need not be considered different musical genres but rather represent a history of differing methodologies for producing related musics. Morris's book and music have been and still are constant companions throughout my doctoral work and emergent free-music practice. Reading his book also jumpstarted my passion for Cecil Taylor's music.

I had listened to Taylor's music before, but reading Morris ignited this passion in a different way. Morris uses Taylor's Unit Structure as the first of the four seminal methodologies included in his book. I was following along with the book as a pedagogical tool, so my first step

in developing my practice was to set about understanding Unit Structures.⁸ Once I began to study Unit Structures, I became obsessed with Taylor's music which led to an engagement with his poetry and his aesthetic. Throughout my PhD experience, it became clearer and clearer that I wanted my dissertation to have an explicit focus on his music and poetry.

As I discuss in my third chapter, "Letters to Cecil", I realized early on in my dissertation process that I needed to change my approach to my instrument to develop into a free music player. The first major changes were to my right-hand approach to the instrument. As a western art trained performer my right-hand pizzicato was vastly underdeveloped for free music.⁹ I am still developing my pizzicato but have devoted a considerable amount of time trying to increase my fluency with pizzicato. One adaption I have made to my playing is to work on the percussiveness of my pizzicato playing which I term the "percussive school of bass playing" in my letter to Cecil Chapter. The percussive school of bass can be understood as an approach to pizzicato that uses short articulation and creates an insistent energy in the music. I have also changed my approach to bowing (adopting a new bow called a kobo bow) adopting a "bowing as breath" which in my letters to Cecil chapter I link to a change in rhythmic approach to the instrument. Bowing as breath is an approach to bowing inspired by Taylor and the poet Charles Olson where the length of phrases is dictated by the length of notes in a given bow stroke, allowing for each phrase to be a differing length. Further, I have begun to look at the different registers on the instrument through Taylor's lens of the Abyss (lowest register of an instrument), and Astral registers (the highest register on an instrument). I have also drawn on *duende*, an aesthetic that I hear in Taylor's music that I first encountered in Nathaniel Mackey's work.

⁸ The other three methodologies include Ornette Coleman's Harmolodic theory, Anthony Braxton's Tri-Axium Theory, and European Free Improvisation. None of these methodologies are discussed in this dissertation.

⁹ Western art music generally makes higher demands on bowing for double bassists and as a result right-hand pizzicato technique can often be neglected.

Duende is an aesthetic derived from Cante Jondo, wherein in the singer demonstrates struggle over refined technique in their voice.¹⁰ These changes to my playing are documented and further explicated in my letters to Cecil and demonstrated in the audition tape linked to the letters.

Writing about Taylor's music is no easy task, and I was not sure how best to address his music in the space of a dissertation. Two specific influences informed my approach for this dissertation and helped me find my entry point to the work. When Fred Moten writes: "And so I have been preparing myself to play with Cecil Taylor, to hear what is transmitted on frequencies outside and beneath the ranges of reading,"¹¹ he made me realize that I too had also been preparing myself to play with Cecil Taylor. The second influence was reading Nathaniel Mackey's ongoing prose work *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*.¹² This work is a poetic epistolary novel following a musician named N. and his band. Mackey writes the book from the perspective of N. by sending letters to someone named The Angle of Dust. The letters muse on music and poetry and there is a deep engagement with many kinds of music, and Taylor's name even pops up throughout. Moten's invocation of preparation is related but different to my approach. I am interpreting preparing to play with Cecil Taylor literally as an invitation of sorts to attempt to join his ensemble. Specifically, I realized that if I paired Moten's assertion of preparation and Mackey's letters as a literary form that carries knowledge, auditioning for Taylor's band (which I had been preparing for) could be a generative entry point for the dissertation. I thus conceived of an audition tape which would demonstrate my audition

¹⁰ My understanding of Duende comes primarily from "Cante Moro" from Nathaniel Mackey's *Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews*. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018).

¹¹ Fred Moten *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2003), 41.

¹² New York: New Directions 1986-2017. It should also be noted that I have also been influenced by the creative-academic letter format used in Nicole Mitchell Grantt's work *The Mandorla Letters: for the hopeful* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022).

preparation (showing my fluency in Taylor’s music and free music in general) with accompanying letters to Taylor outlining each track, which would demonstrate my interpretation of Unit Structures and my synthesis of Taylor’s music into my own playing. Such an approach generates new knowledge by deriving my analysis of Taylor’s music from my own perspective as a performer who wishes to enter Taylor’s ensemble. As a result, my work is, necessarily following feminist thinker Donna Haraway, situated and speculative.¹³

Need for this approach

In *Jazz as Critique: Adorno and Black Expression Revisited*, Fumi Okiji challenges scholars to approach jazz and black music through an empathetic lens.¹⁴ An empathetic lens is necessary because of the way “the boundaries separating music and discourse are routinely trespassed in black expression”.¹⁵ This empathetic lens is achieved by developing a closeness to the music (through a thorough engagement of listening and immersion) that stops writers from trespassing the boundary that separates music from discourse. For Okiji, following the philosopher Andrew Bowie, the fact that music can never be fully understood in a definitive, discursive way is a point of opportunity for fruitful philosophical intrigue. Okiji highlights a quotation by Moten who states: “even though music is not constrained by meaning, no one would ever say that music doesn’t bear content or that music doesn’t have something to say.”¹⁶ Okiji goes on to say “The relegation of designative necessity without giving up the right to ‘say

¹³ Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

¹⁴ *Jazz as Critique: Adorno and Black Expression Revisited*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 83.

¹⁵ Okiji, *Jazz as Critique*, 83.

¹⁶ Ibid.

something' may be the reason that some of the most perceptive writing on jazz has come from black literature".¹⁷ Further, "writers are able to meet jazz partway. Their musicality puts them in an empathetic position from which to approach the music."¹⁸ Writers are thus able to respond to the music in such a way that for Okiji eludes most scholarly discourse. She uses the example of Nathaniel Mackey's character N. musing on Al Green's falsetto in *Bedouin Hornbook* to illuminate this point. Mackey's style of analysis (in the form of fictional prose) is fecund with possibilities, and Okiji offers that if she were to continue that style of analysis she might attend to "the wetness of Albert Ayler's warble".¹⁹ Such a move:

sketches an approach [to musical analysis] where the focus is not on individual solos, or performances or musicians, but has in sight from the start a network of associations that often takes minutia, and what are usually regarded as secondary musical components, as points of departure. The extramusical and musical material that occupy more conventional analyses mingle and, indeed, slide into one another. The challenge for the analyst attracted to the possibilities of this approach is in learning to listen and in finding ways to circumvent the tendency to apply extramural and reified categories and expectations. One would need to immerse oneself in the depth and breadth of the tradition in order to become attuned to how these contributions gather and hang.²⁰

This approach opens the door for a writerly approach to analysis which does not aim to solve the music but rather sits with it. For me it echoes the notion of a partial perspective or situated

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid. 84.

²⁰ Ibid.

knowledges articulated by feminist theorist Donna Haraway.²¹ For Haraway, a partial perspective resists the “God’s trick” (the paradoxical position of seeing everything from nowhere) of top-down analysis that she associates with a specific reductive patriarchal gaze and scholarly practice. Okiji warns and demonstrates that: “To speak of this music is to speak for it, and that really means to speak as part of it, not to identify with it necessarily but to join its ensemble. Perhaps the only preparation required is to reach beyond the unease of presuming oneself part of its “anagrammatic” experiments.”²² Thus I have decided to join the ensemble of this music by trying to audition for Taylor’s ensemble. My letters, therefore, function as a literary, critical, and creative approach to analyzing Taylor’s music as a response to Okiji’s call for a more empathetic approach to musical analysis, one that adopts a partial writerly approach to the music.

If Okiji is correct, that writers are often able to meet music halfway, then the other half of the puzzle could be understood from the musicians themselves. This dissertation thus moves between a writerly approach and an approach derived from my own experience as a practicing musician. The dissertation, therefore, performs both, wherein the letters I write creatively serve as part of the empathetic scholarly practice outlined by Okiji while also situating and deriving my analysis from my embodied experience of performing the music.

I have been especially inspired by Natalie Loveless’s understanding of Research-Creation, which resists the neo-liberal (or simply liberal) understanding of research-creation, an inclusionary policy that grants artists a seat at the scholarly table. Instead, Loveless situates

²¹ Donna Haraway’s “Situated Knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective” (*Feminist Studies* Vol. 18, No. 3, 1988).

²² Fumi Okiji, *Billie’s Bent Elbow: Exorbitance, Intimacy and a Nonsensuous Standard*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2025), 86.

Research-Creation as a socially-engaged practice that articulates a feminist politics of resistant academic languages that ruptures or troubles disciplined, or disciplinary knowledge-making systems (i.e. academic research).²³ Loveless argues that through a research-creation lens “artistic production is no longer solely an *object* of scholarly inquiry but is itself legitimate *form of research and dissemination*” (Loveless’s emphasis).²⁴ Further, she reminds us that “As feminist, antiracist, and decolonial theorists have long taught us, pedagogical ideologies—regimes of truth—configure the parameters of legitimate research questions as well as what counts as rigor or excellence.”²⁵ I would argue further that these regimes of truth also govern the ways we define research-creation outputs as well as research questions. If “regimes of truth” delineate what is legitimate or not, then one way of combating these regimes is to avoid firm definitions. This realization troubles the idea of defining research-creation as well as delineating categories and methods of performing research creation. Such an approach is in line with feminist, decolonial, anti-racist thinkers, who mobilize refusals, opacity, fluidity and fugitivity to combat oppressive regimes, in this case “regimes of truth”. As a result, I choose to avoid defining research-creation as a fixed model or method of research or academic output. My research-creation contribution is thus broader than simply conversations around research-creation in music studies as it both it exceeds discussions around music studies and because it resists categorization.

The rupturing potential of research-creation is what I wish to mobilize in this dissertation. By focussing on the audition I do my best to align myself with Taylor’s (and others) “exaltation of process” as noted by Nathaniel Mackey.²⁶ This move dodges what Amiri Baraka sees as a

²³ Loveless, Natalie *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

²⁴ Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World*, 13.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Nathaniel Mackey, notes “The most obvious of the “persistent similarities” among, say Olson’s or Baraka’s poetry, the painting of Jackson Pollock, and the music of Coleman or Taylor is their exaltation of process.” *Discrepant*

problem of “The academic western mind” who only cares about artifacts (and analysis derived solely on artifacts.²⁷ Loveless suggests that Research-Creation can be “one of those cracks (to paraphrase Leonard Cohen) that lets the light shine in through its experimental and dissonant forms of practice, research, and pedagogy.²⁸ My approach exists in the crack but also makes *creaks*, to follow Mackey, because it extends an approach to musical analysis (and maybe academic work in general) that is discrepant. That is to say, following Mackey, “It is my hope that in addition to making sense it makes noise.”²⁹

Sarah E. Truman’s book *Feminist Speculations and The Practice of Research-Creation: Writing Pedagogies and Intertextual Affects* first hippped me to the hyphen in research-creation.³⁰ I see the hyphen as not just the link but the space between research and creation from which this dissertation is written. Specifically, my writing in this dissertation was written with the intention of existing in the hyphen. I take the hyphen to be the hinge in a, borrowing from Nathaniel Mackey (yet again), paracritical approach to Cecil Taylor’s music. Mackey states:

It wants to be what I call a paracritical hinge, permitting flow between statement and metastatement, analysis and expressivity, criticism and performance, music and literature, and so forth. It traffics in a mix—a discrepant, collaborative mix—of idioms, genres, registers, dispositions. *Paracritical* is meant, of course, to echo and to be analogous to such terms as *paramedical* and *paralegal*, its prefix indicating an auxiliary, accessory

Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 32. The link between Olson’s projective verse and Taylor’s poetry/music is articulated in this section of Mackey’s work which I unpack in the Letters to Cecil chapter.

²⁷ Mackey, *Discrepant Engagement*, 32. It should be noted that Mackey goes on to give the example of Baraka’s “History as Process” as a poem that reflects these views and that this poem references cante jondo. Cante jondo which if sung properly should have duende a theme that is prominent in my Letters to Cecil Chapter.

²⁸ Loveless *How to Make Art at the End of the World*, 8.

²⁹ Mackey, 21.

³⁰ *Feminist Speculations and The Practice of Research-Creation: Writing Pedagogies and Intertextual Affects* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

relationship to criticism, a near equation with or a close resemblance to criticism.

Merriam-Webster's Eleventh Collegiate Dictionary defines a hinge as “a jointed or flexible device on which a door, lid, or other swinging part turns”. I’d like to suggest a translative project or prospect in a quality so often attributed to the music, the quality—the verb, not the noun—known as swing. *Hinge’s* work as verb highlights contingency, haunted by tenuousness and risk, an intransitive creaking well worth bearing in mind. The coinage wants to suggest that improvisation, the pursuit of new expressivity, whether musical or literary, is an operation best characterized by the prefix *para-*, an activity supplemental to more firmly established disciplines and dispositions, an activity that hinges on a near but divergent identity with given disciplines and dispositions.³¹

This lengthy quotation is how I want to situate my dissertation—a writing with Cecil Taylor that exists with and beside his music. The “para” portion of the critical analysis situates my writing (and my music) as alongside, or tied to, Taylor’s music but also as linked to my analysis.

In “-Aquoeh R-Oyo”, Taylor writes “Improvisation is a tool of refinement an attempt to capture ‘dark’ instinct cultivation of the acculturated to learn one’s nature in response to the group (society) first hearing ‘beat’ as it exists in each living organism.” This definition of improvisation links (or hinges) with the above notion of improvisation that always needs the prefix *para-*. Taylor is suggesting that one learns one’s nature by subsuming to the group or as scholar-artist Helen Abbot might say submit to the temptation to dissolve into the group.³² I am moved by the way this understanding resists a notion of individuation that is often necessary for

³¹ Nathaniel Mackey, “Paracrritical Hinge” in *Paracrritical Hinge: Essay, Talks, Notes, Interviews*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018) 211-212.

³² Helen Abbot. “Acoustemology and Non-Monogamy in *Spy in the House of Love* by Anaïs Nin.” *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture*, forthcoming 2026. I am drawing on Abbot’s description of Caillois’ notion of the subject as being structured around a temptation to dissolve.

the categories of research subjects and objects. Specifically, if we understand ourselves (Taylor sees improvisation as self-analysis) by submitting to the group then we can also understand others by submitting to the group. As such, my dissertation offers or suggests a new approach to analysis derived from entering an ensemble (submitting to the group or learning one's nature in response to the group) rather than focussing on a top down approach. My dissertation then proposes an understanding of Cecil Taylor by attempting to join his ensemble to understand him without presuming to be let in. It is written with him (and a whole host of others) that exists *para* to his music. It understands that the music of Taylor is not simply his music but also the music of everyone who contributed to his music and thus is an ensemblage as much as musical assemblage.³³ It attempts to join his music by way of audition and by way of paracritical writing inspired by Nathaniel Mackey and Nicole Mitchell Grantt.

Outline of dissertation

My dissertation comprises of 6 chapters. Chapter 1 is the introduction to the thesis. Chapter 2 is the literature review which situates my thesis in Cecil Taylor studies. The subsequent chapters are focussed on my engagement with Taylor's music.

Chapter 3, titled "Unit Structures," pertains to Joe Morris's interpretation of Taylor's music. In this chapter, I break down Morris's terminology derived from his own experience as a musician and teacher of this music. I believe Morris's terminology is helpful in understanding and playing Taylor's music. I apply Morris's understanding of Unit Structures and then discuss how I have come to perform the basics of Unit Structures.

³³ Ensemblage is a term I am coining to conjoin ensemble and assemblage to refer to the shared and distributed nature of musicking amongst a band of players.

Chapter 4, titled “Letters to Cecil,” contains my letters to Taylor with attached recordings embedded in the footnotes through YouTube links. This chapter uses the form of letters (a nod to Nicole Mitchell Grant and Nathaniel Mackey’s work) to detail my developing approach to his music. My letters to Taylor highlight a variety of aesthetic and poetic approaches to playing his music. These are not exhaustive and demonstrate aspects of his music that I have incorporated into my playing that he might hopefully find appealing for my audition. They serve as primers for the audition tape. In the letters I discuss what I term the **Percussive School of Bass playing** which I derive from Vijay Iyer’s concept of **Percussive School of Piano**, in which he lists Taylor among the group of pianists.³⁴ I write about the notion of **Bowing as Breath** which I link to Amiri Baraka’s “Three ways to play the saxophone” and ultimately Charles Olson’s notion of projective verse.³⁵ The theme of **Duende** is also included, following Nathaniel Mackey’s article “Cante Moro” and his writings in his fiction, which I tie to Taylor’s notion of the **Abyss** register of the piano.³⁶ I discuss Taylor’s notion of being **Astral** in and all registers and link that to Anthony Braxton’s language music of multiphonics.³⁷ I finish with a letter and track dedicated to Taylor’s love musicians who dance at their instrument.³⁸

Chapter 5 titled “For Cecil Taylor: Before and around Midnight” are a series of poems written based on my research. Throughout the dissertation writing process I have had to grapple

³⁴Vijay Iyer “Harlem Speaks Oral History: Vijay Iyer” at the National Jazz Museum in Harlem, 2004.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWexiifFOJ0>

³⁵ Baraka, Amiri “Three Ways to Play the Saxophone” *Black Music* (Brooklyn Akashic books, 2010), 37-43. Charles Olson, “Projective Verse” in *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960* edited by Donald Allen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999 [1960]), 386-396.

³⁶ Mackey, Nathaniel. “Cante Moro” in *Paracritical Hinge*, 181-198. Grundy, David. “Cecil Taylor’s Voodoo Poetics”. *Points of Departure* (Issue 70, 2020).

<https://www.pointofdeparture.org/PoD70/PoD70Taylor.html#:~:text=stepped.%20This%20%20historic%20dialectic,cl aim%20to%20universal%20knowledge%2C%20Voodoo>

³⁷ “Cecil Taylor: African Code, Black Methodology” interview by J.B. Figi, (*Downbeat*, April 10th, 1975). Anthony Braxton, *Composition Notes Volume A-E*, and *Tri-Axium Writings* (Red hook: Frog Peak Music 2024).

³⁸ Spellman *Four Lives in the Bebop Business*, 42.

with poetry to understand Taylor's poetry which explicates some of his music. These poems are artifacts from this research and are inspired by Cecil Taylor, Nathaniel Mackey, and a host of other authors I have read to prepare myself to play with Cecil Taylor. They mirror loosely the audition tracks and letters contained in Chapter 4.

Chapter 6 titled "An after-the-fact rumination on a dissertation or on making dissertations creak" offers a short conclusion to this dissertation. This conclusion is necessarily open-ended reflecting the position I have been writing from in this dissertation. The invocation of creaking meant to be a nod to Mackey and leaves the door open for future conversations and work.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Cecil Taylor was a prominent artistic figure in the past century. In addition to his musical significance, he has been studied for his poetry, his thinking (which has been taken up by some critical theorists), and spirituality.³⁹ This literature review will briefly mention scholarly discussions surrounding, Taylor's historical significance, philosophical significance, his poetry, and the important journalistic works written about him. My dissertation focuses on Taylor's music and as a result this literature review will be primarily centered on musical analysis of Taylor's music.

Historical

Cecil Taylor is often discussed in relation to the creation of supposed "free jazz", a sub-genre of jazz that emerged in the late 1950s that broke from traditional song form performance practice and often did away with expected harmonic and rhythmic expectations of the music. Taylor is mentioned as one of the creators because of his early involvement with this movement. Free jazz gets its name from Ornette Coleman's album *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation* which was released in 1961, five years after Taylor's first album *Jazz Advance* which can also be understood as a first step towards the "New Thing".⁴⁰

³⁹ For spirituality and Taylor's music see Jason C. Bivans *Spirits Rejoice! Jazz and American Religion*. Oxford University press 2015. Also, David Grundy's "Cecil Taylor's Voodoo Poetics".

⁴⁰ What is often referred to as Free Jazz was originally called the New Thing, other artists have called it Creative Music, Free Music, Free Improvisation etc.

This is Our Music: Free Jazz the Sixties and American Culture by Iain Anderson is a sociological and historical analysis of 1960s “free jazz” and Taylor is a prominent figure in the book.⁴¹ *Free Jazz* by Jeff Schwartz takes a different approach to the history of the music by focussing on grouping artists by different aesthetic areas of Free Jazz.⁴² Specifically, he lists Taylor as part of the Energy players and also the Experimentation aesthetics in his book. Taylor is also discussed in Cisco Bradley’s biography of the important bassist William Parker, who played in many of Taylor’s ensembles.⁴³

Taylor was part of the short-lived Jazz Composer’s Guild, a union that tried to make demands for more equitable playing opportunities. Scholar Benjamin Piekut has extensively detailed the rise and fall of the Jazz Composer’s Guild in articles and in his book. Taylor features prominently and his race and sexual orientation figure into each analysis.⁴⁴

Much of the musicological scholarship surrounding Taylor is often framed around discussions of the limits of jazz and the transitional nature of the 60s and 70s over the meaning of jazz. How jazz is defined has been a large academic discussion wherein subgenres such as fusion or free jazz have often pushed the so-called limits of what can be considered jazz. Taylor eventually removed standards and “traditional” forms from his repertoire but maintained that his music was derived from African American music traditions.⁴⁵ The above examples attest to these discussions as does articles such as Benjamin Givan’s “The Fools Don’t Think I Play Jazz” about

⁴¹Iain Anderson, *This is Our Music: Free Jazz the Sixties and American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

⁴² Jeff Schwartz. *Free Jazz*. (Albany: University of New York State Press, 2022).

⁴³ Bradley, Cisco. *Universal Tonality: The Life and Music of William Parker*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022.

⁴⁴ Benjamin Piekut. “Race, Community, and Conflict in the Jazz Composers Guild”. (*Jazz Perspectives* Vol 3, No. 3., 2009). “New Thing? Gender and Sexuality in the Jazz Composers Guild”. (*American Quarterly*, Vol 62., No. 1, 2010). *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

⁴⁵ Taylor moved back and forth between defining his music as jazz and often questioned (like other musicians) whether jazz was a valid label for music. For more on this subject matter see Eric Porter *What is this thing Called Jazz: African American Musicians As Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.)

the ill-fated concert between Cecil Taylor and the older generation Mary Lou Williams.⁴⁶ Articles such as “All-Star Television: Charles Mingus, Cecil Taylor, Ralph Ellison, Martin Williams” also explore the tension in the changing definitions of jazz and reception to the New Thing.⁴⁷ “The Fact of Black Nonrelationality: Cecil Taylor in Paris” by Matthias Domingo Mushinski addresses these issues in relation to the Parisian reception to Taylor’s music.⁴⁸ Dissertations such as “Caseworks” as performed by Cecil Taylor and the Art ensemble of Chicago: A music analysis and Sociopolitical History” by Matthew Kiroff, and “The Free Place: Literary, Visual, and Jazz Creations of Space in the 1960s” by Andrew Walsh Bartlett also attest to these tensions.

It is no surprise that given the tensions of defining this new jazz or even dispelling with the term jazz altogether, that this discussion was taken up by the artists themselves. Some of the most insightful commentary on Taylor (and his peers) come from the activist writers, and journalist, associated with the New Thing. *Four Lives in the Bebop Business* written by A.B. Spellman, shows the tension between the artists and the music industry.⁴⁹ Spellman’s book is a particularly helpful resource because he spends much of the time quoting the artists and their bandmates. Many of the quotes I use to understand Taylor for this dissertation are drawn from this work. A.B. Spellman was a member of the Black Arts Movement which explicitly linked itself to the New Thing and often staged collaboration between the musicians and the writers (generally through poetry) of B.A.M. and the New Thing.

⁴⁶ Benjamin Givan “The Fools Don’t Think I Play Jazz” (*The Journal of Musicology*, Vol 35, No. 3, 2018).

⁴⁷ Ethan Iverson “All-Star Television: Charles Mingus, Cecil Taylor, Ralph Ellison, Martin Williams” (*Journal of Jazz studies*, vol 13. No. 1., 2022).

⁴⁸ Matthias Domingo Mushinski “The Fact of Black Nonrelationality: Cecil Taylor in Paris” (*Obsidian: Literature and Arts in the African Diaspora*, Vol. 46, issue 1, 2020).

⁴⁹ Spellman, A.B. *Four Lives in the Bebop Business*. Originally published in 1966, I draw on the updated 1994 Fourth Limelight edition.

Some of the most poignant thinking, writing, and creating about this music comes from Amiri Baraka (once known as LeRoi Jones). His books *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music that Developed from it* (1963) and *Black Music* (1959) are a testament to his thinking on the music. Taylor and Baraka had an on and off again friendship, but Baraka was always extremely complimentary to Taylor's music and his writing collected in the books mentioned above offer some of the most insightful understandings of Taylor's music.

It is worth mentioning Val Wilmer's *As Serious As Your Life: Black Music and the Free Jazz Revolution, 1957-1977* (1977) the first major document about the scene. It is also the book where Taylor first gets described as playing 88 tuned drums (in reference to how he played the 88 keys on the piano), a saying that gets used when describing his playing style and one I implicitly discuss in the letters to Cecil chapter. John Litweiler's (1990) *The Freedom Principle: Jazz After 1958* is also another journalistic book on supposed Free Jazz. Building on that tradition, the first biography of Cecil Taylor was written by music journalist Philip Freeman.⁵⁰

As mentioned above much of what has been written about Taylor, and his music has been around defining jazz. He also emerges as a figure in relation to musician unions and radical movements like the Black Arts movement. Taylor addressed these issues in public talks, in his music, and his poetry. He was extremely insightful on these matters, and the complexities of his statements (and music) has led to his emergence as an interlocutor for black studies. Dr. Fred Moten's *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* situates Taylor and his music in poetry in relation to the black radical tradition, a term coined by scholar Cedric Robinson.⁵¹ He also features in Moten's follow up works such as *Black and Blur* and also in Moten's

⁵⁰ Philip Freeman *In the Brewing Luminous: The Life & Music of Cecil Taylor* (Hofheim: Wolke-verlag, 2024).

⁵¹ Fred Moten *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

poetry.⁵² Taylor is discussed at length in both of Dr. Fumi Okiji's books and her second book *Billie's Bent Elbow* takes its title by riffing on a line from Taylor's poetry.⁵³ Lastly, *X—the problem of the Negro as a problem thought* by Nahum Dimitri Chandler also cites Taylor to think with W.E.B. DuBois.⁵⁴

Musical analysis of Cecil Taylor

Taylor was one of the most prominent musical figures of the 20th century and although cited in many academic works on histories of music he has had relatively little attention from music analyzers. There have been a few dissertations on his music such as: the 1994 “The Music of Cecil Taylor: an analysis of selected piano solos 1973:1989” written by Mark J. Bobak, (1993) “Improvisation analysis of selected works of Albert Ayler, Roscoe Mitchell, and Cecil Taylor” by Jane Marth Reynolds, (1994) “Analyzing Free Jazz” by Lynette Westendorf dissertation and the more recent (2021) “Body as Site of Innovation: Gesture and Musical Meaning through Cecil Taylor” by Cory Sibasish Tripath, and (2013) “Cecil Taylor: Life as... structure within a free improvisation” by Kaja Draksler. While all important works, many of them try to reproduce Taylor's music via transcription which, as I will demonstrate further on, has been proven to be a less effective system for analyzing his music.

The first academic musical analysis of Taylor's music comes from the landmark work (1974) *Free Jazz* written by German musician and musicologist Ekkehard Jost.⁵⁵ This work is

⁵² Fred Moten *Black and Blur* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

⁵³ Fumi Okiji, *Jazz as Critique: Adorno and Black Expression Revisited* (2018) and *Billie's Bent Elbow: Exorbitance, Intimacy, and a Nonsensuous Standard*. (2025) (both with Stanford: Stanford University Press.

⁵⁴ Nahum Dimitri Chandler. *X—the problem of the Negro as a problem thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

⁵⁵ I am citing the first re-printed version of the work by Da Capo Press in 1994.

extremely important because it is the first musical analytic work on free jazz as a genre and features analysis of many of the important figures in so-called free jazz. In his analysis of Taylor, Jost coins the term “energy” which he defines “a kind of playing whose dynamic impetus arose not from off-beat phrasing but from combining the parameters of time, intensity and pitch, thereby creating a new musical quality, *energy*.”⁵⁶ He elaborates that “Energy is, more than anything else, a variable of time. It creates motion or results from motion; it means a process in which the dynamic level is just *one* variable and by no means a constant.”⁵⁷ Jost’s analysis focusses heavily on transcriptions and analysis. I implicitly reconstruct Jost’s notion of energy in my “Letters To Cecil” chapter, by playing on the idea of energy as anima, and anima as breath.

In “Sound Structures and Naked Fire Gestures in Cecil Taylor’s Solo Piano Music” (2022) Mark Micchelli makes a compelling case for approaching musical analysis of Cecil Taylor’s music by attending to the physical gestures of his movements. He makes this argument by presenting two approaches to studying his music. The first approach is a transcription (with notes on the page) and the second is attending to the physical movements of Taylor to reproduce “Taylor-esque” music. Ultimately, the second approach is the more fruitful one. As Micchelli demonstrates, attending to his physical movements (i.e. the way he moved on the piano) is more in line with Taylor’s own philosophical approach to making music. He highlights that Taylor often discussed his preference for musicians who danced at their instrument (suggesting the importance of the body for understanding his music) and Taylor’s ambivalence (or disdain) for Western notation, which he believed hampered musical expression. Taylor was adamant in many instances but most famously in his poem “Sound Structure of Subculture Becoming Major Breath/Naked Fire Gesture” that “Western notation blocks total absorption in the ‘action’

⁵⁶ Jost, *Free Jazz* 69.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

playing. The eye looks, mind deciphers, hand attack, ear informs.”⁵⁸ My dissertation tries to respect Taylor’s disdain for western art music notation and opts to use Taylor’s letter-based form of notation when providing musical examples such as the ones found in the following Unit Structures chapter.

Taylor’s lack of interest or ambivalence in scores coupled with Micchelli’s demonstration of the utility in attending to Taylor’s gestures rather than notes troubles many of the previous analyses that look to conventional note-based music analysis of Taylor’s music. One exception to the previous note-based approaches has been Joe Morris’s (2012) *Perpetual Frontier: The Properties of Free Music*, which I detail in the next chapter. Morris’s approach looks at the *how* of Taylor’s music, treating Taylor’s approach as a methodology. Morris does not describe Taylor’s music in terms of notes but rather explains how Taylor would structure a piece of music and process his units (melodic cells). It is not a note-based approach but rather a systemic methodological approach which allows the reader to learn how to structure their music like Cecil Taylor’s (or other free music methodologies) without risking copying or sounding like Cecil Taylor. I closely work with this text in chapter 2 of this dissertation.

Jessie Cox’s article “Cecil Taylor’s Posthumanistic Musical Score” works with the idea that Taylor’s scores are located in the body rather than on sheets of paper.⁵⁹ He states: “This approach to composition problematizes the location and function of musical scores and at the same time, of course, also interpretation.”⁶⁰ I would add it also problematizes note-based analysis, echoing Miccheli’s work. Cox and Miccheli’s work open the door for analysis of

⁵⁸ Liner notes from *Unit Structures* Taylor, 1966.

⁵⁹ Jessie Cox “Cecil Taylor’s Posthumanistic Musical Score” (*American Music Review*, Vol. L, Issue 2. 2021).

⁶⁰ Cox, 1.

Taylor's music that moves away from focussing on simply what notes Taylor and his bandmates played.

Poetry analysis

Taylor was a prolific and innovative poet, and some scholarship has focussed on his poetry. For instance, (2019) "everything that you do": On the Poetry of Cecil Taylor David Grundy and (2019) "The Scented Parabola": Occasion of Cecil Taylor's Poetry David Grubbs. He also features prominently in poetry and sound studies scholar's Anthony Reed's work (2021) *Soundworks: Race, Sound, and Poetry in Production*. It is not a surprise that some of the most fruitful work on Taylor's poetry has been from poets the aforementioned Amiri Baraka but also scholar-poet Fred Moten whose work I cited earlier in this chapter.

Taylor rarely published poetry but his poetry often accompanied his albums as liner notes. He saturated his performances with his poetry, often reading poems before playing the piano. In one of his famous interviews, "being matter ignited..." with Chris Funkhouser, Taylor mentions some of his poetic influences.⁶¹ One of his influences is Federico García Lorca, whose concept of *duende* I highlight as being present in Taylor's music in my letters to Cecil. I also have noted the connection between the opening line of Taylor's poem "Sound Structure of Subcultures Becoming Major Breath/Naked Fire Gesture", "The first level or statement of three an *opening field*" (My emphasis added), with Charles Olson's open field poetry. When asked in the interview about Olson's influence on his poetry and his music Taylor skirts the question. I make the connection between Olson and Taylor explicitly in my letters to Cecil chapter,

⁶¹ Edited by Nathaniel Mackey. (*Hambone* No. 12. 1994)

something that I have only seen in Nathaniel Mackey's work which I explicate in the footnotes to the same chapter.

Nathaniel Mackey

This dissertation's format of auditioning for Cecil Taylor's ensemble derives from my engagement with poet-scholar Nathaniel Mackey's work, specifically his book *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*.⁶² This book (comprising of 5 volumes), details the music of N. and his ensemble (whose name changes throughout the series) through a series of letters to "The Angel of Dust". This novel (as well as Mackey's poetry and scholarship) has some of the most insightful thinking on music including Cecil Taylor. In the introduction to this dissertation, I have mentioned how my work mobilizes a paracritical approach to Taylor's work derived from Mackey.

In a 2021 New York Times article "Nathaniel Mackey's Long Song: Listening to music with the poet whose alternative history of humankind intersects with the realities of Black Life in America" by Hua Hsu centered on Mackey's work, it states that Mackey "'felt he had a finite amount of words" in himself and wanted to conserve them for his creative work."⁶³ Further, the article states (after interviewing Mackey) that he used the letters in his novels to explore "ideas and theories around Black performance that he would once have formulated into academic articles". I have been moved by the idea of creative work as academic work. Further, I have often found creative work to be more insightful to academic work, specifically when reading Mackey. In the Times article, it quotes Moten who states that everything is in Mackey, and I find it hard

⁶² I am citing the New Directions compilation of the first 3 volumes, released in 2010, as well as the 2 subsequent works published by New Directions.

⁶³ Retrieved from: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/04/12/nathaniel-mackeys-long-song>

not to disagree. My approach to this dissertation has been inspired by Mackey's creative work and is why I have chosen to make much of the material for this dissertation creative.

Chapter 3: Unit Structures

Introduction

In what follows, I analyze Cecil Taylor's Unit Structures, by working closely with Joe Morris's *Perpetual Frontier: The Properties of Free Music*.⁶⁴ Since free music (free jazz, free improvisation, etc.) sometimes uses musical elements such as melody, harmony, silence, etc. in different ways than other styles of music, the analysis will use some of the terminology Morris devised for discussing free music. By using this terminology, the analysis hopes to avoid putting western music labels on Taylor's music especially because of Taylor's abandonment of both conventional song form and western art music compositions in his performance practice.

This chapter divides into 4 sections. Section 1 begins with an explanation of the building blocks of Taylor's music specifically by describing Unit Structures. There are many moving parts in his music which requires isolating and explain how aspects of his music and its structure are to be understood. In Section 2, I discuss the ways in which a unit can be processed to make a unit structure. Section 3 gives a brief overview of the formal components of Taylor's music. In section 4 I proceed to demonstrate examples of improvising with my own instrument (double bass) with attached listening examples. My aim in this section is not to find coherence through analysis but rather, like Morris, to locate ways to improvise using Taylor's methodology. Therefore, my analysis is directed towards a prescriptive mode of understanding his music rather than a descriptive one. Ultimately, this step is necessary for producing the base-level skills to audition for Taylor's ensemble.

⁶⁴ Joe Morris. *Perpetual Frontier: The Properties of Free Music*. (Riti Publishing, 2012).

Unit Structures as methodology

Morris highlights four methodologies for how free music musicians have, and sometimes still do, structure their music. They are Harmolodics (Ornette Coleman), Unit Structures (Cecil Taylor), Tri-axiom theory (Anthony Braxton), and European Free Improvisation (a movement that emerged in many parts of Europe). These methodologies are often used explicitly or implicitly in working free music musicians' practice and are often hybridized to form new methodologies. These methodologies are varied, and I will only be focussing on Unit Structures because of this dissertation's focus on Cecil Taylor.

Unit Structures is the name Morris gives for the musical methodology associated with Cecil Taylor's music. It is named after Taylor's 1966 album *Unit Structures* which marked a definitive shift in Taylor's musical style. Although Taylor had been working and releasing albums since 1956, it was not until the mid 1960s that his musical system had coalesced. During a European tour, a shift happened in the way Taylor's band began to play (abandoning standards and song forms, etc.): "We were in Sweden and we had finally decided to be *free*. That's what Cecil had decided and there was no more "Love for Sale"..." stated Sunny Murray.⁶⁵ "No more Love for Sale" is referring to Taylor's choice to abandon standards and to improvise freely. A recording of them playing free from this period can be heard on the album *Nefertiti, The Beautiful One Has Come*, which was released in 1963.

In 1966 Taylor recorded the albums *Unit Structures* and *Conquistador* (released in 1968) which solidified his new approach to playing. *Unit Structures* contained liner notes written by

⁶⁵ Interview by Dan Warburton in the *Paris Trans-Atlantic* in 2000. Retrieved from: <http://www.paristransatlantic.com/magazine/interviews/murray.html>

Taylor (which was unusual for the time period) detailing his approach to making his music. These liner notes are written in an open field poetic style that mirrors the way he structures his music. In chapter 3, “Letters to Cecil”, I will closely read Taylor’s liner notes; but in what follows I will use Morris’s explanation of Taylor’s methodology to describe ways that Unit Structures can function.

A Unit Structure can be thought of as the methodological framework by which Taylor builds his music to be processed by him and his collaborators. Taylor’s band was often called the Cecil Taylor Unit, which reflects the importance of units to his work. I have come to understand that his music is built out of a series of units (which he sometimes also called cells) that when combined form a structure with the structure being synonymous with the piece of music. Taylor’s methodology is complex and evolved over his long life. I will do my best in the following sections to unpack how his methodological functions while trying to avoid oversimplifying such complexity. His methodology draws heavily on many artistic forms, musics, and cultural expressions.

In a landmark study A.B. Spellman notes that “Cecil considers his music ‘constructivist’, a concept he recognized first in Dave Brubeck’s early music, but which he has developed through several steps simply by the abundance of the material he uses and by the placement of those materials in all the voices”.⁶⁶ He goes on to quote Taylor who says:

The emphasis in each piece is on building a whole, totally integrated structure. In doing this, we carry on—in ensemble as well as solo sections—the mood of a jazz soloist. I mean the principle of kinetic improvisation that keeps a jazz solo building. What makes jazz unique is the compression of that energy into a short period of time, and that, in turn,

⁶⁶ Spellman, *Four Lives in the Bebop Business*, 38.

is a reflection of what the machine has done to our lives in metropolitan areas in America.⁶⁷

For Taylor, it is important that the piece has kinetic drive, which will prove important further on and is more deeply explored in the Letters to Cecil. As I will demonstrate later in the recording examples, Taylor is able to create the kinetic drive he associates with a “a jazz soloist” through an alternative means than what had been used by jazz artists in the past. Note that he finds interesting the compressing of energy into “a short period of time” because this theme will also be relevant to the Letters to Cecil. He is further quoted in the book stating:

Music is the organization of sound existing in time, its dimensions hanging in space. The problem was reorganization of ingredients to discover surprise. Harmonic changes provided yesterday’s dynamism. Additive technique, extended phrases, slowing down of harmonic motion, diads, clusters replace chords built on thirds. Rhythmic possibilities are expanded, and knowledge of given time is understood. And the ecstatic compressions of time’s energy produces twelve, sixteen, and thirty-two measures-complete sketches, improvisation, content and shape becoming one.⁶⁸

To innovate and take his music to the next level, Taylor used additive techniques, chord clusters, and took the energy implied in rhythm and transformed it. These additive techniques might suggest why Taylor described his music as constructivist. These possibilities emerge out of his use of cells.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

The first mention of cells comes from the album *Cell Walk for Celeste* (1961 but released in 1988) which is an early recording that sounds like a predecessor to *Unit Structures*. Morris states that “Taylor has referred to his version of melodic structures as *cells*, which is an apt and suitable term. In many cases the melodic material present in his work is cellular in nature, meant as a smaller, seed-like motive or device meant to grow in size, meaning, value, and expression”; Morris goes on to say that he views these cells as templates.⁶⁹

Morris’s book stems from his teaching of free music at the New England Conservatory and his approach to making music. Morris is a renowned musician and one of the few who has found a way to teach multiple free music methodologies. Often, artists such as Taylor have taught their musical methodologies to their students or bandmates, but it is rare for someone to have discerned these methodologies from outside of those settings. The book deconstructs all the properties of free music and gives ideas of how musician could reconstruct those properties to build their own methodologies.

The term template is helpful for understanding Taylor’s cells. Morris states:

The easiest way to understand the value of melodic structure is to think of a melody, or a portion of a melody as a *template*, a pattern that can be used to make shapes. The shape of the melody is the result of the sequence of parts that make up the melody, which can be defined as duration of tones (note value), silence, rhythm, intervals, curvature of the line, and expressive character of the melody. Any kind of melody can be used as a *template*.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Morris, *Perpetual Frontier*, 79.

⁷⁰ Morris, 51.

Templates are important for Morris's music and pedagogy, because he can adapt the processing of templates to different free music methodologies. For instance, the processing of template for Ornette Coleman's Harmolodic method would be different than Taylor's Unit Structure methodology. What I find helpful about the term template, is that a template is not a melody nor is it a tone-row. Meaning, the grouping of the notes described as a template does not carry the semantic baggage of either of those terms. However, templates can be treated as a melody or a tone row depending on the methodology in question. What I want to highlight here, however, is that a template is neither melody nor tone-row but can contain both definitions within it.

For Morris, templates have pitches, rhythms, and an implied shape (based on the highs and lows and the contours of these peaks and valleys). Further, he states (as noted above) that Taylor's cells can be conceived of as "seed like motives" and he further states that for him they are templates. Therefore, we can understand that a cell is small series of pitches that the performer can process based on the methodology of Unit Structures.

Processing a Unit

Processing a unit is the manipulation of the unit via the Unit Structures methodology, that results in the content of the improvisation. It is the process by which the player uses the unit(s) to produce the musical content of their improvisation. I draw directly from Morris for my understanding of how to process a unit. Further, I introduce Morris's term "object" and "array" to highlight the way Taylor could process units and thus develop long lines derived from motivic chains.

Usually, a player will state a unit and then begin to process it. To process a unit, one can change a note in the unit and replay it. A note can be added or subtracted from the unit. The unit

can be changed rhythmically, by changing the value (length) of any note in the unit, by adding rubato or accelerando to the unit. For example, a unit such as the one I use in the example at the end of this chapter (F#, E, F) could be processed as follows:

(original unit stated) F# E F, (add a note) F# E F G, (subtract a note) F# E, (transposition) A G
G#⁷¹

The unit can also be transposed by either melodic transposition, octave transposition, or by taking the handshape used to play the unit and moving it. This last form of transposition is instrumentally based and can be seen in the way that Taylor moves his hand in performance and is something that a string player can accomplish but with a very different result in sound. The instrumental specificity to the transposition is one of the ways I believe that Taylor's music can result in such beautiful heterogenous sounds. If each musician in Taylor's ensemble transposes the units differently (using the different performance requirements to move a unit on their respective instruments) then a plethora of shapes and variations can result, creating a unique type of polyphonic music. As indicated previously, notes can be added or subtracted from the unit. Additionally, approach notes or phrases can be inserted before a unit to lead into the unit. Morris also highlights that extension notes/phrases can be added after a unit, these extensions can become units in themselves. Further, Morris states that players are encouraged to interject material that is not derived from the unit that could result in improvised responses from other members of the ensemble. Additionally, units can be played in retrograde and retrograde inversions. Lastly, repetition is favoured, restating the unit or continuing to repeat the unit many

⁷¹ I am electing to use letter notation because that is how Taylor wrote his music out and to respect his disdain for standard western music notation. The brackets designated each process done to the unit and the commas are used to separate each one. Realistically a musician playing unit structures will seamlessly transition between the unit and the processing creating a chain of notes that sound like a long musical line.

times is often an effective way to process the unit. Morris describes in detail how looping (repeating a unit) can result in effective unit structure playing. Heavy repetition can be heard frequently in Taylor's recordings and often creates some of the 'energy' for which Taylor is known. Not only can a unit be repeated but any variation or a processed version of the unit be repeated.

The result of each act of processing creates multiple new (what Morris calls) objects. Objects for Morris is a way of naming particular musical properties with which free music musicians improvise. He states:

Music is made up of sound, silence, rhythm and the passage of time, dynamics, etc. Free music has developed by identifying and creating its own versions of the meaning and values of these objects, and by displaying them in a myriad of ways, which are presented in compositions and improvisation.⁷²

A unit can be considered an object that was potentially pre-composed and when musicians process the unit they produce new units which become new objects.⁷³

The result for Morris is what he calls an "array" of objects that can be called upon during performance. That means that a musician can draw on these various objects throughout their improvisation to create the material for their performance. It requires strong memory and

⁷² Morris, 38.

⁷³ I am using objects here not only to be consistent with Morris's terminology, but also to separate it from pre-composed units. Taylor composes units that are used as the bases of his compositions and that fuel improvisation. As I outlined before, there are ways to process and improvise with units based on his methodology. These processes can generate new units which can also be processed. However, to separate the Taylor's pre-composed units versus the new units generate via processing, I am calling the latter Objects to borrow from Morris.

listening to what one or the musicians around oneself are playing but can be very fruitful because of the sheer number of objects that can be produced from processing a unit.

In Taylor's solo music, he often unrelentingly performs, sometimes for more than an hour. Listening closely to his improvisations, it is possible to hear that he does in fact draw on an array of objects (processed units) which propels him through his music. Describing the process of using an "array" allows for a sense of how Taylor is approaching some of the material in his music to generate such long performances.

It should be clear there are many ways of processing units, and each way of processing is up to the player to decide. Unit Structure methodology gives a great deal of agency to the players which can result in rich texture of the music. It also suggests an alternative hierarchy to other musical traditions in the way that Taylor's musicians worked with his music. Although Taylor constructed his methodology and taught it to his musicians, as well as composed the units that were used for his pieces of music, the realization of the music arose from the choices that the musicians used to interpret his methodology as it interacted with the units he composed. This autonomy granted to performers is part of my reasoning for approaching this dissertation from the perspective of joining his ensemble.

Each realization of individual works by Taylor drastically changes based on the personnel in the ensemble such that one way to understand Taylor's music is to understand it from the perspective of a musician entering his ensemble. I term this approach as an attuning to the ensemblage of Taylor's music. Ensemblage which conjoins ensemble and assemblage denotes the way that music is created by an assemblage of the musical ensemble members. Ensemblage is one way that afrological musics and free music in particular can differ from other musics.

Formal components of Taylor's Music

In this section I expand on how Taylor's music was generally disseminated and treated. It is not an exhaustive analysis but instead will be used to give a general understanding of Taylor and his musicians performance practice. I begin by highlighting how Taylor's music is built out of pre-composed melodic material (units) which often served as repertoire for his touring bands. I discuss how his music was not written western music notation and was taught to the musicians in his ensemble aurally. I then move on to unpack the way form, harmony, and rhythm function in his music.

Taylor's music was often improvised using units he had composed as material to develop and structure his music. On his album *Unit Structures*, he suggests in the poetry that serves as liner notes that the pieces are structured in three parts. Jeff Schwartz highlights this suggestion as well and states that much of Taylor music is structured in three sections.⁷⁴ Whether his music is structured in three parts (or less or more) matters less than understanding that his music often contains multiple sections structured around separate pre-composed units. Musician Alex Ward has spent considerable time documenting on his blog that Taylor's band had a repertoire for their live tours.⁷⁵ Many times, this repertoire would be untitled in video/audio documentation (found on YouTube and other bootleg recordings) or renamed as a new composition. Sometimes recordings of the same piece but played at different concerts (and recorded for different albums) would have different titles such as "Epicritic (Pertaining to Cutaneous Sensitivity)" from *2 Ts For a Lovely T* appears as "The Silence of Trees" on *Burning Poles*. It is often hard to fully prove each track is a similar composition because the pieces comprising this touring repertoire

⁷⁴ Jeff Schwartz *Free Jazz*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2022).

⁷⁵ Documented on his blog: <https://alexwardmusicblog.wordpress.com>

can change drastically in each performance with only the units being recognizable. I would like to point out here that the way the unit is stated initially on a recording can also change each performance, which leads to difficulties in knowing if the *same* composition is being used. Often Ward is able to discern a composition as being the same because of the other units occurring throughout piece matching up with another composition. For instance, there are live recordings of Taylor's Units (often archived by Taylor fans on YouTube) where themes from albums such as *Conquistador* that clearly begin with the same unit but sound different after the statement of the unit because of the way the musician chose to process the unit in that given performance. What I want to highlight is that Taylor's ensembles often had repertoire (based on shared units) even when the music could sound drastically different per performance.

Like many other composers from African American traditions (such as Charles Mingus, and Thelonious Monk), Taylor preferred not to provide written scores for his music to the musicians in his ensembles. In the liner notes for *Unit Structures*, Taylor spends time discussing what he sees as a problem when reading music for performance, which I will discuss later in my Letters to Cecil chapter. Taylor did seem to have scores for his music: when watching live performances of his music you can see him bring out stacks of paper and rest it on his music stand. Some of these notes are clearly also his poetry which he recites during his performances. In Chris Stover's (2006) documentary *All the Notes*, Taylor's piano can be seen with music on the piano. Taylor explains that he dispelled with 'traditional' notation and uses letter note (i.e. A, B, C, D, D# etc.) and his own system for articulating register. Taylor would play his music to his performers and have them learn it by ear. If the performer chose to write it down after learning it, that was alright for Taylor, but it was important that the music was learnt first by ear. I want to

highlight the importance of the oral component of his music and the alternative scoring practices to demonstrate how his music was structured.

As stated before, Taylor's music is structured around a series of units that he and the members of his ensemble process. It does seem through listening that there are moments of agreed upon arrivals to new units. In many recordings in the middle of improvised sections, multiple instruments will play a unit in unison, suggesting that there was a way for the ensemble to know they have moved into new sections. The sections, however, do not conform to any nameable form. In an interview with Chris Funkhouser (quoted in Morris's book) Taylor states "I don't really concern myself too much about form. And the reason I don't is because it's there. I'm always surprised to find out it's there". In the interview he goes on to describe how he finds that, when artists focus too much on form, they often produce what he deems boring art. It seems Taylor does not improvise with a form in mind but rather creates form through his methodological processes. If we recall, he considers his music constructivist and if we apply that to form, we see that form emerges in his music by the construction of the components and realization of the units. I will expand on Taylor's approach to form which I believe is linked to Charles Olson's concept of Projective Verse in my Letters to Cecil chapter. The important point here is that Taylor's music is unique in its approach to form.

It should also be noted that Taylor's music is not diatonic music. Even though units can have tonal suggestions, the execution of the processing of the units do not relate or conform to tonal centres. Morris states "the *chromatic* character of much of the melodic material often only implies a tonal centre, or at least permits the players to either state the centre or not state it, depending on their spontaneous decision making".⁷⁶ But it would also be wrong to call Taylor's

⁷⁶ Morris, 80.

music atonal (he did not like the term being used for his music), but the tonal weight is always shifting in his music in a way that, not surprisingly, does not conform with western art music tonality.

Harmony in Taylor's music often results from the spontaneous treatment of each unit. The harmony happens (much like form) because the musicians working in Taylor's ensemble react (via improvisation) with the units and the result produces harmony rather than follows it. This relationship to harmony is what might lead some to call Taylor's music 'free' because it is free from being tied to harmony and harmony is always a result not a cause for the music. I would argue that harmony in Taylor's music is often better viewed as counterpoint. Morris highlights that Roswell Rudd has described Taylor's music as being free counterpoint. Morris says "Considering the role of *chance* in the reading of the composed material, and the manner of utilizing the material in the improvisations, the effect is indeed a shifting version of counterpoint".⁷⁷ If all members are interpreting the unit and processing it, counterpoint will emerge because simultaneous lines of melody will be shifting. The result is free counterpoint because the counterpoint is not linked to any set of rules of how the counterpoint should be generated; rather the counterpoint occurs because of the free (and not pre-determined) interaction of the various lines. This counterpoint might be best understood as layers in Taylor's music. The term layers occurs in Taylor's writings on his music for instance in his liner notes to the album *Unit Structures*.

By the time of the album *Unit Structures* Taylor had discarded what might be considered a steady pulse in his music.⁷⁸ His music is very rhythmic in nature but, like his approach to pitch

⁷⁷ Morris, 83.

⁷⁸ There are exceptions such as moments on albums like *3 Phasis* but generally he avoided what might be felt as a consistent regular pulse.

material, is often dense with many layers of rhythmic impulse. His music is extremely sophisticated rhythmically and is not easily characterized through meters, or a simplistic understanding of swing. If we remember, one way to process the unit is to change the rhythm of the unit. Morris notes that often musicians will re-state portions of the unit in a variation of a duple or triplet. For instance:

(stated as eighth-eighth quarter) F#E F-, (all triplets) F# E F, (half note eighth-eighth) F#--EF⁷⁹

Taking a quarter note figure and inserting a duple or triplet could drastically change the metrical implication of a unit (same as simply adding a note or subtracting a note from a unit). If multiple musicians are doing these processes at the same time (each choosing a different process) then the result will inevitably create multiple different meters or rhythmic variables simultaneously.

Morris also points out that the melodic structure (the unit, which can be of any length) dictates the relation of the music to the pulse. He explains that “Unit structures *phrase lengths* are not counted in normal metric way 1, 2, 3, 4,... Instead they are counted 1, 1, 1,... in the length of the composed or improvised *template phrase length*”.⁸⁰ Therefore, the meter and phrases are always dictated by the unit and then will subsequently be changed as the unit is processed.⁸¹ I will discuss rhythm and Taylor’s philosophies of rhythm in further sections of this dissertation.

⁷⁹ I am drawing on the same unit used previously and that I will use in the final section of this chapter. The brackets indicate the metric value assigned to each note and the dashes serve to show that the note preceding the dash is held longer.

⁸⁰ Morris 81.

⁸¹ Recall the previous example I wrote out. The first iteration was 2 quarter note lengths, the second 1 quarter note, the third 3 quarter notes. Connecting that to Morris’s description of phrases being counted in 1s each of the example phrases are differing lengths despite being felt as a new 1 in each iteration.

Examples of processing in practice

In what follows I demonstrate ways of processing a unit through recorded examples. I isolate various processing options so that the reader/listener can hear one type of processing at a time versus listening to all options that one might hear in full performance. Note that I am not doing all types of processing just a few types to show how generative the differing processes can be. An exhaustive number of examples would be impossible to demonstrate and would not be helpful. I use “Looping”, “Changing of Rhythm”, “Transposition by shifting”, “Transposition by Changing Strings”, “Changing Notes in the Unit”, “Adding Notes and Subtracting Notes from the Unit” and approaching the unit via an “Array”. These examples were also chosen as something I could perform solo and where the processing could be evidently discerned by a listener unfamiliar with free music.

I have chosen to process a unit which will be F#, E, F natural. I have composed this unit for this exercise specifically. A double bass handshape generally only extends to a tone between first and fourth finger and the unit I composed for this exercise fits within one handshape on one string. For example, if played on one string in first position (on the D string) the unit would be played 4th finger, 1st, 2nd, finger (3rd finger is often omitted in lower positions). I wanted a unit that could be played on a single string so that the changing of strings could be heard as an effect. I believe part of the reason why Taylor’s methodology can generate such fruitful music is because it requires instrument specific interpretations of the methodology.⁸² I also wanted a unit that did not suggest tonality because Taylor’s music rarely exhibited qualities of diatonic music.

⁸² For example, string players can process the unit via changing strings, shifting the same fingering pattern in another position. Wind players would have a different approach, as would percussionists.

Further, I wanted a unit that would not sound like a chromatic scale when I shifted positions, so I wrote one that had contrary motions (i.e. it goes down to the E and back up the F).

Lastly, I have chosen to not notate the unit or demonstrate approaches to the unit in written form because of Taylor's distaste for standard notation. I want to respect that he often used letter notation, as I did above. I also wanted to respect the oral nature of the way he disseminated his music and wanted the examples heard rather than read (i.e. I do not include a transcription of the music).

Repetition (Track titled "Loop")⁸³

For this process, I state the unit and then proceed to repeat it on a loop. Naturally the looping effect creates a slight accelerando because there is no gap between the repetitions. I continue to speed up because it feels natural with the looping and by speeding up it also does not sound like sheer repetition it ends up being a musical device in it of itself.

I want to note the dizzying effect of the loop. The dizzying comes from the repetition but also the way it creates new sensations of pulse. The bow changing naturally creates the odd accent (as does the hammering of my left hand), but, because the accents fall in different places, it feels like different senses of pulse. It should be clear that much of what I am doing, I am in control of and choose to do from an artistic perspective, but what I want to highlight is what repetition opens up for the player outside of artistic choices.

The act of repeating and looping creates new ways of generating pulse. I cannot measure or determine the variations of rhythms and pulse that emerge from the looping but the fact that

⁸³ The recording can be accessed at the following link: <https://youtube.com/shorts/-oQIHhrnx0E>

repetition of notes has rhythmic and metric permeability is interesting to note. The process of manipulating pitch material (in this case via looping it) generates rhythm. This observation might explain how Taylor is able to generate so many variations and rhythm. It is also why he can make the statement that “Rhythm then is existence and existence time, *content offers time quantity to shape*” (my emphasis)⁸⁴. I will analyze Taylor’s liner notes in the next chapter, but I want to highlight how rhythm is linked to content which creates shape much like the shape that emerges from simply looping 3 pitches. Specifically, I will illuminate Taylor’s thoughts on rhythm through my concept of bowing as breath.

Changing of rhythm (track title “Rhythm Change”)⁸⁵

In this improvisation I do not change any pitches I only change duration of notes and change the rhythms of how I play them. Silence also plays a role because it helps naturally change the rhythm. By shortening certain notes, articulations emerge such as staccato which like looping also changes the metric feeling of the line.

Changing the rhythm in my ears gives the music contour. It squirms and moves up and down and creates an angular feeling. I want to highlight two points that will become larger discussions in my letters to Cecil chapter. In Taylor’s Unit Structure liner notes he begins with metaphor of fields and landscapes. Also, throughout Taylor’s liner notes rhythm and dance are linked and dance was an important act for Taylor in general.

Changing of rhythm through a unit structure approach creates contour that gives rise to musical shape. These shapes can be related to Taylor’s invocation of landscapes. His invocation

⁸⁴ Liner notes from Taylor’s *Unit Structures*, 1966.

⁸⁵ The recording can be accessed at the following link: <https://youtube.com/shorts/K-vBDxMjILc>

of landscape is not then simply a musical metaphor but maybe an indicator of how his methodology can give rise to shapes of sounds which can become a sonic landscape.

The changing of rhythm makes your fingers move at different times. Each strike of the finger becomes a new point of articulation which shapes the rhythm. The feeling is akin to dancing and Taylor often spoke of preferring to see musicians dance on their instrument. The approach to changing of rhythm then might be linked to how he understood musicians to dance on their instruments.

If we remember from Morris, meter for Taylor is measured in 1s based on the length of the unit being played. Pulse then becomes breath like; each breath, each change in the processing of the unit is a different meter based on the length of the musical line. Therefore, every change in processing of the unit creates constant changes in meter. We will return to the importance of breath and rhythm in the next chapter.

Transposition via shifting (track title “Transposition with shifting”)⁸⁶

I chose to transpose the unit via moving the unit up and down the same string. In this case the D string. I could have shifted to a new string, but I wanted to show one string to demonstrate the range of possibilities of only one string. Further, I did not want to change to many variables so that it would be clear how the act of shifting creates an effect.

When transposing by shifting, I am thinking of shifting to continue the line. That means the act of shifting the figure (the unit) creates musical lines (lines being a continuous musical idea). This type of development is not generated by motivic development we might see in other

⁸⁶ The recording can be accessed at the following link: https://youtube.com/shorts/vNiPHZmA_OI

music practices like in sonata form for example, it derives from a kinaesthetic approach. The kinaesthetic approach (shifting) which Taylor might call dancing, produces a long musical line. If we compare it to the long lines of soloists associated with Bebop, we can see that Taylor has created a way of getting the effect of long solo lines generated from improvising over changes.

Transposition via changing strings (track titled “Transposition with change string”)⁸⁷

In this improvisation, I transpose the unit by taking the handshape needed to play the original unit and playing it on a different string. I do not shift positions and instead move between different strings playing the same handshape. I sometimes abruptly change strings by not playing on the adjacent string which creates a change in register. As pointed out in the shifting transposition section, transposing the unit changing strings creates a line.

Changing notes in the unit (track titled changing notes)⁸⁸

Changing notes is one way to process a unit. To do it in isolation I kept the note changing in one position to demonstrate the possibilities in one handshape. The procedure of performing it requires replacing a note in the unit with another note. For instance, if the original unit is played F#, E, F, then I can play F#, E, Bb, (which I do). Following this procedure strictly is the hardest to execute because it requires holding the unit in your mind and substituting out other notes.

For me the experience of holding the unit in my mind and trying to substitute a note out is difficult because I feel compelled to play the original unit because I am thinking about it. If I do

⁸⁷ The recording can be accessed at the following link: <https://youtube.com/shorts/MfO77dNAD6E>

⁸⁸ The recording can be accessed at the following link: <https://youtube.com/shorts/aT-PLP9je8>

not think about the unit then I inevitably begin to improvise past the unit which is fine but would not be truly processing the unit in the way I am striving for in this example. The sensation of having to keep the unit in my head and then feeling compelled to play it while trying to play other notes as replacement feels like a process of possession. This feeling of being possessed by the unit, the unit compelling me to play, links to Cecil Taylor's own thoughts on possession in relation to his methodology and music-making. In an article discussing the influence of Voodoo or Vodun on Taylor's music, Grundy highlights that Taylor's student Bobby Zankel described Taylor's objective with his music as motivic possession.⁸⁹

Add notes and subtract notes (Track title "Add notes, Subtract")⁹⁰

In this example, I add notes to the unit lengthening the unit and then take away notes. I did my best to improvise this example with choosing to add notes closely to the unit (through step wise motion) my goal was for an added note to be heard as additional to the unit. This process seems to change the unit the most. By adding and subtracting notes the unit disintegrates and subsequently a long line emerges. It is similar to the transposition examples but does not have the recognisability of the unit that you can hear when you just transpose.

Array (titled "Array")⁹¹

In this example, I process the unit in the ways mentioned above with the goal of producing an array of objects as the units are transformed. I do my best to recall the emerging

⁸⁹ David Grundy "Cecil Taylor's Voodoo Poetics". In *Point of Departure*
<https://www.pointofdeparture.org/PoD70/PoD70Taylor.html>

⁹⁰ The recording can be accessed at the following link: <https://youtube.com/shorts/Y2dg4qylR-g>

⁹¹ The recording can be accessed at the following link: <https://youtube.com/shorts/rOk89KrFLsQ>

objects (new units) and switch between them to create a short piece. This example functions more like an actual piece of music built using Unit Structures.

A note on the images accompanying the recordings

Recordings posted to YouTube require files to be uploaded as video, which means for audio only recordings an image must be present to make it a video. I used the opportunity of pairing audio recordings with an image to create a series of drawings based on unit structures. Specifically, I treated each image as permutation/processing of an original image through a visual interpretation of unit structures.

The first image “Loop” consists of four angled lines with dots. The lines loosely depict double bass strings, and the dots represent fingers touching the strings. The image was made with a notebook that I used as a rule with a graphite pencil, which I use for all of the other images as well. I wanted this initial image to be minimal in nature because the first recording is a simple process of manipulating the unit.

I continued this process for each of the subsequent images. I placed the notebook-my makeshift ruler- in different places and drew along it to create lines on each page. I chose the placement of each line spontaneously mimicking the improvising process used to create unit structures. The placement of each line determined the next placement of a subsequent line based on ratios that I found were visually appealing. The result is a shape made from lines that intersect. I place dots spontaneously throughout to keep elements from the initial template image.

I created each work while listening to my recordings that accompany each image. My drawings do not literally depict each recording but are inspired by differing forms of ways to

process a unit. I see the drawings as using additive techniques not dissimilar to the additive techniques that Taylor termed as constructivist (quoted earlier) to describe his way of creating music. Again, the process of drawing them was spontaneous which also mimics the improvisation used in unit structures.

I am aware of the art movement known as Constructivist, but I am not clear that when Taylor was using the term he was referring to the same art movement. That is a topic I would like to explore further in future work. Although I am not drawing on Constructivist art (and am unclear if Taylor was either) I have been drawn to the work of Piet Mondriaan, Barnett Newman, and Sam Gilliam for inspiration for my drawings.

Chapter 4: Letters to Cecil

Introduction

This chapter contains my Letters to Cecil, which serve as my audition for his ensemble. The letters are written from the perspective of introducing the tracks individually from the speculative audition tape to Taylor. Each letter ruminates on a theme I have discovered in Taylor's music or in the players of his music (for instance his bassists are often very percussive when they play) that I wish to demonstrate to him on my double bass. It additionally serves to demonstrate my knowledge of his music. Therefore, the letters show my fluency in Taylor's music through words, and the audio (audition tape) shows my fluency through performance. Each track can be accessed through clicking on the YouTube link found in the footnotes beside "Dear Cecil" for each letter following my first introductory letter to Taylor.

Dear Cecil,

I hope this letter finds you well. I was very excited to hear the announcement that you and Jimmy were putting a new version of the unit together, a spectral unit. I understand the slight logistical issues of you being on a different plane of existence from mine, but I was hoping you might still entertain an audition tape from the living. Since Henry Grimes has joined you on the other side, I have heard that he has been completely in demand, and Sirone has been busy with the ghostly Revolutionary Ensemble. I also hear that Dominic Duvall is also extremely busy with ghostly musical projects. As a result, I was wondering if you would entertain an audition from me? I know I am new to this music, at least relatively in the whole scheme of things, but I have been studying your music day and night for a few years and feel like I have something to offer the unit. I have emersed myself in your music and philosophy and I have recorded an audition tape that I was hoping you would be willing to listen to. Additionally, to get towards your musical philosophy, I thought I would offer some explanations of my engagement with your musical system through my own writing on the subject. To not overwhelm you, I thought I would send you each track of the audition tape separately with a small essay on the reasoning for my musical choices.

If you were wondering about my musical credentials, do not worry, I have been working closely with Joe Morris's book (with some lessons from him) which details your methodology. As you know, Morris has been teaching successfully at your alma mater, the New England Conservatory.⁹² I have also been studying many theorists who have specialised in your music

⁹² Joe Morris *Perpetual Frontier: Properties of Free Music* (Riti Publishing, 2012).

(Anthony Braxton's books, for example) to engage in further insight into how musicians have been grappling with the legacy of your work.⁹³

I am a so-called western art music musician but have been engaged deeply in what George Lewis calls afrological music traditions. Afrological is a word to refer to what you have called the tradition that extends from Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson to yourself, while not subscribing to a reductive racial categorization.⁹⁴ I have been doing my best to get close to this music respectfully, and I hope that you can hear that in my work. Anyways, please pass on my regards to Jimmy and Sunny.

Thank you so much for taking the time to read this and entertain my audition.

-Jury Tosh Kobayashi-Mackay

⁹³ Anthony Braxton, *Composition Notes*. (Volume A-E) and *Tri-Axium Writings* (Frog Peak Music 2024).

⁹⁴ Lewis, George. "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives" (*Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 16. No. 1, 1996). Lewis coins two terms, Eurological and Afrological, which serve to delineate different ways of conceiving spontaneity in music. Specifically, he charts a logic of Eurological spontaneity associated with Cagean Indeterminacy and Afrological spontaneity associated with improvisation and the historical racialized logics that emerged to separate the two forms of spontaneity. He notes the racist logics of Cage's creation of the term indeterminacy to circumvent the innovations of African American improvised musics. Eurological comes to refer the logic behind music where the outcome is not pre-determined, and the performers personality is avoided in performance. Afrological conversely has a large degree of the performers' personality in the performance of the music. These terms do not refer to the race of the performers but rather the racialized logics that give rise to the differing performance ideals. I use the term here to refer to a specific historical musical legacy while avoiding genre specific labels such as jazz.

Dear Cecil,⁹⁵

Thank you for your prompt reply. I am glad this mode of communication is working for you, please do let me know if there are any other ways you would prefer to converse. I am very excited that you are willing to offer me an audition. I also completely understand your reservations with hiring someone with my background. Specifically, your reservations about western art musicians' musical articulation and the fact that your music requires a very different approach technically and rhythmically. I am hoping over the course of these letters that I can demonstrate how I have come to understand the articulation needed for your music, as well as the rhythmic and gestural shapes that are also required.

In the following enclosed track, I have tried to address your concerns regarding articulation. Recently, I have been thinking deeply about your statement “this music is the face of the drum.”⁹⁶ William Parker, who was one of your most frequent collaborators, recently was the topic of an academic study published a few years ago, in which he described a technique of playing the bass as a drum kit.⁹⁷ I will do my best to try and send you a copy of the book. How he obtained this drum-like approach was by treating each string as a different drum in a trap kit. I have tried to emulate this effect in the track enclosed.

Upon further contemplation and trying to put this concept into practice, I have come to understand your idea of the music being the face of the drum through two ways of thinking. The first is as a reflection of what I am calling the percussive school of bass playing. The second is in

⁹⁵ Track titled “For Drenette (but also William Parker & Hamid Drake)” can be found <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15ZZfh1YO6A>

⁹⁶ Levin, Robert. “Cecil Taylor: This Music is the Face of the Drum” (*All About Jazz* 2010) accessed at <https://www.allaboutjazz.com/cecil-taylor-this-music-is-the-face-of-a-drum-cecil-taylor-by-robert-levin>

⁹⁷ Cisco Bradley *Universal Tonality: The Life and Music of William Parker* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

reference to what Wadada Leo Smith calls the spirit drum.⁹⁸ These two ways have informed this track and hopefully will demonstrate to you an aesthetic in my sound that you might find appealing.

In a talk on his own musical practice from 2004 at the National Jazz Museum in Harlem, Dr. Vijay Iyer mentions his style of piano playing being rooted in the Percussive School of Piano playing.⁹⁹ The originator of that school of playing in his view is Thelonious Monk. From Monk, the lineage continues through Herbie Nichols, to Andrew Hill, and you are of course included in that school. I will not bother you with all the details of those involved on the list, but it interestingly coincides with a similar canon formed by Matthew Shipp, called the Black Mystery School Pianists.¹⁰⁰ Either way, there is a lineage of different pianists who have had a percussive and unique approach to playing the piano, and you are often thought of as part of that kind of approach to playing. Not to suggest that your sound is not unique, I am just setting up the way I am approaching the material on this track.

If you will indulge me further, my training in scholarship has led me to be wary of canon building. Much of what is referred to as jazz scholarship has in fact been working towards diversifying the canon, deconstructing the canon, etc., because canons generally favour (patriarchal) genius narratives that leave out woman, people of colour, etc. I am bringing this to your attention because I know how much you cared about such issues especially in light of your work with the Jazz Composers Guild.¹⁰¹ However, there is an alternative way of thinking about

⁹⁸ Wadada Leo Smith *Notes (8 pieces) source a new world music: creative music* (Self Published, 1973)

⁹⁹ Can be accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWexiifFOJ0>

¹⁰⁰ Matthew Shipp “Black Mystery School Pianists” (*New Music USA*, 2020) can be accessed at <https://newmusicusa.org/nmbx/black-mystery-school-pianists/>

¹⁰¹ Benjamin Piekut. “New Thing? Gender and Sexuality in the Jazz Composers Guild”. (*American Quarterly*, Vol 62, No. 1. 2010).

canons in this context. Many musicians (as I am sure you have noticed) often form personal canons to create a narrative in which to situate themselves. I feel that these canons are not always inherently problematic but often are important places of imagined and speculative kin claiming. Kin as chosen family, a feminist and anti-racist move against hegemonic notions of nuclear family.¹⁰² I am thinking of examples like Anthony Braxton's claim of a post-Ayler saxophone school of playing.¹⁰³ Braxton describes these schools of playing as being related by “affinity principles”.¹⁰⁴

Poet-scholar Nathaniel Mackey has mentioned a similar impulse in writing communities. He sees his work of editing *Hambone* as his stamp of writers that he feels are important.¹⁰⁵ His book *Discrepant Engagement* can also be seen as part of that approach where he puts in conversation writers who are not always in dialogue with each other, often crossing/exceeding genre and racial lines.¹⁰⁶ Coincidentally enough, many of the poets he refers to are some of your favourites, such as Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, and Charles Olson. What I am trying to say is that the school of playing I will be discussing is tentatively called the Percussive School of Bass playing, and it is my attempt to follow that tradition of canon forming (as kin making) rather than a reductive racist/sexist canon formation often is associated with the word canon. Maybe I should call it speculative-canon-forming, a curatorial approach to artistic kin making.

¹⁰² Donna Haraway “Making Kin” in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 99-104.

¹⁰³ Braxton, *Tri-axium writings*.

¹⁰⁴ Specifically, I am drawing on Braxton’s term Affinity Postulation which he defines as “the phenomenon of “reaching” for “understanding” without the information tenets that are accepted as true, but instead “reaching” with respect to what one feels and senses” *Tri-Axium Writings* Volume 1. 491.

¹⁰⁵ Mackey, Nathaniel. “Editing *Hambone*” in *Paracritical Hinge* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018), 244-250.

¹⁰⁶ Mackey. *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

As I mentioned earlier, Dr. Iyer described you as being part of the Percussive School of Piano Playing. This school of piano playing originated with Thelonious Monk, whose music I know you very much enjoyed. I am reminded of how in Dr. Robin D.G. Kelley's biography of Monk during a rehearsal, Monk became clearly annoyed at the ensemble but refused to speak. One of the band members who had worked with Monk mentioned that Monk preferred shorter articulation and when the group shortened up their notes Monk became happy again.¹⁰⁷

The above anecdote serves as a starting place to think through what a percussive school of double bass would look like. I believe it is a starting place, because I do not believe shorter articulation is the only way to make one play percussively. Much like I do not believe playing a tripleted eighth note means you are swinging. But like swinging, it is a groove thing, it is a rhythm-a-ning, and so articulation is not percussive playing's essence but rather its foundation.

If you will indulge me, I would like to walk you through my thoughts on the percussive school of bass playing as it relates to your percussive school of piano playing. I will start with a quick list of percussive school of bassists, then I will discuss the articulation of the percussive school of bassists, move towards what I would loosely call a rhythmological way of playing the bass (via Nathaniel Mackey) and finish with a musing on what Wadada Leo Smith has termed the sprit drum.¹⁰⁸

If Thelonious Monk is said to be the founder of the percussive school of piano playing, then certainly Wilbur Ware must be the founder of the percussive school of bass playing. There could be a case to be made for Jimmy Blanton being the originator, but I digress. A tentative list, (I am sure I am missing plenty, but the point of this list is not to be comprehensive but to riff on

¹⁰⁷ Robin D.G. Kelley *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original* (New York: Free Press, 2009).

¹⁰⁸ Nathaniel Mackey *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate* (New Directions 1986-2017).

another thinker, show that it was there) Wilbur Ware, George Morrow, John Ore, Buell Neidlinger, Henry Grimes, Alan Silva, Sirone, Fred Hopkins, William Parker, Dominic Duvall, and Joe Morris, etc. Charles Mingus and Jimmy Garrison might have made the list but I have not decided if Garrison being associated with the Coltrane cosmology (a universe into itself)¹⁰⁹ and if Mingus's scope is also too large to be contained into a single school.

Starting with Neidlinger, if we look at your recording with him of his composition O.P. (I assume a reference to Oscar Pettiford), we can hear a distinct approach to articulation that is also evident in Ware's playing.¹¹⁰ Neidlinger opens the track with a solo bass groove before you enter with a quick chord. Neidlinger's articulation on the opening riff is so short that it almost is as if he is 'ghosting' the first pickup. Anthony Braxton might call this playing short attacks or staccato line formings.¹¹¹ Minus the held bent notes, the moving riff before he begins to walk is played with such short articulation it is almost hard to make out the pitches he is playing. Despite (or maybe because of) such short articulation his riff has a clear direction. Therefore, I think the major quality of a bassist in the percussive school of double bass is short articulation that has direction. I believe it is not enough simply to play with shortened lengths of notes, but rather the shortness of the articulation (and the placement of the note) must give the bass line a sense of propulsion that gives the line direction.

Luckily in 2022, a recording you made at Newport in 1965 was released that has helped me a great deal in how I have developed my thoughts on the percussive school of double bass.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Shipp states in "Black Mystery School Pianists" states that members of Coltrane's band (specifically McCoy Tyner) are not included in the Black Mystery school of Pianists because Coltrane's music is so large in scope that it needs to be treated as its own cosmology.

¹¹⁰ *New York City R & B*. Cecil Taylor and Buell Neidlinger. Recorded 1961, released 1972.

¹¹¹ Braxton, *Composition Notes*.

¹¹² *Newport 1965*, Cecil Taylor. 2022.

I am sure you remember it, it comprises of you, Jimmy Lyons on alto, Bill Baron on tenor, Henry Grimes on double bass, and Andrew Cyrille on drums. You are in fact playing the repertoire that you would later record for your *Unit Structures* album in 1966. What I find helpful about listening to this album is the fact that there is only a single bass player (rather than *Unit Structures* and *Conquistador*, which have two), and the album was mixed well enough that Grimes's bass playing is very easy to hear. Throughout, Grimes keeps his recognizable "woody thump" articulation. Although he walks magnificently (reminiscent again of Braxton's staccato line formings) his use of repetition is something I am drawn to. There are moments when, rather than walk, Grimes plays the same figure over and over again, much in the insistent way I would associate with your playing. This insistent way of playing, bordering on obsessive, drives the music, propels it, and ultimately moves it forward. The repetition does not then hold the music back, but rather hurls it forward like gravitational acceleration. Insistence, with short articulation, creates line that drives the music.

Repetition is something I also associate with William Parker's playing. His work with you on the Feel Trio albums speaks to this type of playing but he has also carried it into his work outside of your music. A clear example is in his duo with drummer Hamid Drake. Often in their duo Parker will play a melodic figure that he will repeat over and over again. What is fascinating to me is how Parker's melodic figure will shift rhythmically both by where the figure might fall in the bar (in co-operation with Drake's drumming which will change meters on a dime) and by emphasizing different beats. One melody played in many different rhythmic configurations, the undulating rhythmic configurations emerging from the sheer number of repetitions. I think of this playing as rhythmological playing (borrowing from Nathaniel Mackey). As I am sure you easily see Mackey is riffing on Ornette Coleman's musical philosophical concept and musical

methodology called harmolodics, which conjoins harmony, movement (rhythm), and melody. Here however, rhythmological, is rhythm and melody equating movement. That is how I feel William Parker's playing often functions, the repetitive use of a grooved melodic figure, creates movement.

Wadada Leo Smith illuminates the importance of the drum in creative music.¹¹³ All great creative music for Smith has an element of drumming in it. However, for Smith, a literal drum need not be present for the essence of the drum to be in the music. He refers to this concept as the spirit drum. I see the notion of a spirit drum as being bound up with your statement that this music is the face of the drum. What I have been learning through this process of auditioning for you is that the drum and the percussive approach transcends a simplistic notion of rhythm and or groove. The idea of rhythm having a more a sacred and important role in this music then is something I cannot simply articulate with words. I hope you can hear it in my playing.

Take care,

-Jury

P.S. it strikes me that Smith uses the term spirit. I cannot help reflecting how spirit is related to anima which is related to breath. Spirit drum then can show the sacredness of drums to this music but what about spirit drum being breath-drum? If breathing and drumming can be thought of together as a way of expressing rhythm, that might set up some interesting ways to think about your music. More on that later.

¹¹³ Smith, 1973. Creative music being another name for the music that Taylor makes, an alternative to terms like jazz or free jazz.

Dear Cecil,¹¹⁴

Thank you for your encouraging words and for indulging me on my musings about the percussive school of playing. You are right to point out that it is not something to get too carried away with, but I think it can provide a productive way of viewing a specific lineage of bass players. I am happy to hear that you agree articulation can be a productive entry point into your aesthetic world. I am also relieved that you appreciate my emphasis on rhythm in your music.

I was noticing in reviewing your poem that accompanied your *Unit Structures* album that you make reference to Rhythm-sound, which also is a term that Wadada Leo Smith uses in his compositional notes.¹¹⁵ What also struck me and is something I explored in the enclosed track is your notion that “Rhythm is life the space of time danced through”.¹¹⁶ I want to explore this concept of rhythm using my bow. If you remember my last track consisted of pizzicato playing.

Learning to play this music has meant that I have had to adopt a much more complex way of playing pizzicato on my bass but what has also become apparent is that I have needed to learn new ways to bow the bass. I have changed to using a “Kobo-bow,” a bow invented by percussionist Tatsuya Nakatani and one that William Parker plays on exclusively. I am not sure if you noticed Parker using it before you passed but if you have not seen one, they are shaped with a reverse curve then what you typically see in a bow. The effect is that, when I play legato, the bow really sits in the string but when I play staccato the bow bounces a great deal. Either way, what I am writing to you about today is not simply the fact that I have a different bow but rather I have adopted new ways of conceiving of using the bow to fit in with the unit.

¹¹⁴ Track titled “For Penguin and Lambert (but also Jarred Bottle & Albert Ayler)” can be found:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9VBATicleI>

¹¹⁵ Smith, 1973.

¹¹⁶ Cecil Taylor *Unit Structures* liner notes, 1966

In an essay (that I'm sure you have read) titled "Three ways to play the saxophone", Amiri Baraka (then known as LeRoi Jones) posits that there were three important ways of playing the saxophone that he then relates to what was at the time the current trends in saxophone playing.¹¹⁷ Baraka points out that the three most important saxophonists were tenor saxophonists, Lester Young and Coleman Hawkins, and alto saxophonist Charlie Parker. He compares them to Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, and Ornette Coleman, theorizing three possible strains of playing the saxophone. To riff on that, I want to propose three ways of bowing the double bass to introduce my second track from my audition tape for you. The three ways to bow the bass for me are (excluding a western art/European art music way) a fiddling way, a sound shape approach, and bowing as breath. I will be discussing and performing bowing as breath for this letter and attached audio because I have been trying to add it to my playing for this audition.

The fiddling way of bowing the bass should be familiar to anyone who has heard a majority of the arco solos found in recordings from the early half of the twentieth century. This approach to bowing the bass borrows from the violin traditions of afrological musics. Some of the characteristics are swung slurred notes, uneven bowing patterns (I am thinking of Slam Stewart's incredible solos). Paul Chambers is also the epitome of this style of playing.

A sound shape approach is one I would generally describe for someone who is using the bow to produce sonic effects. Often the role of this style of bowing is to generate sound as line rather than pitch material as line. Slides, harmonics, multiphonics, bowing the tail piece, scraping the hair of the bow across the string are all examples of this style of playing. Players who employ this style of bowing are Barre Phillips, Joelle Leandre, Barry Guy, etc. Again, my intentions are

¹¹⁷ Amiri Baraka "Three Ways to Play the Saxophone" *Black Music* (Brooklyn: Akashic books, original 1959, 2010), 37-43.

not to create a complete list, but more to give examples. I am also not trying to pigeon-hole anyone, all of these bass players could (and probably do) play bowing as breath, I am creating the distinctions as a literary gesture following Baraka.

The last style of bowing is bowing as breath. In what follows, I describe what bowing as breath is, link it to quotes from your poetry as it relates to my reading of Charles Olson's "Projective Verse". What emerges is a link between breath and rhythm such that bowing as breath becomes not just a commentary on articulation but also a commentary on rhythm within the context of rhythm in your music. Further, I relate the notion of hearing and breathing to your issues with western art music reliance on reading scores which blocks in your words action-playing. I also link this form of playing to the ways you invoke shapes, spaces, and landscapes in your writings and music.

Bowing as breath can be thought of as linked to voice or singing way of playing with the bow. Using a bow can produce a wide variety of articulations and effects but it is also especially good at sustaining long notes or long slurred passages. Long slurred passage in the context of bowing as breath I am suggesting can be a means to create lines that mimic breath and singing-like qualities in a given musical line. For instance, bow changes can be thought of as an inhale and what is played under one slur can be thought of as the exhale in which one emits sound. Further, with good bow control a slur can incapsulate the notes of a given phrase and each bow stroke need not be the same length. Meaning, I can play one breath (one bow length) that is 7 beats long and the next one 5 beats long. Such an approach I believe would work well in your music because it would allow me to create lines that are comparable to the long lines Jimmy plays on his saxophone that take the amount of time they need to take.

“The first level or statement of three an opening field of questions, how large it ought or ought not to be.”¹¹⁸ A quote, I hope you do not mind me using, next to

And the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes, and thus is, it is here that, the daily work, the WORK, gets in, for only he, the man who writes, can declare, at every moment, the line its metric and its ending—where its breathing, shall come to, termination.¹¹⁹

The line (in this case poetic line but I think you would agree with me that it can be used for musical line) is as long as the poet (or musician) breaths. Olson (as I know you know) states that the two children of verse are syllable and line, and these two children are what constitute a poem. What I am suggesting is that playing the bass percussively is much like Olson’s attention to syllables and that bowing as breath than might be a way to produce another form of line. If the question is how long it ought or ought not to be, then we are also playing an Olsonion game of syllable vs line, and line as related to short or long breaths.¹²⁰

Breath (even when allegorical as is the case when bowing breath) also connects the player to the body. Olson states “the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE, the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE”.¹²¹ I cannot help but hear this statement as an antidote for the Western notation issues you mention in your liner notes. You state “Western notation blocks total absorption in the ‘action’ playing. The eye looks, mind deciphers, hands attack, ear informs”. Following Olson, using the head by way of the ear, through the recognition

¹¹⁸ Taylor, *Unit Structures*.

¹¹⁹ Charles Olson “Projective Verse” *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960* edited by Donald Allen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999 [1960]), 386-396.

¹²⁰ Nathaniel Mackey “Breath and Precarity”, (Leslie Scalapino Lecture in Innovative Poetics at UC Berkeley, 2016) connects Olson’s breath and Taylor’s open field poetics as well. Can be accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OlrPmLEYmsE>

¹²¹ Ibid.

of a small unit of sound (syllable), to the heart by way of the breath, to the line, can be seen as synergistic with your notion of action playing. Action playing being a body first form of playing that does not rely on notation which as you say blocks total absorption.

If you will indulge me further, Olson's emphasis on hearing I also see echoed in your work: "To play what one hears is our objective downward & inward are the forces bent to live as recognition of the invisible: spirit".¹²² If we translate spirit to anima (and remember that anima is often used as breath) then Olson and you are speaking in tandem together. You say "Rhythm-sound energy found in the amplitude of each time unit". If I replace energy with breath (spirit=anima=breath=energy) then *does rhythm-sound consists of the maximum amount of energy fit into a single time unit?* If so, then the question of the length it ought to be comes down to how well are you breathing or maybe how alive you really are?

Time measurements as isolated matter abstracted from mind, transformed symbols thru conductor, agent speaking in angles; a movement vacuum death encircling act, defining nothing Pythagorian desert a waste land lit deafness before ultimate silent arena senses ride naked in souls.¹²³

Am I right that this passage also alludes to western notation's blocking of action playing? What strikes me is the containment of time via measurements that is "abstracted from the mind"; mind separated from ear, which is separated from the body that produces breath, that produces line. This abstraction leads to what you say is "movement vacuum death encircling act". The word vacuum stands out because it quite literally cannot contain breath. Is that why the Pythagorian desert is deaf, because it cannot hear and because it cannot hear it cannot breathe? If breath is

¹²² Taylor "Aqoueh R- Oyo".

¹²³ Taylor *Unit Structures*.

linked to anima, and anima as spirit but also life, then when you say “Rhythm is life the space of time danced thru” then is Rhythm breath that the space of time danced through? More on dance in another letter but I wanted to stick with space for a little longer if you don’t mind.

Space or spaces is something that jumps out at me a lot in your work. You open “Sound Structure of Subculture Becoming Major Breath/Naked Fire Gesture” with a description of spaces. Actually, the title of the poem alludes to a sonic structure of a subculture – could that be considered a space as well? A space for this new subculture which you helped create around sound and music making? You state: “From *Anacrusis* to *Plain* patterns and possibility converge, mountain sides to dry rock beds, a fountain spread before prairie, form is possibility...”.¹²⁴ The patterns I imagine are your units (*Anacrusis* units and *Plain* units) which when processed (a term I borrow from Joe Morris) produce an endless landscape of material where “form is possibility” rather than fixed or pre-ordained. Given the “content, quality and change growth in addition to direction found” which I assume is part of processing a given unit (and you state that this is being done simultaneously by what I assume are all players in the ensemble) then “the paths of harmonic and melodic light, give architecture sound structures acts creating flight”.¹²⁵ So, by playing your units it seems that spaces emerge. These spaces do not have determined form, they can be as large or as small as they “ought or ought not to be”. Then the opening field of questions are not simply a field of questions but rather a gesture at the field, the question of “how large it ought or ought not to be” can produce. Again, remembering Olson, focussing on the question of size (by way of the breath and syllable) produces the field, the container of what some might call, form. Actually, form not as container but rather endless possibilities that cannot be

¹²⁴ Taylor, *Unit Structures*.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*.

contained (maybe that is why Joe Morris calls his book “Perpetual Frontier”?). Is that the unknown totality the player emerges into, the space that is ever changing based on attunement to breath, or maybe attunement to life?

If the question of “how long it ought or ought not to be” can produce a field of possibilities, field being a space, then is that how “the player advances to the area, an unknown totality”? The space is “made whole thru self-analysis (improvisation)” would it not be the focus on one’s breath and the length of the breath that produces the line? The line as I mentioned earlier made via attention to the breath and syllable and then you simply choose to make the line that length. To attune oneself to the breath can be space of self-analysis or meditation or what you call improvisation. That is how one can advance to the area?

Can this attention also get one out of the Pythagorean desert? What about the body as area as well? You say, “Would then define the pelvis as cathartic region prime undulation, ultimate communion, internal while life is becoming, visible physical conversation between all body’s limbs: Rhythm is life the space of time danced thru.” Focussing on the physical conversation between the body and its limbs and I imagine its breath as well can let one out of the Pythagorean desert into the area of unknown totality. Would it be wrong to say it also lets you be in the space where rhythm can dance through? Is that why improvisation is self-analysis, because the line is best generated by listening to one’s breath, analyzing the length of the breath, to produce line?

Earlier, I alluded to rhythm being linked to breath as energy as a reflection of how alive someone is. Is that why you say later in the poem: “Rhythm then is existence and existence time, content offers time quantity to shape: color mental physical participation. Passage is search against mirror held – reveal the waters of greed running love an older child set to the pain in

fire”. If we need breath to live (and we do) and rhythm can be thought of as linked to breath but rhythm is also “life the space of time danced through”, then it makes sense that rhythm is also existence, which would be why it would also be time. Is the self-reflection (improvisation) and the focus on the length of how long breath ought or ought not to be, the mirror held which can reveal the pain in fire? Is pain here the blues or duende? I will hold off on that for another letter.

One last point and I promise I will stop typing for now. Sound Structure of Subculture Becoming is listed above Major Breath/Naked Fire Gesture. What I have started realizing through spending time with your work is the “Becoming” can be read with the bottom line, so: “Becoming Major Breath Naked Fire Gesture”. If sound structure is the unit then perhaps learning to play it helps you become major breath and naked fire gesture. Major breath also being alive and naked fire gesture the result of holding up a mirror to oneself? Either way, reading your poetry always inspires me.

Recently, a video recording of you playing in Montreux in 1976 was posted to YouTube.¹²⁶ It must have been recorded around the time you made *Dark to Themselves* because the ensemble had David S. Ware on saxophone and Marc Edwards on drums. Obviously, Jimmy and Raphe were there but unlike other albums of yours from that time period it has Alan Silva on bass rather than Sirone. In any event, the performance opens with you plucking the inner strings of the piano while Silva bows the bass. The way Silva bows the bass is getting at what I partially mean by bowing as breath. His sound warbles with vibrato that is almost voice like. He digs so deep into long lines that he blows (breathes) with the horns to the point where he vocalizes while

¹²⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVCTvHIBVJI&t=545s> video no-longer available on YouTube.

playing. How could you not when so much breath (spirit) is coming out of your instrument. You of course join in too with your voice.

I hope you can hear my understanding of breath from your poetry and Olson's theorizing in my new way of bowing the bass.

Take Care,

-Jury

Dear Cecil,¹²⁷

I hope this letter finds you well. Thank you for response back and your updates on the forming of the new unit. I am very excited to hear that both Sunny Murray and Ronald Shannon Jackson will be playing drums. I know Jimmy is of course joining the horn section, have you been in touch with Eric or Albert at all?

I appreciate your comments on my previous track and letter and thank you for your encouragement to continue to bow as breath. I especially will pay attention as you say “to the way the breath can wheeze, choke, and splutter” out from someone and try to get at that even more with my playing. Further, I found your thoughts on breath and the voice particularly insightful. I agree with you there are many ways the breath can be heard in one’s voice, such as with your example of a “raspy voice”, as a voice so filled with breath that you hear the breath and often the throat as well as the sound of the voice.

I would like to get at this type of breathing in the track enclosed title “Chthonic strum”, an allusion to Nathaniel Mackey’s writings which reference duende.¹²⁸ I am sure you are aware of the concept of duende, I remember reading in the interview with Funkhouser that you like García Lorca’s poetry.¹²⁹ I specifically wanted to write about Mackey’s interpretation of duende and relate it to your notion of breath as an attempt to get closer to your music.

¹²⁷ Track titled “For Aunt Nancy (but also Alan Silva and Henry Grimes)” can be found:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7NPXc2z-UDw>

¹²⁸ Mackey, *Ated A.D.* (New York: New Directions, 2017), 102. Mackey, muses on a low subterranean sound that the band hears when on a drive to a gig. This sound which the character N refers to as a chthonic strum (among other names) sets the tone of the gig, in which balloons emerge bearing messages for the audience to read. At the end of the gig the character Penguin removes the mouthpiece from his saxophone and blows on the horn. In *Cante Moro* (which I will continue with in the next paragraphs), Mackey describes Sonny Rollins doing the same thing at the end of East Broadway Rundown, in connection with duende. My connection of Chthonic strum with duende is related to Mackey’s writing of Penguin playing in the same style as Rollins.

¹²⁹ Chris Funkhouser “being matter ignited... an interview with Cecil Taylor” (*Hambone* No. 12. 1994).

In Nathaniel Mackey's article "Cante Moro" he unpacks the inclusion of Federico García Lorca's inclusion in the collection of the New American Poetry anthology.¹³⁰ Mackey unpacks Lorca's reading of *duende*, specifically Lorca's understanding of *duende* as "dark sounds" found in *cante jondo*, deep song. While Mackey's article is as much about *duende* as it is about cross-cultural engagement with black aesthetics, I want to focus specifically on the concept of *duende* as it relates to your music.

I am not going to fully summarize Mackey's article but instead pull a few points that might help for our ongoing dialogue. Mackey notes that Lorca opens his essay on *duende* with a quote from the singer Manuel Torre who states, "All that has dark sounds had *duende*" and that dark sounds has been translated also as black sounds.¹³¹ Further, Torre linked his Gypsy background to the fabled origins in Egypt stating that "What you must search for, and find, is the black torso of the Pharaoh".¹³² Mackey riffs that Torre "meant that one has to root one's voice in fabulous origins, find one's voice in the dark among the dead".¹³³ He articulates that "the word *duende* means "spirit", a kind of gremlin, a gremlin-like troubling spirit".¹³⁴ This notion of troubling spirit I believe is related to the spirit and voice discussion we were having earlier. Mackey goes on to say: "One of the things that marks the arrival of *duende* in flamenco singing is a sound of the trouble in the voice. The voice becomes troubled. Its eloquence becomes eloquence of another order, a broken problematic, self-problematizing eloquence."¹³⁵ The voice

¹³⁰ Nathaniel Mackey "Cante Moro" in *Paracritical Hinge* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018), 181-198.

¹³¹ Mackey, "Cante Moro" 181.

¹³² Mackey, 182.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

then is not a regular voice but one that troubles the notion of a voice, both with its strain but also clearly in its way of conjuring or invoking the dark sounds.

Mackey states that *duende* is “something beyond technical competence or even technical virtuosity”.¹³⁶ He summarizes a story from Lorca, where a talented singer is singing for an audience in tavern in Cádiz and her singing although virtuosic and beautiful aroused no reaction from the audience. The lack of reaction was because although singing well she was not singing with *duende*. Lorca says that she “got to her feet, tossed off a big glass of firewater and began to sing with a scorched throat, without voice, without breath or color, but with *duende*”.¹³⁷ To sing with *duende* is to sing without voice or breath, and to as Mackey says, “to find one’s voice in the dark among the dead.”

How does one sing without voice or breath? I would hypothesize that maybe it is to sing in such a way where voice and breath are heard equally to the point where they cancel each other out. To sing in such a way that troubles the notion of the voice without breath or breath without voice. To trouble the sound of breath and to trouble the sound of voice. One cannot get there by simply having a technique for *duende* but rather by abandoning one’s footing in the world and finding one’s voice among the dead. To find one’s voice among the dead assumes that voice is not your voice but another’s voice you’re trying on. Trying on another’s voice might indeed make it sound like you are singing without a voice or without breath. Maybe without breath because without breath there is no life and thus one can truly sing with the voice of the dead. I hear this invocation as the mirror to Baraka’s formulation that this music is to find the self and kill it.

¹³⁶ Mackey, 183.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

In another paper on duende Mackey quotes Mack Thomas (did you ever meet him?) on Dolphy who said that he

... begins with what the horn will not do. He implies beyond the horn. He tries to sneak through the limitations at some swift, flat angle. He tries to stroke through them head-on. He makes you hurt with knowing how he felt that range, with listening to the faith he had in his bones and ligaments and muscles and breath.¹³⁸

Mackey uses this quote to link Lorca's understanding of duende to the role of dispossession in writer Wilson Harris's work. To play what the horn will not do, or to imply beyond the horn, is that not a commentary on going past the instrument? To adopt a new voice outside of one's own, maybe the voice of the dead? Is that what Alan Silva was doing in the video I mentioned in the last letter? Bowing with so much breath that he could not help but vocalize, vocalize to the point of screaming? I also hear the need to sneak in the scorched sounds, taking on the voice of the dead is never easy, as Mackey mentions, Spicer notes that "the dead are notoriously hard to satisfy", one must sneak in the sounds to attract or take on the voice of the dead.¹³⁹

Later in Cante Moro, Mackey points out that Robert Duncan (a poet I know was an influence for you) notes that duende is "the speaking more than one knew what", like playing what one's instrument cannot do.¹⁴⁰ Mackey goes on to say that "the taking on of another voice, and that is very much what duende is in cante jondo. It is a taking over of one's voice by another voice."¹⁴¹ Mackey links this taking on of another voice with the idea of being ridden, such as

¹³⁸ Mackey, "Limbo, Dislocation, Phantom Limb: Wilson Harris and the Caribbean Occasion", (*Criticism*, 1980, Vol, 22 No. 1 1980), 71.

¹³⁹ Mackey, "Cante Moro" 185, 2018.

¹⁴⁰ Mackey, 186.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

being ridden by a spirit from vodun or voodoo. I have heard that you once described one of your objectives in music was “motivic possession”¹⁴². To be possessed by a motive, (musical motive but maybe also motive as another intention) might get us back to the repetition I invoked in an earlier letter with a rhythmtonalodic way of playing. To repeat to the point of straining to lose one’s breath in the repetition, to repeat with a scorched throat. Or maybe to repeat until the listener “hurt[s] with knowing how [you] felt that range, with listening to the faith [you] had in [your] bones and ligaments and muscles and breath.” (my interjections added).

Where do these other voices come from? Mackey’s work (fiction, criticism, and academic) has spoken much about the “other voices”. The search for a meta-voice. I want to write about another way of playing the other voices. Also, via Mackey but from a different angle, if you don’t mind.

Near the end of *Cante Moro*, Mackey discusses duende in the piece “East Broadway Rundown” by Sonny Rollins. He mentions how during Jimmy Garrison’s solo, Garrison plays the bass like a Spanish guitar because of the way he strums the bass. The Spanish guitar obviously being connected to Flamenco and canto jondo where duende is present. This comparison reminded me of a scene in Mackey’s novel *Bass Cathedral* where during the listening of the band’s new album a balloon arises from the phonograph during the character Aunt Nancy’s bass solo. The bass solo was in the style of Jimmy Garrison and that triggered balloons to emerge from the phonograph, each balloon bearing a message written in words.

¹⁴² Grundy, David. “Cecil Taylor’s Voodoo Poetics”. *Point of Departure*. <https://www.pointofdeparture.org/PoD70/PoD70Taylor.html#:~:text=stepped.%20This%20%20%20historic%20dialectic,cl aim%20to%20universal%20knowledge%2C%20Voodoo> Grundy (drawing on his conference paper on the subject) points readers to some of the connections between voodoo/vodun and Taylor’s music practice, while calling for increased scholarship on the subject. Grundy states that in a discussion with one of Taylor’s former student’s Bobby Zankel, Zankel claims that Taylor once described his music as motivic possession.

Other voices on balloons from a solo filled with duende, a literal manifestation of new voices in captured breath (balloons). Without going into too many details on the books Mackey starts alluding to Aunt Nancy's bass playing with its strumming and thumping as Chthonic strum. The link to duende being the strumming of Jimmy Garrison's bass as well as Mackey's description of Aunt Nancy's bass playing as breathless etc.¹⁴³

The link of Chthonic strum helped me connect duende to your music. When I began my PhD, I originally planned on writing a dissertation on climate change and this music, before I fell in love with your music and threw 110 percent of myself into the study of it. One of my favourite thinkers on climate change is Dr. Donna Haraway. Her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, helped me think through climate change and possible ways of living and dying well with one another in a thick present. The term Chthulucene is presented as an alternative to Anthropocene. The term Anthropocene being a way of naming humans (Anthropos) as geological force that via anthropogenic affects has produced global climate change. The term Anthropocene is often rejected because it blames climate change on all Anthropos which is not accurate because not all Anthropos have contributed to production of climate change. Many communities and groups of peoples on the planet have life ways that do not produce anthropogenic effects that can cause global climate change.

Chthulucene is an alternative name Haraway proposes. One that links her project of making kin across species and temporalities as integral to sustainable futures and presents and

¹⁴³ The link is subtly depicted. Mackey never states duende in relation to Aunt Nancy's playing, however the strumming and plucking style of her solo is linked to Jimmy Garrison (3), which in Cante Moro Mackey refers to as playing with duende. He then links her playing style to Chthonic strum linking duende to Chthonic playing. On further reflection of what she was thinking about during soloing and telling another character about her dead father, Mackey writes "She seemed agitated, put upon, Djamilaa says, pestered by a gremlin or a ghost" (6). Duende in Spanish folklore are gremlins according to Lorca. Which links, duende bass playing, with strumming and Chthonic ones.

her rejection of God's trick solutions and perspectives. She achieves these goals by the invocation of Chthonic deities, gods and spirits linked to the underworld in Greek mythology as an alternative to the sky gods of many religions. She states:

Chthonic ones are beings of the earth, both ancient and up-to-the minute. I imagine chthonic ones as replete with tentacles, feelers, digits, cords, whiptales, spider legs, and very unruly hair. Chthonic ones romp in multicritter humus but have no truck with sky-gazing Homo. Chthonic ones are monsters in the best sense; they demonstrate and perform the material meaningfulness of earth processes and critters.¹⁴⁴

Throughout the book, Haraway calls us to stay with trouble rather than shy away from it or fix it. She also attunes us to the Chthonic ones and how to live and die with them and the rest of the earth.

I want to bring Haraway up as she provides the link between the Chthonic strum (duende) of Aunt Nancy's bass, the singing with the voice of the dead, and your music. One way of playing duende for your music is the repetition I mentioned earlier, the repetition to the point of scorching one's throat. The other way I have suggested is to play with breath to the point where one must resort to using voice (in addition to your instrument), to take another's voice (your voice) in addition to one's own voice (instrument) maybe one way of describing Mackey's meta-voice.

The other way is to play the voices of the Chthonic ones. The Chthonic ones being from the underworld (the dead, which duende alludes) but also the voices of the muddy ones, the thick voices of Terra. The Chthonic ones then following Haraway's use, are not just dead but rather the

¹⁴⁴ Haraway, 2.

creatures and monsters of Terra, the ones who might sing the deep songs naturally. Songs so deep they must come from the dark.

I hear this invocation as related to what you said in interview with Joseph Chonto quoted in the liner notes for your album *Dark to Themselves*.

Music... is the force of nature which is what the sound is- the eternal sound. The beauty of whatever made those trees, those stones, the rivers... that is the living force I'm concerned with. That is the force that leaves me at those highest points of ecstasy... I'm trying to be in touch with and appreciative of... this day – the way the sky looked last night – extraordinary! ... the beautiful forces unleashed were not a manifestation of anger, but manifestations of the beauty of nature. What we try to do now is consciously bring the beauty of living experience and to share that.¹⁴⁵

I am therefore not trying to bring duende in relation to your music as simply a painful invocation but rather as a way to get at the aspects of your music which speak to its relationship with the spirits of the planet; the strained or choked breath (spirit) that I referred to at the beginning of this letter in terms of bowing.

The darkness or deepness of duende may not need to always be painful but the turn to the darkness of the Chthonic region might also be a way to get closer to the earth. You have said:

“Improvisation is a tool of refinement an attempt to capture ‘dark’ instinct cultivation of the acculturated to learn one’s nature in response to the group (society) first hearing ‘beat’ as it exists in each living organism.”¹⁴⁶ Is attempting to capture dark instinct a way of playing with duende?

¹⁴⁵ Cecil Taylor, Liner notes for *Dark to Themselves*, 1976.

¹⁴⁶ Taylor, Aqoueh R-Oyo.

If improvising is self-analysis, and duende is the voice of your not voice, then to try to capture it is to understand yourself in relation to another. Is that why capturing dark instinct helps you acculturate your nature in response to a group whether that be society or a subculture of sound? That is, how you can understand yourself relationally, in kin with “those trees, those stones, the rivers”—is that the living force that you were concerned with?

Anyways, enclosed please find my track that attempts to get at what I have been writing to you about. I chose to play in the lowest register of the instrument, the abyssal register of the instrument to invoke the deep sounds. I will have more to say on that in coming letters. Thanks again for taking the time to read and listen.

As ever,

-Jury

Dear Cecil,¹⁴⁷

Thank you again for listening and your feedback. I feel very fortunate that you are taking the time to indulge me on my writings and music. I agree with you that I should not forget about the fun in your music, and I should not be afraid to as you say, “dance more than you cry”. This next track builds on a lot of what I wrote in the last letter but rather than focussing on duende I will offer a reading of meta-voice and playing in the astral register.

As I mentioned in a past letter, I have been deeply engaged with Anthony Braxton’s language musics. If you are not familiar, they are 12 instrumental languages derived from breaking down the possibilities of what can be done on an alto saxophone.¹⁴⁸ Braxton arrived at these through his process of ‘conceptual grafting’, which is a method of inquiry where one looks at the ways to play an instrument and finds minute playing techniques (technique, articulation, etc.) and figures a way to expand them into a language in-it-of-itself. For instance, one language music is titled “trills” and having spent considerable time working with trills I have developed my own language just for trills. I am sure you can see the potential in such a practice. I imagine Braxton, who I know has acknowledged your influence, began his inquiry after listening to your constructivist approach to music making.

Either way, I wanted to write to you about my exploration of multiphonics. Specifically, multiphonics to explore the astral register of the bass and take a stab at the meta-voice (as it relates to duende and abyss) I mentioned earlier in relation to Nathaniel Mackey’s writings.

¹⁴⁷ Track titled “For Djamilaa and N. (but also Anthony Braxton and John Coltrane)” can be found: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DpFjnwPFMQ4>

¹⁴⁸ Braxton, *Composition Notes*.

Multiphonics for playing astral both because of its registral capacity (having higher pitches) and also because of its implied astral/cosmological capacity.

I first heard multiphonics in Coltrane's music as a teen. I did not know the name for multiphonics, but I certainly heard the multiphonic sound from Trane's horn as something interesting that I wanted to replicate on the bass. I would try imitating them by haphazardly bowing differently and pressing the string down with my left hand in different ways. I eventually got to a point where I could generate them, not with a lot of control, but the sound was there.

What has drawn me to multiphonics are its ability to illicit both a metallic like sound on the double bass but also its vocal qualities. A multiphonic in a true sense is a splitting of pitch into multiple pitches via the combination of right hand and left-hand placement. The splitting of the pitch results in multiple partials being activated in such a way that it can sound like multiple harmonics.¹⁴⁹ There is both a grating and ethereal sound of multiphonics, that ethereality is something I want to explore in its relation to your music.

The ethereality of multiphonics I assume comes from the complexity and delicacy of its sound. Not to say that multiphonics are not loud but they do require delicate listening to hear the myriad of pitches that can arise from a single multiphonic. Further, there is a delicacy in producing them because a slight misplacement of right hand or left hand can either produce an

¹⁴⁹ Multiphonics/harmonics were most thoroughly explored on the double bass by composer Francisco Grillo and his student Stefano Scodannibio. There have been papers written on them by scholar/bassist Hakon Thelin such as in his article "Multiphonics on the Double Bass" which can be accessed at <http://haakonthelein.com/multiphonics/multiphonics-on-the-double-bass> and improviser and double bass innovator Mark Dresser's "Double Bass Multiphonics" in *Strad*, Vol. 120, No. 1434, 2009), 72-75.. Ashley John Long, has a website dedicated to "extended techniques" that covers many of the details on how to execute multiphonics which can be accessed at <https://www.themoderndoublebass.org.uk/multiphonics.html>.

alternative multiphonic but quite often it results in a non-focused noise. Again, not that producing a noise is not desirable, but the noise of a missed multiphonic is a separate technique.

In any event, multiphonics (like harmonics) generally produce pitches that are in the highest register of the double bass. I have been thinking about how multiphonics allow for the double bass to play in the register you term as astral. I believe you make the distinction of higher pitches being the astral register and low pitches being of the abyssal register. In the last letter, I played in the abyssal register, the chthonic register, the deep sound of the double bass.

In this letter and enclosed track, I want to think through and play in the astral register but rather than simply playing high on the double bass, I wanted to look at the implications of your reference to the differing registers as astral vs abyss.¹⁵⁰ If the abyss can be considered as related to concepts such as the underworld (where the chthonic ones dwell) and the astral being the celestial realm than more is at play when you named these musical registers. I want to approach thinking about the register in two different ways, the celestial (music of the spheres) implication and astral as search of meta-voice.

Dictionary definitions of astral tend to associate it with being a ‘celestial’ realm. I know your invocation of the term is from careful study of vodon, which I have begun to read about but would not be arrogant enough to venture to discuss those aspects of your use of the term in much depth. If we just use a simple definition of astral being a plain of existence related to celestial realms than it is hard in a musical context to not think about the music of the spheres. Music of the spheres being related to Pythagoras and his measuring of western ideas of pitch. I do not want to get too far into Pythagoras because the history of his measuring practices I would argue

¹⁵⁰ Grundy, “Cecil Taylor’s Voodoo Poetics”. Also, “Cecil Taylor: African Code, Black Methodology” interview by J.B. Figi, *Downbeat*, April 10th, 1975.

resulted in what you call dividing of the body and the mind. Anyways, what I do find interesting about Pythagoras is the ratios that give rise to the ability to produce harmonics and multiphonics. I am playing with the association of multiphonics playing higher pitches located in the astral register while the math that produces the logics of multiphonics being related to music of the spheres.

When I first heard your album title *being astral and all registers*, a posthumous recording of yours with Tony Oxley, I misheard it as being “astral *in* all registers.” I know the title is derived from your poem “Choir” which I very much enjoy but if you don’t mind, I was hoping to write briefly about the implication of my mishearing of your poetry. Specifically, what it would mean to be astral in all registers.

It seems to me that being astral or becoming astral has a utopic impulse. If one wants to become astral, then one is seeking to be part of the stars or celestial bodies. To exceed oneself and move past the planet. The scope of which is so monumental it cannot be simply imagined. In an interview in 1975 you state “The music is about joy. The music is... the purpose of the music is, to achieve a levitation, or a trance which is the existence beyond the normal existence.”¹⁵¹ I hope I am not overstepping but that seems like a gesture to being astral. The music’s goal then is to become astral, to move into another state, both physically (to levitate) and mentally (to go into a trance). I cannot help but remember that you title one of your tracks “Stepping on Stars” on *Garden Part 2*.

The ecstatic quality of multiphonics I believe gestures to some of what you are getting at. Multiphonics have timbral quality to them that sound other-worldly due to the splitting of the

¹⁵¹ Cecil Taylor interview with Say Brother on GBH program “New Music” (1975) can be accessed at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Te0XSIzA_Is

tones. Splitting of tones means that your sound is always exceeding itself because it is both one sound and multiple sounds. It is heard at once (much like a chord) but does not have the harmonic unity of chord because the multiple sounds are generated from a single pitch. So, a multiphonic is both a single pitch and more than one pitch. It is like being yourself while also being a mirror of yourself. To put it like Baraka does, “it slides away from the proposed”.¹⁵² If the proposed is the fundamental and the multiphonic is the resultant note both are heard and displace each other in the act of hearing. It is almost a fugitive sound because it is always getting away from the sound you think it is. That constant exceeding borders on a flight to somewhere else, or maybe even flight as in flying up to somewhere else. That movement away and up might be a way to become astral. To be astral in all registers (again I know a mishearing of what you wrote) would be possible with multiphonics because multiphonics can be activated in any register of the instrument. I can activate multiphonics in the low register and medium register with simple left hand and right-hand configurations.

It is hard for me to describe multiphonics and not think of Nathaniel Mackey’s concept of a metavoice.¹⁵³ Meta meaning self-referential, so, a voice that refers to itself. I have been thinking a lot about this concept. A metavoice cannot simply be something analogous to finding one’s voice on the instrument, because that would simply be ‘your-voice’ or something of that nature. The invocation of meta must be a voice which refers to your voice. Given you are playing it must be a voice that refers to your voice that is not your voice but comes from your voice. The meta-voice then can also be a way following Baraka, to find the self and kill the self because to find your voice to play with another voice must be a type of replacing the self with another self.

¹⁵² Baraka, 156.

¹⁵³ Mackey, “Bedouin Hornbook” in *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate* New Directions 1986-2017.

A multiphonic does that a bit, it derives from a fundamental pitch but sounds pitches that reference the fundamental given pitch albeit with another voice (because of its complex timbre).

I know I am harping on this concept a lot, but it is because I believe it is something extremely important in your work. I could play an academic game of theorizing this vocal quality as the grain of the voice (following Barthes) or the notion of the rupturing potential of jouissance which has synergy with what I am saying, however I think the best examples of what I am trying to get at occur in the music itself. Specifically, your music and the way you orchestrate your ensembles, maybe your Ellingtonian moments. For instance, take track 1 on your album 3 *Phasis*, after your solo piano intro, when the band hits playing what I imagine is the head (your plain), the music begins to build and unfold very quickly. The sounds of the trumpets, violin, and sax, weave in out of the similar pitch material often arriving on a single note together. They hit the note but separate constantly in such a way that the pitch itself seems to split. These moments occur throughout the album and to me are some of the most ecstatic and rupturing playing. I can think of similar moments in *Dark to Themselves* and other large unit albums. Your solo piano gets there as well but there is something different when the horns play your music like that.¹⁵⁴

I want to get to that joyous sound in my playing. Of course, an ensemble would help but the effect can happen (maybe without the same level of grandeur) with multiphonics. A brilliant splitting of pitch, that melts away, the grounding of a stable pitch. Or maybe a splitting of pitch that allows one to take flight from it. Maybe again, a way of taking flight to the astral plane or a way of being astral.

¹⁵⁴ Taylor's bass player Buell Neidlinger states "Cecil's trying to get the vocal sound of the piano, and I think he's achieved it on many occasions. You can almost hear the piano scream or cry." Spellman, *Four Lives in the Bebop Business*, 47. Fred Moten picks up on this moment in *Black and Blur* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 182.

Anyways, I hope I get there with this track.

As ever.

-Jury

Dear Cecil,¹⁵⁵

This letter will be my last one to you in the context of my audition. I wanted to formulate an understanding of how to dance on the instrument. I remember reading in *Four Lives in the Bebop Business*, A.B. Spellman quotes you discussing your preference for musicians who dance at the instrument. You make reference to Duke Ellington's foot movement as well as Horace Silver's dancing at the piano. You say that "I try to imitate on the piano the leaps in space a dancer makes".¹⁵⁶ I tried putting into words what dancing at the instrument might mean but kept failing. I realized that some things cannot be described and in your own words "it's fun if you don't let them make you write all this stuff down".¹⁵⁷

So rather than write all of this stuff down, I chose to play. I hope you can hear me dancing on the instrument and I hope you know how much it has meant to make this music for you. It has been a privilege writing to you and playing for you.

Take care,

-Jury

¹⁵⁵Final track titled "For B'Loon (but also Nathaniel Mackey and Joe Morris)" can be found: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hngbJejd47E>

¹⁵⁶ Spellman, 42.

¹⁵⁷ "Christopher Felver's documentary "All the Notes: a Portrait of Cecil Taylor" 2006. Can be viewed: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yr_Akk2hNrM&t=193s

Chapter 5: Poetry

Introduction

This chapter is inspired by the following quotation:

I never understood how musicians could play music for poets and not read poems. I don't understand musicians who can play for dancers and not know how to dance. I mean it's very interesting to me, you were talking about your research; well, one of the things—before I put words down, I probably have read a thousand words.¹⁵⁸

To learn to play Taylor's music I have had to study his poetry which was demonstrated in the Letters to Cecil chapter. My exploration of Taylor's poetry has led to reading the poetry and prose of Nathaniel Mackey. The above quote illuminates that for Taylor his research process involves reading "a thousand words" and engaging in the art practices that he uses as inspiration. Further, in the same interview when discussing an upcoming performance with the dancer Min Tanaka, Taylor states "I'm dealing with how to get to the piano, what kind of movement is going to be required."¹⁵⁹ For Taylor the act of performing does not start or end at the piano but rather is a totalizing experience. His music often incorporates chanting, dance, and the reading of poetry in addition to playing the piano. I did not learn to dance for this dissertation, but I did want to avoid being a musician who could play for poets but not read or write poetry as Taylor suggests above. As a result, I have written poetry (found below) inspired by reading Taylor and Mackey's poems. These poems loosely pair with the audition tracks found in the Letters to Cecil chapter.

¹⁵⁸ Chris Funkhouser "being matter ignited... an interview with Cecil Taylor" (*Hambone* No. 12. 1994).

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

For Cecil Taylor: Before and around midnight

Double Bass Ensemblage

i.

Blisters stinging like thumbs

thumbed through, held through

aloft, we cried, we dangled,

desperate

swearing

Out past midnight,

round...

We came though, not simply as we were but as we weren't

desperately trying to see what couldn't be seen

It was, what was, but all that had grown past

passed us, was the pass we sought

found not, what we sought but in so finding we found

trying to thicken as if to thicken were to know

As if to know, were to know...

Knowing to be the lowest form of magic,

Knowing to be the lowest form of knowing.

It wasn't that we weren't, it was that we weren't already.

Total-area moving to form... form from which we knew.

We knew that new was the age and that wasn't a problem.

It was only a problem if...

If, was the word to avoid

A void itself it were,

It wasn't that we weren't. It was that. That which we were.

ii.

Thump trickled down

avoided the ring... avoided the slide

made line by making line by moving line

line being what we thought it was, line being how we got there

line made up of sounds, sounds added

constructivist is what he called it, construct it was how we made it

We made it for him so he could hear

We made it together, instrument and player.

To hear the line as breath, breath by way of ear, by way of head.

Reading troubles eye, that troubles ear.

Ear then, by way of hand by way of line, by way of process, gives way to line.

Line, direction, to movement, movement creating shape.

Phrase then being line's stage-name, phrase being lines understudy

I don't concern myself with form. I don't concern myself with phrase.

Line our only project. Line something we can build.

Something we build... hand touches board, board pressed to activate string,

String speaks to ring body, air moves, to give way to sound.

Sound emitting, not from one but from we.

Sound emitting gives way to line.

Line gives pulse, that gives rhythm its feel.

Its feel our touch, our sound.

iii.

We were searching for a voice...

(Voice being the name we give to sound, when sound has a certain intention to it)

Voice is what we sought, but also what sought us

Pre-voice is what we were, pre-voice being a voice in itself

Split-voice, pre-voice, voice searching for voice, to give sound intention

Split-voice refracted

Inter and Intra voice, moved by way of stolen-voice

Stolen-voice our regret, stolen-voice our only solution

Break-voice, our way of splitting the split-voice

It moved by way of break, breaking its movement and its result

It was in this break, in this cut, this move to cut and thereby break, that we sought.

What we sought was not just voice then but the way by which voice might be made.

We wanted to make voice by splitting, breaking, voice...

This was the song we were creating, through creaking of the string and breaking of the sound...

This was the deep sound, deep croak we were after, the splitting of many sounds to form a sound, to form a voice...

iv.

“This was the inner music and voice of the peacock I suddenly encountered and echoed and sang as I never heard myself sing before”- Wilson Harris¹⁶⁰

We came across a rock, knees scraped, hands worn.

We knew the only way was up...

not so much as up but rather higher..

not so much as higher but rather astral

You looked at us and said “Can you imagine all the spirits that are coming out of that rock”

We didn’t know but we knew the only way was up...

You said “We are the transitory poems”

We thought we understood and so we ascended.

Ascension is what we sought, but not by way of train but maybe by way of Glenn.

Spearman, we thought we were, hunters, seekers.

Horseman, maybe even...

But we knew we needed to climb.

By way of Trane and by way of you, we knew ascension came from preparation.

We the bass and player, bass on back, you our guide.

The spirits were with us,

you their catcher.

This was the way to be astral, to be amongst the ghosts.

We sought the means to be astral, we sought how to move as transitory poems.

We knew this story...

ascending up a rock, seeing through the rock into small windows

but when we looked all we saw was a field..

A field, a plain, we were climbing higher, but we were also moving forward on the plain

The field, the plain, you our guide,

¹⁶⁰ Wilson Harris, “Palace of the Peacock” from *The Guyana Quartet*, 110. London: Faber, 2021.

being astral is what we sought but you reminded us of other registers, too.
Registered that you were teaching us more than about which way to aim
Registered that you were showing us something else
Something else or something different(!!!!)...
We knew what we sought could not be held, at least not for long.
You said remember what Dolphy said...

We listened for his whistle, the duende laughed and we fell.

Conclusion: An after-the-fact rumination on a dissertation or on making dissertations creak

In this dissertation I have attempted to analyze Taylor's music through a respectful approach to his artistic practice. Specifically, I did not want to isolate my understanding of his music by only addressing Taylor's music and separating it from his other artistic practices such as dance and poetry. Nor did I want to isolate the music by transcribing and putting it in western notation. I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation Taylor's disdain for western art notation and wanted to respect his concerns with certain forms of notation. I did not want to be one of those who "divided the body treating the mind as divine agent" and thereby reinforce the Cartesian Subject implicit in Taylor's critique.¹⁶¹

When listening to Taylor's musical output it became clear that his music shifted with each iteration of his ensemble. For instance, it is easy to hear a difference between Taylor's music pre- and post-Jimmy Lyons heading the saxophone chair in his ensemble. In Taylor's poem "Aquoeh R—Oyo" he refers to the ensemble as a microcosm and a living organism. This revelation calls into question analyses of Taylor's music that only considers Taylor as sole Composer, which provides the impetus for an analysis derived from my term *ensemlage*. My audition for Taylor's ensemble thus treats Taylor's music as a living organism, as something to interact with. The letter format allowed me to write from a position where I could speak to Taylor rather than for Taylor with the understanding that my knowledge of his music is always partial and one voice among many.

¹⁶¹ Cecil Taylor, "Aquoeh R-Oyo".

As stated in the introduction, my aim was to write (following Nathaniel Mackey) paracritically about Taylor's music, alongside and also in support of Taylor's music. Specifically, my writing hinges between analysis and creation (my creative prose, music, and poetry) much in the way that research-creation hinges between research and creation via its hyphen. It also (following Mackey again) aims to make analysis of music creak, which is to say demonstrate the impossibility of a definitive analysis of an artistic work and thus opens the door to many approaches to Taylor's music.

It was clear from the outset that to address Taylor's music, I would need multiple approaches. As a result, I chose to include the Unit Structures chapter (using Joe Morris) to demonstrate one understanding of his music with my own audio examples. My letters show my engagement with Taylor's music using my own words (my interpretation) and audio examples that demonstrate how I have synthesized Taylor's musical concepts into my playing. Finally, my poetry serves as my fuller engagement with Taylor's artistic practice by engaging in Taylor's more-than-musical approach to art while also offering another creative interpretation of the themes discussed in the letters. The poetry, like the letters, musical examples etc., continue the paracritical writing by working alongside and in support of my arguments in my dissertation. The creative components also work to make the dissertation creak.

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