

Approaching the Jazz Past: MOPDTK's *Blue* and Jason Moran's "In My Mind: Monk at Town Hall, 1959"

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"Polemical traditions seem to valorize the literal"
-Henry Louis Gates

In October 2014, the jazz group Mostly Other People Do the Killing released their seventh album, *Blue*, a "painstakingly realized, note-for-note" re-performance of the classic 1959 album by the Miles Davis Sextet, *Kind of Blue*. Some jazz critics have described this album as "ingenious and preposterous" and "important."¹ Many of my fellow jazz scholars have been intrigued, wondering just how closely these artists come to re-performing the nuances of Miles or Coltrane or Evans. I have been far less impressed or intrigued. MOPDTK's album is the product of a long Western tradition of understanding the art object, the artist, and history. Far from preposterous, ingenious, or even new, I argue this album is a stark example of comprehending jazz via a Western epistemology that informs "classical music" rather than, as one reviewer argues, a critique of this tendency. Using the 1939 Jorge Luis Borges story the band offers as liner notes as my pivot point, I argue that MOPDTK assumes an epistemology that privileges objectivity and an obsession with naming while suspecting the subjective and what cannot be named. In an obtuse reading of the Borges story, bassist and bandleader Moppa Elliott asserts that we must have a new object in order to re-read the old one. An obsession with naming (that is, locating boundaries) breeds a fascination with difference, which is then found in a predictable place: racial difference. The album typifies how a Western qua postmodern worldview (dis)misses lessons that can be found in the jazz tradition.² To offer an example

¹ *New York Times* and *Jazz Times* critic Nate Chinen described the album as "ingenious and

² I am speaking of a strong epistemological strand within the Western tradition to divide a subject from an object in order to know—to privilege the "objective" over the subjective—and a preoccupation with "naming" in order to delineate this from that. Important descriptions and critiques of this epistemology can be found in Anzaldúa 2010 [1987], Derrida 1997 [1967], Trinh 2011, 1989. Further, I argue that Borges' "Pierre Menard" lampoons this epistemology. "Classical music" is not tantamount to the "Western tradition." Music associated with this genre also may be influenced by a variety of epistemologies. I use the phrase "jazz tradition" to index

of a jazz artist intent on learning such lessons, I conclude by describing pianist Jason Moran's parlay of this fascination with strict reenactment in his performance, "In My Mind: Monk at Town Hall, 1959." While approached to do a precise restaging, Moran created instead a multi-media performance piece that revisits Thelonious Monk's famous Town Hall Concert album and represents a different understanding of jazz, artistic influence, and history than that found in *Blue*. I find my argument obvious. So obvious that a reader could initially be skeptical that I am dimly missing the point of *Blue*: MOPDTK's knowing irony about it all. But claiming "irony" can be a (perhaps unconscious) power grab (and I will highlight aspects of this project that are decidedly ironic, though not in any knowing way). My argument is necessary precisely because of the ways in which reviewers, scholars, and others uncritically embrace the epistemology that supports MOPDTK's ostensibly shrewd engagement with jazz history and the jazz tradition.

Blue consists of a track-by-track, solo-by-solo reenactment of *Kind of Blue* by the Miles Davis Sextet (Davis on trumpet, Julian "Cannonball" Adderley on alto sax, John Coltrane on tenor, Wynton Kelly on piano on "Freddie Freeloader," Bill Evans on piano for the rest of the album, Paul Chambers on bass and Jimmy Cobb on drums). For the album, MOPDTK added pianist Ron Stabinsky to its regular line-up of Peter Evans on trumpet, Jon Irabagon on alto and tenor saxophones, Moppa Elliott on bass, and Kevin Shea on drums. Irabagon played both the Adderley and Coltrane roles by overdubbing some saxophone parts. Their intention was to mimic the performances as closely as possible in a type of "logical extreme" of a common pedagogical approach in jazz: copying jazz artists' recorded performances.³ For example, the running time of each song is within seconds of the original. The group then released the recording in a simple glossy blue CD with lighter blue basic typescript on Elliott's independent label, Hot Cup Records, named it *Blue*, and included as liner notes only this: Jorge Luis Borges' 1939 short story, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*." The ensemble consists of highly respected contemporary jazz musicians who are regularly recognized in *Downbeat* critics' polls and who play with highly creative jazz

characteristics attributed to African American musical practice, such as versioning and "repeating with a signal difference" (See Gates 2014 [1988], Mackey 1998, Monson 1996). These traditions are not hermetically sealed off from each other. For example, many jazz artists, black and white, approach jazz from a more "Western" angle, including, in my view, Wynton Marsalis, Charles Tolliver, and Moppa Elliott. And, of course, Western literature is replete with parody and irony, as Gates recognizes in his discussion of African American literary practices (2014 [1988]). There are many within the Western tradition who critique the tendency toward the subject-self/object-other split, for example, Cervantes (See Echevarría 2001).

³ See, for example, Berliner 1994, chapter four.

improvisers like guitarist Mary Halvorson, bassist Mark Dresser, trumpeter Dave Douglas and others. *Blue* is not the first of MOPDTK's albums to engage with jazz in an ironic and pastiche-y fashion. Their first two albums, *Shamokin!!!* (Killing 2007) and *This is Our Moosic* (Killing 2008), use cover art that mimic classic jazz albums by Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers and The Ornette Coleman Quartet.⁴

While the album design and title differ from the original, the liner notes appear to be the most overt and intentional “difference” between the original album and the copy. Both the name—*Blue*—and the album design pare down the original, simplifying and abstracting as one might expect for a work described as a “thought experiment” (Elliott and Elliott 2014). The liner notes, however, introduce a layer of complexity that the ensemble uses to contextualize their recreation. Borges’ story takes the form of a narrator glorifying his recently deceased and unjustly little-renowned literary friend, Pierre Menard, for his most grand and audacious project: to reproduce, nay, to *produce* again the novel *Don Quixote* word for word, originally, as if it had come from Menard himself. This unrecognized genius initially thought he would try to “become” Miguel Cervantes; he would learn 16th century Spanish, “return to Catholicism, fight against the Moor or Turk, forget the history of Europe from 1602 to 1918,” and then from this would be able to create the *Quixote*. But Menard came to believe this would be too easy. Rather, he took on a much more interesting task: to produce the *Quixote* from his place as a fin de siècle Frenchman. As Menard told the narrator, “Every man should be capable of all ideas and I believe in the future he shall be.”

The irony and pleasure of Borges’s story rests upon the recognition that such a project is absurd. We will never be able to spontaneously re-produce a work of art that involves the complexity of *Don Quixote*.⁵ MOPDTK could be making a

⁴ Comments made in their liner notes and, to a lesser extent, the group’s style, have attracted charges of racism against the conservatory-trained band that has no African American members (Neuringer 2015b). I also have a problem with many of the liner notes, which can sound arrogant in their decontextualized understanding of jazz history. I do want to acknowledge, however, that the music on their original albums offer the spontaneity and creativity of the best jazz today. I would argue that those albums are closer to an “exact” reenactment of *Kind of Blue* than *Blue*.

⁵ “Pierre Menard” is one of Borges’ most famous and critically acclaimed stories. Scholars cite it as an example of the “death of the author” and rise of the text decades before Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and others made such claims in philosophy and semiotics (see, for example, Wood 2013, Williamson 2013). I suggest that Borges is also sending up a nascent breed of literary figures at the cusp of postmodernity and presaging (if not flatteringly) the rise of appropriation art. Marie-Laure Ryan writes that “Borges satirizes the efforts of a fictional early twentieth-century French author who devotes his life to an absurd project”—that of recreating *Don Quixote* word for word (Ryan 43). Emir Rodriguez Monegal and Alistair Reid read this

valid, but timeworn, statement with this. They could be pointing out that to the extent that jazz is copied but not developed—for example, by players who merely become master mimics of old styles—we are missing the point of what art is: to really *re-create* something great is to create your own “something great.” This would be a minor statement about how jazz is learned today and a critique informed by the tradition of Western conceptual art, not African American-based jazz practice. But this is not how Moppa Elliott describes the project nor how it has largely been received by critics. Elliott asserts that this project makes us ask: What is jazz? And critics have taken it as a critique of the ways in which we deify jazz masters.⁶ The significant problem here is that the epistemology of a Western art tradition is assumed to be the yardstick by which we measure elements of jazz without Elliott or these critics discerning that jazz practice itself already offers a much better measure of the issues at hand. Before discussing this, however, I want to suggest the ways in which Borges himself parodies certain aspects of the Western tradition in the nascent postmodern era.

Borges’ story is so effective in part because it lampoons a modern Western cultural desire to find and locate the mystery of the idea (or of art, of life, of self) as if it were a unitary, bound entity.⁷ Ideas and art are infinite, yet Borges sends up this desire to find and have, thus delimit and complete, them. The infinity of the art and of the artist was especially revealed to Borges in his vocation as a translator. He reminds us that “every translation is a ‘version’—not *the* translation...but *a* translation, one in a never-ending series, at least an infinite *possible*

satire as “a caricature of what Mallarmé and Valéry (whose *Monsieur Teste* is a precursor of P.M.)...had already attempted” (1981: 346, n. 30). Finally, Deppman describes this attempt as follows: “Valéry tried indefatigably and from many angles to imagine what it must be like to live with unimaginably powerful abilities to think and perceive” (Deppman 2003:197 – 8). I suggest that Borges is linking the belief that one can have “all ideas” to Valéry and the project of “having it all.” Thus, while the story demonstrates how “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination [the reader]” (Barthes, qtd in Wood 148), there is also humor in the thought that one should even attempt such a thing. Earnest battle reenactments began in the 1960s followed by clone bands, performance art reenactments and appropriation art, like Sherrie Levine’s *After Walker Evans*. While these different reenactments have different motivations, they nonetheless all stem from a tradition that strictly delineates the author and the work. That is, appropriation art, as useful as it may be to critique the “absurd project” of the individual author, only makes sense in a tradition that separates and locates in order to know. This way of perceiving the world differs significantly from understandings linked to *duende* and signifying, traditions with which I believe Borges’ thought more closely resonates.

⁶ Graham 2014. Also quoted below. Or Phil Zampino who asks rhetorically, “Why do it, knowing that it might infuriate those who worship this record as an untouchable masterpiece?” (Zampino 2014).

⁷ The novel *Don Quixote* itself calls into question the idea of a coherent, separate “self” who can be located and whose ideas could be clearly attributed to this “self” (Echevarría 2001:xviii).

series.”⁸ With Menard we are presented with the idea of a 1=1 reproduction so that it is not even a reproduction but a production again: a quixotic, if I may, translation with *no remainder*. If Menard could become Cervantes there would be the remainder of the previous Menard. Instead, Menard produces (aka translates) the work in such a way that it is not a translation. It is the thing itself.⁹

Which begs the question: why do we need that? Why produce again the thing itself, especially when the thing is a book? Don’t we have the book already? Borges is therefore also satirizing the related obsession with the objective over the subjective: the idea that we need the new author in order for us to (re-)interpret the work. The narrator writes, “The Cervantes text and the Menard text are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer.” We can’t re-read the context ourselves, it seems, but need the new author for us to do this. It is a flat-footed literalism, a positivism, a necessity for objectivity because we don’t really understand subjectivity which we can’t point to and locate as an external object. Borges is parodying those of us who are, frankly, thick enough to believe that we can know in such a way—through such delimitation and location. In lamenting that we can’t know the process Menard went through in his “earlier versions” of the *Quixote*, the narrator writes, “unfortunately, only a second Pierre Menard, reversing the labors of the first, would be able to exhume and revive those Troys.” I await the arrival of the new clone band “The Second Pierre Menard” who, through their archeology, will be able to unearth and recreate that experience for my consumption. I will then assuredly know the travails of those earlier drafts.¹⁰

But in discussing the album, bandleader and bassist Moppa Elliott reproduces the character Menard’s logic without irony. Elliott states that the band’s copy reveals new insights about the original in a way that echoes the enthusiasm of the narrator in “Pierre Menard.” Rather than aligning with the insight of the Borges’ story, Elliott implicitly follows another tradition that sheds a different light on Menard’s project: the modern Western art tradition of the readymade and appropriation art. Elliott contextualizes *Blue* in this tradition when he suggests that the album brings up the question, “what is jazz?” Much like Sherrie Levine’s *After Walker Evans* (1980) or Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917) and

⁸ Quoted in *The Life of Milarepa*, Heruka, trans. Quintman 2010, p. xxxvi (Heruka 2010).

⁹ Suzanne Jill Levine writes, “[Borges] had already concluded that a ‘literal’ formula for fidelity to an original was by definition absurd, and would lay this idea to rest most effectively via the ‘invisible’ work of the intrepid and phantasmal Pierre Menard” (Levine, 46).

¹⁰ A “clone band” is a band that recreates another band as precisely as possible. The Genesis clone band, The Musical Box, describes their reenactments as “musical archaeology.” This “painstaking” work is in the service of finding the truth of the original performance. See McMullen forthcoming-2018.

L.H.O.O.Q. (1919) call into question the art object and the artist, Elliott believes *Blue* presents the question: what is the difference between the copy and the original when “on the surface [they are] ‘exactly the same.’”¹¹ As such, the story, “Pierre Menard,” becomes not a comment on jazz canonization, but Borges’ anticipatory critique of MOPDTK and the postmodern obsession with identity and difference obtusely included as liner notes. This I find ironic.¹²

Elliott describes *Blue* as a “thought experiment”—as a way to take the practice of jazz transcription to its “logical extreme.” In doing so, according to the bassist, it brings up this question: What is jazz? In an interview, he asks,

Is what we did *Kind of Blue*? Is what we did even jazz? If it isn’t, what does that make it? If it’s not jazz, why not? Listen to that music and tell me what the difference is.... Someone will be like, “Ok, it’s not jazz because you’re not improvising.” But if I just put it on and play it for you without telling you what it is first, you don’t know that. So you’re dismissing it for a reason that has nothing to do with the actual sound. It becomes not jazz for purely rhetorical reasons. The sound is clearly jazz, but because of the process that went into it, it magically becomes “not jazz.” ...if you don’t know the difference, how can you tell which one of them is jazz and which one of them isn’t?¹³

First, it’s impossible not to think of Louis Armstrong’s famous answer to the question, what is jazz?: “Man, if you have to ask, you’ll never know.”¹⁴ When Elliott exhorts, “Listen to that music and tell me what the difference is,” whom is he addressing? I mean, these are fine musicians, but anyone who is a serious jazz fan will immediately hear a universe of difference between the original (a *Don Quixote*-size achievement) and an ensemble of jazz conservatory graduates who have paid their dues transcribing recordings. Because really, is this band going to play that album like the Miles Davis Sextet did? *We all know the answer to that.* Their skill levels vary, and I’m not going to review their individual skills as musicians and mimics. That is not the point of this article. But the album falls one infinity short of the buoyancy and brilliance of the original. The notes and tempo are there, but something (that is, everything) is missing. As Miles would

¹¹ For more on Duchamp, Levine, readymades, and appropriation art, see Evans 2009.

¹² I suggest that Borges is anticipating the rise of earnest reenactments that began in the 1960s and have become a staple in popular music (clone bands), art (performance art reenactments), and history (living history museums). For more, see McMullen forthcoming-2018.

¹³ Elliott and Elliott 2014. The last line refers to Irabagon performing a Steve Lacy solo, but it is the same question as *Blue*: “What is the difference?”

¹⁴ Armstrong’s sentiment is well known to jazz scholars and has been loosely referenced for decades. The exact quote is: “when you got to ask what is it, you’ll never get to know” from a 1949 interview in *Time Magazine* (Armstrong quoted in N.A. 1949).

say in regard to finding musicians for his bands: they had to have that indescribable, yet recognizable, “thing” (Nisenson 1993: 90). And in recreating the greats, it is zero surprise that everything can be recreated, except the greatness. For the record: I have stated and acknowledged this colossal and obvious difference.

Thus, to return, Elliott implicitly situates *Blue* as a conceptual piece in the tradition of appropriation art. The problem of author and artwork highlighted in appropriation art is a problem for a tradition that fetishizes the object and the artist in order to fit the narrative of private property. Levine and Duchamp critique this tradition and make interesting interventions (for example, regarding gender and class)—all within a postmodern concern with identity and difference. Jazz music, however, comes from a different tradition: an African American tradition that has been less infatuated with origin and ownership and more concerned with Signification as implication, metaphor, and repeating with a signal difference (Gates 2014). Certainly jazz became concerned with the author and artist many years ago, but this is the influence of a system of thought based in private property: the Western tradition. That the Western elements in jazz are now “critiqued” by tools from the Western tradition serves only to further distance jazz from an African American tradition that already inherently problematizes unitary authorship and artworks.

When Elliott asks, “is what we did even jazz? If it isn’t, what does that make it?” the axis around which the question rotates is the terminology (the object, the name), not the music (process). The question is only “interesting” or “important” within a worldview that privileges the word or the name over the less locatable doing. That is, *Blue* might be asking “What is jazz?,” but not in a way that Armstrong or Davis would ask or answer the question. Elliott crashes onto the shores of perplexity and remains there, fascinated. This perplexity is easily explained, however. It stems from the confusion produced by a reliance on logic and language in order to know. This fascination goes back at least 2500 years to when Zeno discovered his paradoxes. The philosopher of Elea argued that in order to get anywhere we must first get halfway there. And before that halfway to halfway, and halfway to that halfway. Zeno concluded, therefore, that a walker would have to complete an infinite series of tasks, which would be impossible. Further, motion can never really begin because there is no finite distance to be traveled; it can always be divided in half. Since this travel cannot actually begin or conclude, motion must be an illusion. Zeno’s paradoxes only remain paradoxes, however, when we don’t learn this lesson: *logic and language do not describe reality*. They can point; they are helpful; but they have significant limits. Zeno demonstrated this 2500 years ago, but that is not the lesson he, nor the Western tradition, learned. Fascinated by our logic, we continue to gaze upon the paradoxes it produces, oohing and awing.

Poet and literary theorist Nathaniel Mackey understands (and therefore engages with) the album *Kind of Blue* through a different lens: that of *duende*. Mackey follows Federico Garcia Lorca when he writes that *duende* signals a type of “longing without object”—a *sin remedio*, without remedy—the impossible. Mackey writes that one would rather hear [Miles] Davis flub a note than a more virtuosic player perfectly hit nine or ten has something to do with *duende*’s feeling or sense that what needs to be said can’t be said” (2005:14). *Duende* therefore acknowledges “a lack of adequation” in language: it “slides away from the proposed. [It is that area of] implication, resonance, connotation, ...something that goes beyond univocal, unequivocal control (2005:186). In accepting this impossible, one understands that nothing of significance will be accomplished in pondering and pursuing perfect adequation. At least according to Elliott, MOPDTK ponders and pursues this perfect adequation. Indeed, they title their album *Blue*, eliminating the untidiness of *Kind of*. They put forth the symbol—the term “jazz”—a word that is, in fact, unimportant and unrelated to the infinity of music on *Kind of Blue* and gaze upon it as their object of knowledge. The questions “is what we did even jazz? If it isn’t, what does that make it?” are not very important to ask or answer. But. These questions focus on what can be said. It is what can be said: the label “jazz.” In taking the label and then gazing upon it, we find that what is *unimportant* to be said can be said and said and said.

While such thought experiments may be disregarded as innocuous navel gazing, a significant problem arises when this deep preoccupation with labels, symbols, and boundaries encourages a fascination with difference. Elliott states,

we get down to this next really interesting level. [What is the deviation] and what aspects of that deviation have to do with us making mistakes, with them making mistakes, and what aspects of that have to do with just like parts of our physique, like the fact that my hands are not Paul Chambers’ hands and the fact that Jon’s mouth and fingers are not Cannonball Adderley’s mouth and fingers? And then beyond that, how much of it has to do with the fact that I didn’t grow up a black kid in Detroit in the ‘30s? That’s where it gets interesting. How much of this is just because I’m not Paul Chambers, and what does that mean? (Elliott and Elliott 2014)

Elliott ponders what makes the two recordings different. There is no discussion of talent, artistry, or skill, which Elliott, therefore, seems to presume are the same. After acknowledging the differences that could possibly be accounted for (mistakes) he denotes differences that ostensibly cannot be remedied: the difference in their bodies—hands, mouths, fingers. This discussion of “physique”

set off alarms in my mind that Elliott was moving toward ruminations on racial difference. Indeed, he immediately followed his discussion of bodies by explicitly bringing up the difference of race: “growing up a black kid in Detroit in the ‘30s.”

Elliott continues his reflection on race and class: “There’s this awesome racial dynamic: it’s 1959, it’s an integrated band. The difference between that and us, these bourgeois, conservatory trained music nerds, to recreate it in 2012/2013, it means something totally different.” Perhaps for Elliott this second *Kind of Blue* is “infinitely richer.” For here is where the imperceptive reading of Borges is most evident. Borges’ story demonstrates how locating and delineating “difference” is impossible. Although there is a difference between Menard and Quixote, how could that difference be transcribed and accounted for? It is impossible for Menard to rewrite the *Quixote* for infinite reasons. The idea that a person could have “all ideas”—all of Cervantes’, The Miles Davis Sextet—is an absurdity. But so is the quest to understand precisely how Menard is different from Cervantes. In choosing to describe the band as “bourgeois, conservatory trained music nerds” as opposed to the “awesome racial dynamic” of the original, Elliott uses signifiers of white, middleclass-ness to delineate difference from the Miles Davis Sextet.¹⁵ Filmmaker and cultural theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha asks, “what do we want to know wanting to know the other?” I understand this question broadly, applying it to the Western scientific mindset that wants to *know* and categorize, what Zora Neale Hurston described as the white man’s probing, ordering mind (Zora Neale Hurston 1990 [1935]: 4-5). To reference Trinh’s book *Woman Native Other*, what do we want to know wanting to know “woman” or “native” or, in this case, “jazz”? As Elliott sets up the question, what he presents as the gazed upon object of inquiry is the boundary between self and other—himself and Paul Chambers—and this boundary is primarily delineated by race.¹⁶ To choose race as a difference is to construct and narrow it as a difference. It is to place a category on this infinity, this impossible to know and impossible to say.

And thus we come to the objectivism satirized by Borges—the belief that we can only *really* know through observation of an external object. Elliott subscribes to exactly what Borges parodies: the bassist imagines that it is only by re-creating the work that the audience can now hear it anew. Indeed, what Elliott asserts *Blue* helps us to hear and locate *is* the duendeness (which is not, of course, duende). Elliott believes that through comparing the two recordings we can put duende under the microscope. He states, “Now we’re starting to talk about

¹⁵ Saxophonist Jon Irabagon appears to be of Indian ancestry. The rest of the ensemble appears to be white.

¹⁶ It is also delineated by class, which is often linked with race—“growing up a black kid in Detroit” vs. the “bourgeois, conservatory trained music nerd.”

timbre and weird tone color things and weird articulation things that we don't even have words for. ...The most interesting things are all of these aspects of music that are non-notable. You can't notate the difference between the way Cannonball plays it and the way Jon plays it. ...How do you talk about those things? Because on the surface it's 'exactly the same.'" Therefore, through their thought experiment MOPDTK has discovered this: there are subtle differences between people and things out there. But the reason that this is news is because they are confused by the fact that *we can't notate that!* And since we can't notate it, they have performed this thought experiment for us so that now we can get at it: *now* we can hear it. For as he avers, "The most interesting things are all of these aspects of music that are non-notable." For Elliott, *Blue* helps us to get at all of this. He states, "So then it's like, why don't you listen to all music like that? Hopefully, this will wake people up."

And this is how many of us influenced by the Western tradition keep teaching ourselves a lesson that we are bent on never learning: there are things we cannot notate! We are fascinated by this. There are things we cannot capture. Indeed, these are *the* things. In his generally positive review for *The Atlantic*, David Graham still stated of people who buy the album that they "will probably listen to it once or twice, maybe comparing it to the original, and then file it away to collect dust." This is why our world is so dusty. Thought-experiments "collect dust" and then we need the "new thing" to teach us to not collect dust, which will then collect dust. Thought experiments do not nourish us. We don't learn the lesson of Zeno's paradox. We don't learn that we're missing the point. We don't need MOPDTK to help us listen to Miles. We just need to listen to Miles. We just need to listen. We need to acquaint ourselves with the idea that the most important knowing is a type of not-knowing. When we learn this we will not need to keep demonstrating to ourselves the fascinating news that the symbolic fails to capture the real.

Mostly other people do the killing, but who is doing the killing here? Bringing everything to pornographic light suffocates the life force.¹⁷ The butterfly is killed, stilled, and pinned to the specimen board in order for us to take it apart and "understand" it because we cannot grasp it in its flight and movement. This is why I am so vexed by the assertion that MOPDTK critiques the tendency to turn jazz into classical music. Graham states that the most "entertaining knock" by critics of the album is that "Miles wouldn't like it." He writes, "exalting Davis

¹⁷ I'm alluding here to Baudrillard's idea that a completely visible world, a world without the possibility of the unknown, is a world devoid of seduction. It is a pornographic world: "Due to the prevailing rule of the world of making everything visible, the images, our present-day images, have become substantially pornographic" (Baudrillard 2006).

to the status of a god, whose imputed opinions are incontrovertible, is an even worse form of idolatry than the one *Blue*'s critics have alleged; they have stepped into [MOPDTK's] trap." But MOPDTK's trap is the privileging and assumption of a Western epistemological tradition over those aspects of jazz informed by a different way of knowing and being. It is not a matter of idolizing Miles. It is a matter of learning from Miles' perspective: that what needs to be said cannot be said. It is interesting that the Davis Estate is not happy with *Blue*. I don't know the details, but I wonder if it has something to do with an epistemology and ontology described by MC Coke La Rock regarding the beginnings of hip hop. According to the MC, if you copied someone's dance move exactly you would get your assed kicked. To copy exactly was missing the point. It was an insult not an honor and a way of forgetting rather than remembering. We could use the value system supporting La Rock's narrative to inform the question "what is jazz?" Instead, it seems MOPDTK and their supporters take as a given the postmodern obsession with location, identity, boundaries, and difference as the way to know. This is ironic because the same tradition supports the approach to jazz history that MOPDTK ostensibly critiques—the canonization of jazz. An extreme and earnest example of this canonization is found in the recent phenomenon of earnest jazz reenactments and it is important to contextualize *Blue* within this trend, as well.

What we now describe as "jazz" is a music that grew out of an improvisatory and interpretative approach to ragtime and vaudeville songs. Over time, improvisation and interpretation became the signal characteristics of "jazz." A combination of jazz's "rise" in status and the growth of memory culture in the 1970s, however, helped turn jazz into a type of fetishized object.¹⁸ The 1970s saw the development of jazz repertory companies, record re-issues and the beginnings of the institutionalization of the music.¹⁹ By the 1980s jazz preservation was in full swing and the canon was being solidified with great masters and masterworks. Conductor Maurice Peress was the first to stage a precise jazz reconstruction when he reenacted Paul Whiteman's famous 1924 Aeolian Hall Concert, an "Experiment in Modern Music," on its 60th anniversary in 1984. Encouraged by

¹⁸ For examples of how jazz turned into "America's Classical Music" see Taylor 1986, U.S. Congress 1999 [1987], and Marsalis 1999.

¹⁹ The concept of preserving jazz's history through repertory companies gained momentum in the 1970s. The 1970s also brought more reissues of earlier material by record companies, an expanding attention to the jazz tradition at academic institutions, and the increased publication of jazz books and journals. Gioia 1997 notes the rise in the 1970s. See especially Porter 2002 on Wynton Marsalis and tribute jazz and Solis 2008 on Thelonious Monk and the tribute approach. For an insightful analysis of the jazz repertory movement in relation to a classical music tradition, see Chapman 2003.

its success, Peress followed with a reenactment of James Reese Europe's historic 1912 Clef Club concert at its original venue, Carnegie Hall in 1989.²⁰ And by the late 1980s one of the preeminent "young lions" of the time, trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, began the process that eventually led to the founding of Jazz at Lincoln Center in New York City in 1991, now known as the preeminent site of jazz's institutionalization.²¹ Marsalis has performed reenactments of Louis Armstrong's seminal *Hot Five* and *Hot Seven* recordings and scheduled "re-animations" of Fats Waller in an approach to the music that one critic has described as "demonstration jazz."²²

Thus, jazz was already firmly ensconced in memory and museum culture by the 1990s, the decade when reenactment became a significant percentage of live musical performance. By the 1990s, the popular cover band of the 1970s had morphed into the tribute and clone band, focusing on a single band and often

²⁰ One could safely wager that Whiteman's concert would have been performed at the original venue if Aeolian Hall still existed. For more on Peress's reenactments, see Peress 2004.

²¹ Jazz at Lincoln Center has been a central node around which questions of the jazz tradition and its continuance or preservation have turned. Wynton Marsalis, writer Stanley Crouch, and scholar Albert Murray were the firebrands behind the 1987 Lincoln Center committee that concluded jazz could and should be a permanent and significant member of the large arts institution. Marsalis came under the intensified scrutiny of jazz scholars after the release of Ken Burns' 19-hour documentary *Jazz* in 2001. Marsalis was a clear ideological force behind the documentary, which has been variously criticized for its maudlin sentimentality, "great man" thesis, aesthetic conservatism, gender bias, and more. See Deveaux 2001–2002; DeVeaux, Gabbard, Gendron, Jacques, Sherrie Tucker 2001. Gabbard 2000; Macy 2006; Pond 2003; Radano 2001; and Tucker 2001–2002. On Marsalis and JALC also see Porter 2002, Gray 2005, McMullen 2008.

²² The promotional materials for a Fats Waller concert at JALC states that "a cast of musicians will re-animate the theatrical side of the Fats Waller Songbook in a retrospective of his all too short career" (N.A. 2010b <http://news.allaboutjazz.com/fats-waller-festival-at-jazz-at-lincoln-center.php> and N.A. 2010a <http://home.nestor.minsk.by/jazz/news/2010/02/2103.html>). The resident Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra is known for its "stylistic authenticity" (N.A. 2013 <http://www.arshtcenter.org/tickets/calendar/2013-2014-season/jazz-roots/big-band-holidays/>) and is dedicated to performing works from the Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Chick Webb, and Benny Goodman songbooks in the "original" style, much to the dismay of many critics and jazz performers. Here is a typical quote: "The band created an uncanny reconstruction of a Duke Ellington small group with Ellington's little-known 'Where's the Music?' Pianist Marcus Roberts emulated Ellington's touch and timing perfectly and Todd Williams adeptly recalled the sweetly buttoned-down clarinetist Jimmy Hamilton. The band offered similar, if slightly less successful, here-is-history treatments of 'And the Band Played On and On,' a tribute to early New Orleans musicians written by Marsalis' trombonist, Wycliffe Gordon, and Jelly Roll Morton's 'The Jungle Blues'" (Dold 1989) http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1989-12-06/news/8903220581_1_wynton-marsalis-jungle-blues-duke-ellington. Ben Ratliff describes Marsalis's approach as "demonstration jazz" in Ratliff 2009b.

recreating specific performances.²³ Revival swing bands like the Cherry Poppin' Daddies, Brian Setzer Orchestra, and Big Bad Voodoo Daddy enticed jitterbuggers and lindy hoppers to the dance floor.²⁴ More recently, trumpeter Charles Tolliver staged a strict reenactment of the 1959 Monk at Town Hall concert on its 50th anniversary in 2009 that was praised for its dutiful and fetishistic capturing of details, including the original opening quartet and accurate tempi.²⁵ The software company Zenph Sound Innovation's "re-performs" a pianist's recorded performance "live" on a disembodied, specially equipped Steinway grand piano. Audiences listen and watch as the piano's keys and pedals go down following the precise movements of Art Tatum, Oscar Peterson, George Gershwin, Glenn Gould, and Sergei Rachmaninoff.²⁶ While much American popular music has been and still is characterized by repetition with a signal difference (not surprising, considering its deep roots in African American musical practice), the reenactment trend has been a quixotic move toward uncanny repetition *without* a difference.²⁷

This way of "repeating" the past is very different from the African American tradition of "signifying" or "repeating with a signal difference." While this strand of the Western tradition reifies form, in the tradition of signifying in jazz, there is not an original form that is used as a permanent template. Form is not separat-

²³ While many of these bands are ironic (and, as such, can be understood within the practice of "repeating with a signal difference"), others, often termed "clone bands," re-enact their chosen bands with uncanny accuracy, paying attention to the most minute of details. Today, tribute and clone bands take up a substantial percentage of concerts at clubs that were once devoted to original bands. For more on tributes and tribute bands in popular music, see Gregory 2012, Homan 2006, Meyers 2015, Plasketes 2010, Oakes 2005.

²⁴ See Usner 2001-2002 for a discussion of the 1990s swing revival and white identity.

²⁵ It is the "note-for-note" accuracy, which encompasses everything from original tempi to the unfolding of the original evening, as well as the re-performance on a significant anniversary that really electrifies the reviewer for npr.org: "Fifty years later, nearly to the day, trumpeter Charles Tolliver presented an evening-length re-creation of Monk's Town Hall concert, with new note-for-note scoring of the big-band portion, as well as arrangements of the little-known quartet show which opened the night's program. Tolliver had obviously studied Monk's music intently, leading a precise performance which replicated the layered beauty and driving swing of the original — even down to the encore of 'Little Rootie Tootie,' played at a faster tempo than the version which appeared in the body of the concert, just like in Monk's show" (N.A. 2009) <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=101140318&refresh=true>.

²⁶ After digitally analyzing finger and foot pressures on keys and pedals inferred from the recordings, Zenph feeds this information into specially equipped grand pianos. The company has "re-issued" these recordings on Sony Masterworks and hopes to extend its technology to other instruments in the future. See www.zenph.com

²⁷ I argue that the rise of strict reenactments in the late 20th and early 21st centuries is a type of "comfort entertainment" that performs the absolutely predictable in a "culture of fear" stoked especially since the 1990s (McMullen forthcoming-2018).

ed from continually shifting and moving content. The concern, therefore, is not with retrieving or preserving an origin, but with responding according to current circumstances within an acknowledged context. Henry Louis Gates refers to this when he writes that, “polemical traditions seem to valorize the literal...the vernacular tradition, however, undercuts this penchant at its deepest level” (26). While jazz has always been a combination of African American and European American traditions, it was born from African American understandings of form and repetition that differ markedly from a European tradition that privileges private ownership, necessitating a clear object (the work) and an author. As an American art form, jazz could not escape this ideology, nonetheless, its emphasis on improvisation, musical re-use, and “repetition with a signal difference” has at least attenuated the assumption of the fixed art object and single producer characteristic of the European tradition of art and “art music.” It is important to acknowledge these two different traditions of repetition and, relatedly, of conceiving of musical form: one that conceives of form as an originary, locatable source and one that does not establish such boundaries.²⁸ Over several decades, the African American tradition has been declining in jazz with the rise of jazz “institutionalization.” As such, there has been a certain “repetition without a difference” or “repetition-in-control.” While some viewed *Blue* as an attempt to critique this tendency, in my view, *Blue* serves to perpetuate it.

That *Blue* recreates “everything but the greatness” could suggest that perhaps many in jazz are “painstakingly” copying the wrong things. *Shamokin!!!*'s liner notes aver: “Their years of training at Oberlin, Juilliard, Berklee, Mannes, and the Manhattan School of Music behind them, the members of the quartet

²⁸ Scholars have demonstrated how the African American literary and musical practice of signifyin(g), or repeating with a signal difference, has characterized African American artistic production for centuries, including most recently (in music) jazz, rap, sampling, and re-mix. See (Gates 2014 [1988], Mackey 1998, Monson 1996, Walser 1995). Zen Buddhist practices have also been a source of formal repetition in American music, most often showing up in Western classical styles, such as minimalism. See Fink 2005, McMullen 2016. Unfortunately, repetition in music is often discussed as if it were a single phenomenon. George Plasketes characterizes late 20th/early 21st century Western culture as a “Re” culture with tributes, karaoke, re-issues, sampling, and rap dominating musical production (Plasketes 2010:12). But some musical copying is more influenced by Replay (see note 31) and some by “repeating with a signal difference,” as well as other traditions of repetition, like those found in Zen Buddhism. Marcus Boon examines different ways of understanding “copying” in culture, but does not parse out how these differences stem from very different traditions of understanding the subject, object, and repetition (Boon 2010). Appropriation art like Levine’s *After Walker Evans* calls this origin into question, but in a way that still is fascinated with difference and edges. It is a critique of the Western tradition within the Western tradition itself. Other traditions do not construct a boundary and therefore do not have to deconstruct it.

represent the end products of Jazz [sic] education” (Featherweight [MOPDTK, pseud.] 2006). I would have to agree. Based on comments by this band and my own experiences at the University of North Texas, students are educated in jazz performance but are not educated in U.S. racial history or a detailed assessment of different conceptual approaches to music, repetition, and the past. They learn a decontextualized jazz history focused on form, technique, and style but do not learn how (or even that) the music is embedded within American racial history. Ethnomusicologist Kyra Gaunt writes,

As certain commodified traditions, histories, and performances primarily associated with African Americans enter the ‘mainstream’ in the curricula of music schools and departments (namely jazz, blues, rhythm and blues as rock ‘n’ roll, and to a lesser degree, spirituals, gospel, contemporary R&B, rap, hip-hop, and black classical music) one finds few musical or ethnomusicological investigations exploring the kinds of experiences and practices that contribute to learning the mosaic of traditions associated with African American musical identities and communities” (43).

Gaunt laments the absence in college programs of the phenomenological, embodied, learned and experienced elements of black musical practice and its consequence—the omission of necessary knowledge: “education is...a process by which we learn to avow and remember certain knowledges and devalue and forget others” (40). As such, it is unsurprising that college-educated jazz students will assume their own worldview as an unexamined ideological basis for their approach to jazz (with most students holding to a modern Western epistemological tradition). It is highly predictable then, that these “bourgeois, conservatory trained music nerds” offer more of a commonality with Peress, Marsalis and Tolliver than a significant or novel critique of them.

There is a better example of an artist engaging with this reenactment craze in a way that *could* be described as “important” and “ingenious”: pianist Jason Moran’s parlay to jazz reenactments with his live performance of *In My Mind: Monk at Town Hall, 1959*. That such an innovative artist and recipient of the MacArthur “genius grant” Fellowship would even be asked to perform (to deploy the buzz words:) a strict, painstakingly-realized, note-for-note, historical re-creation of a past jazz performance demonstrates just how far this clone-band mentality has infiltrated jazz.

The San Francisco Jazz Festival approached Moran with the idea of doing a “historical re-creation” of Thelonious Monk’s 1959 Town Hall Concert as part of a Monk-at-90 tribute in 2007 (the same concert/album that Tolliver recreated

precisely, approached by many of the same funders).²⁹ Moran demurred on an exact re-creation, remarking in an interview that “technical re-creations can be a recipe for disaster” via quick allusion to Gus Van Sant’s shot-by-shot remake of *Psycho*. But Moran was intrigued and soon secured a co-commission from Duke University, The San Francisco Jazz Festival, Chicago Symphony Hall, and the Washington Performance Arts Society to create a compromise: a “making of” combined with a “historical recreation.” With his ensemble The Big Bandwagon and in collaboration with visual artist Glenn Ligon and video artist David Dempewolf, Moran presented a multi-media recreation developed out of archival material of preparations for Monk’s original concert that, in part, “[examined] the making of the Town Hall concert.”³⁰ He premiered it in 2007, took it on a 16-city international tour, and has performed it intermittently since. Moran’s *In My Mind* has not sidestepped all of the fetishistic landmines associated with strict reenactments.³¹ It was staged for the almost exact 50th anniversary of the

²⁹ For an interesting comparative review of both, see Ratliff 2009a.

http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/02/arts/music/02monk.html?_r=0

³⁰ Moran 2008.

<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2008/may/16/filmandmusic1.filmandmusic207>. The Big Bandwagon consists of Moran on piano, Ralph Alessi, trumpet; Walter Smith, tenor saxophone; Logan Richardson III, alto saxophone; Frank Lacy, trombone; Bob Stewart, tuba; Tarus Mateen, bass; Nasheet Waits, drums.

³¹ I term this practice of fetishistic reenactment *Replay* and contextualize it within the Western epistemological tradition outlined above (McMullen forthcoming-2018). The general approach of *Replay* will usually have several and very often most of the following qualities. *Replay* fetishizes time, space, and material details. Re-enacting at the exact spot of the original performance on an anniversary is very common. Efforts are made to find and use the original equipment (instruments, guitar pedals, recording equipment). *Replay* attempts to “fix” in both senses of the term: to make permanent and to improve, usually through technological advancement (for example, the original visual slides of the band Genesis are used by its clone, The Musical Box, but the present-day projector is considered more reliable than the projector available in the 1970s). *Replay* genuflects to the past as authority. Re-enactors do not attempt to understand how the music or performance would best work now in relation to present day circumstances—for example accounting for room size, current weather temperature, or popular taste regarding tempo or rhythm—but rather attempt to re-enact the music along the lines of “original intent.” *Replay* presents the uncanny as a selling point. Performances are marketed as bringing the performance or person uncannily “back to life.” Promotional materials and reviews also highlight the “painstaking” work that went into recreating the performance with such accuracy. *Replay* assumes that we can and should have it all—that we should not lose or be parted from anything. *Replay* emphasizes control. Many reenactments stress that through this work even the flow of time can be mastered. *Replay* understands music as an historic *event* which is then re-enacted, not as a continual process of unfolding, nor even any longer as a text to be interpreted. Finally, *Replay* conveys a desire to touch the Real. *Replay* is a fantasy of connecting with that which has been lost (the past). It is a fantasy of a return to oneness (perfect identity) from a world of separation, difference, mediation, and alienation.

famous concert February 27, 2009 at the original venue—Town Hall in New York—as part of the Duke University Monk Festival (the original performance took place on February 28th).

I attended a performance of *In My Mind* at the Kennedy Center’s Eisenhower Theater on March 28, 2015. The evening did not begin auspiciously. As the audience filed in, a screen at the back of the stage filtered through a series of black and white television clips framed by a representation of a mid-century television set. Flashing by were 1950s-era film and TV images: commercials, major league baseball, white men surfing, male hands of unidentifiable race playing the piano, news or military footage of warplanes, other news footage I did not recognize but some including Rosa Parks, the headline to a documentary “The Story of Television,” and news footage of Richard Nixon in the USSR, referencing, I imagine, his 1959 “kitchen debate” with Nikita Khrushchev. I was hoping the material was not all from 1959, but the “kitchen debate” footage led me to believe it was. This fetishizing of the year and the un-ironic presentation of nostalgia all framed within the 1950s-era television set gave me the same Disneyland feel I get from many reenactments. It is as if the images taken from “That. Very. Year.” are what should be thrilling and interesting for us.³² Positivistic, flat-footed, literalist fun, I’m thinking. I was preparing myself for disappointment.

But this fetishistic interaction with the past dropped away when Moran entered from stage right, took his place at the piano, and donned a pair of extra-large headphones. Soon we heard the original recording of *Monk at Town Hall* “leaking” the first track from Moran’s ‘phones: “Thelonious.” Moran dove into the piano, scrawling all over the partially-audible-to-us, but we imagine very-loud-to-him, “Thelonious.” The pianist did not treat the original “reverently.” He was not dutifully re-performing the master’s licks, but getting funky, atonal, gospel-y. For me, it evoked Moran’s youth, his private practice at home, experimenting, pretending to be a grown-up “great artist,” being free, unrestrained; playing. Moran seemed to be saying: this is how jazz artists interact with the jazz past—they *play* with it. Playing with the past is how they learn jazz. Perhaps overly excited, I read it as a critique of this whole reenactment thing. It was a call to arms, a statement of what this “historical recreation” would and would not be: Moran *playing with* the past. *Playing. WITH.* Monk. Here’s the *with* that all of these reenactments have been vainly trying to capture. Here’s the connection.

³² For example, Maurice Peress promoted his reenactment of Paul Whiteman’s 1924 “Experiment in Modern Music” at Aeolian Hall in New York City with the tagline: “Same Day. Same Block. 90 Years Later.”

The past *is* here when we stop trying so hard to locate it. Monk *is* here. The greatness of *Kind of Blue* *is* here. I was relieved.

As the performance unfolded I was pleased to find that I was not overly excited; I was as excited as I should have been. The performance was not only an answer to the reenactment approach but an argument for a way to think about the past and about art. It was a case for a way of knowing that favors connection and allowing, not copying and conquering. After the Monk/Moran “duet,” the band entered, joining Moran for a full band version of “Thelonious.” Like many of the evening’s musical arrangements, at a certain point the song began to fragment into bits of melody-turned-riff that one section of the band would take up and loop, while another section of the band would layer another looping riff over it and so on. These loops continued to repeat beyond the point that seemed like “over-doing it.” The effect was a type of implosion of the song with different sections of the band obsessively repeating different riffs in kaleidophonic splendor. It seemed another comment on the issue of copying, tradition, influence and repetition. You want tribute? You want the past?—here it is. Over and over and over and over and over and.... It was making copying so obsessive that something else came out the other side. Songs subjected to this approach disintegrated out, sending constituent particles of the melody into the ether as atonal solos or group improvisation sidled in. Although not an exact technique that Monk employed, it was redolent of a certain brilliant obsession I find in Monk’s work. A starkness and a complex simplicity. An adamant quality that marks Monk’s idiosyncrasy.

With the exception of the video prelude, David Dempewolf’s contribution further supported the overall approach to engaging *Monk at Town Hall*. Moran collected archival sound and visual material from the original rehearsals for the Town Hall concert as well as images from Monk’s family history. Dempewolf manipulated and played with those images. Photographs of the rehearsals for the Town Hall Concert jumped around and changed with color filters or were partially obscured. They were “ruined” so as not to remain clear representations of a locatable past. The visual backdrop behind the performance of “Monk’s Mood” displayed photos with subtitles. The subtitles were partially obscured from my seat, but what I could read—“This is my room, my piano, I started piano lessons when”—I initially took to be statements from Monk. The song is called, *Monk’s Mood*, after all. But I started to think that these were statements from Moran and the photos probably of Moran’s childhood home. This was further supported when we heard a recording of what I took to be Moran describing listening to a Monk record with his family in his childhood living room. The TV set was on with the volume down and his parents were discussing the recent tragic news of some friend or relative dying in an accident. While I do

not clearly remember the details of the story, the effect remained with me: it was a story of Moran learning the importance of music—its power to help us survive in a world full of unknowns.³³ This “arrangement” of “Monk’s Mood” was an example of how Moran blurred the “my” in his title: *In My Mind*. While beginning with *Monk’s Mood*, we are led through a complex interaction that leaves everything unclear as to whose mood, whose mind, whose song. Who is Monk here and who is Moran? Where, precisely, could we find that boundary?³⁴

Because, indeed, isn’t “blurred” just another word for “connection”? The visuals behind the performance of “Off Minor” included old newspapers flashing

³³ Moran talks about this story in an interview, Carbone 2009.

³⁴ The phrase was taken from a recorded comment by Monk during one of the rehearsals that Moran had, in fact, misheard. What Monk had actually said while discussing some music was “for my mind.” As Moran stated in an interview, he remembered it as “in my mind” and began to ponder the phrase, listening to when other people in his life stated this phrase. He then created a sound collage where he tried to repeat the particular cadence of the way each person said “in my mind” (video interview, Hawkins 2009 <http://www.cdsporich.org/archives/5754>). This recognition and acceptance of how misremembering is part of the creative practice and how we relate to the past, generally, can be compared to Moppa Elliott’s misremembering of a quote from the Borges story. As Moppa Elliott discusses the relationship between the music on *Blue* and “Pierre Menard,” he misremembers the story (and the date of Cervantes’ writing). Elliott states, “The line is something like, ‘Fate, the mother of truth, the daughter of reality...’ When Cervantes wrote that in 1567, it was talking about the way people viewed fate as ruling their lives and to say that it was the “mother of truth” was to talk about how you have to adapt to your surroundings” (Elliott and Elliott 2014). *Quixote* was published in 1604 and it is guessed he first conceived of it in prison in 1597-8 (Cervantes Saavedra 2003:xxxvi). The line is taken from *Quixote* and “re-written” by Menard in Borges’ story. The correct line from the translation that they excerpted in their liner notes is: “...truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and advisor to the present, and the future’s counselor.” The line as it is translated in my Penguin edition of *Don Quixote* is: “truth, whose mother is history: the imitator of time, the storehouse of actions and the witness to the past, an example and a lesson to the present and a warning to the future” (Cervantes Saavedra 2003:76). Moran misremembers “for my mind,” turning it into “in my mind.” I can’t perfectly remember the Kennedy Center performance. The difference is in how we think about these misrememberings. Elliott is perhaps misremembering a high school or college discussion of the novel, but he is “explaining” some type of truth—what Cervantes “was talking about.” His commentary is completely erroneous, yet, he uses this incorrect memory/reading to “clarify” the point of the story. Moran’s misremembering, like mine, is acknowledged. The point for myself, and I believe for Moran, is the impact the “misremembered” moment had. We are not relying on some perfect accuracy, but on how we are affected by something. That the Cervantes passage about the relationship of truth to history is so egregiously misremembered and, yet, presented as truth by Elliott situates the entire *Blue* project within the territory of unintended farce, in my view. Perhaps I have now arrived as the “daughter of reality.” As such, I’d like to assert the reality that misremembering put forward as truth undergirds practices such as white and male appropriation of music produced by their “others” (see for example, McMullen 2014).

quickly by. There were no images of Monk or even jazz, but simply newspapers which gave the impression of “the past” more generally, not some specific Monk past or jazz past. Live shots of the band currently playing in Eisenhower Theater were then superimposed upon these images. Throughout the song we had these two worlds coming together, the present concert smeared into the representation of the past, playing and interacting with it, blurring and connecting. It is the antithesis of the idea that we here in the present can somehow capture the past as a separate object. There was no separation and therefore no this to capture that. As “Off Minor” came to a close we heard a recording of Monk talking about the song, “Crepuscle with Nellie.” At a certain point Monk intones, “Let me see you play it” and Moran begins playing, creating the impression that Monk’s statement (asked in rehearsal) was a generous invitation. Moran responds to that invitation with alacrity, offering his own version of “Crepuscle.” Moran is listening to Monk and responding. He is not copying him exactly. He is taking up the invitation offered by a jazz elder. Moran is honoring the artist by listening hard enough that I/you/Monk/he can verify that he has heard by his own response. To mimic the man would be to demonstrate that, indeed, he has not really heard him. He has not heard what needs to be heard.

The performance made a final case for connection in the last number. In the middle of the song, the musicians rose and left the stage while still playing. The audience followed the sound of the players growing fainter as they filed into the wings. It was unclear what was happening, but then the audience heard the sound coming nearer again. The music grew stronger until a side door to the auditorium opened and the band paraded through, crossing the audience aisle and then turning right toward the lobby. Upon exiting the back of the theater the band continued to play until the song was finished and the audience offered its hearty applause. As we exited into the lobby we found the musicians there waiting to interact with us.

I requested one, but Moran did not have a recording of the entire performance to offer me. There are so many specifics of this performance that I don’t remember. But I find this apt. Things are lost. We don’t retain everything. But what is it that is important to retain? For example, I was fascinated by the musicians getting up and leaving the stage while still playing. But I don’t recall what the song was. Was it still “Crepuscle”? I don’t think so. Was it a reprise of “Little Rootie Tootie”? I also don’t think that. I recall being pleased that Moran did not reprise “Rootie Tootie” which was so fetishistically performed by Tolliver and rewarded with critical praise.³⁵ But I wouldn’t stake my life on that memory. How I remember the music now (and I think, “incorrectly”) is as a kind of

³⁵ See note 25.

second line feel. Perhaps because they were marching I am now remembering it as a New Orleans second line. Or perhaps it really was a second line feel. I like the truth of this imperfect recollection. I cannot fix the performance in my mind—it cannot be fixed (neither frozen, nor my memory “fixed” by listening to a recording). Moran’s reenactment highlighted how the past cannot be “said” in the positivistic, pointing-to, obsessive way we’re all so used to. It is an uncapturable influence, which is to say it is there and not there. Of course the Town Hall Concert is no longer what it was exactly. That time, that whatever-it-was (which could never be captured anyway, even then)—that is the “not there.” But it is there in the influence. It is there in how it is here now. Moran was *connecting* with the past. He was demonstrating how the past is a *relationship* we have.

What is important to copy? What is it we want to know wanting to know the other? A discussion between the two artists Jason Moran and Glenn Ligon offers a perspective:

Ligon: “What drew me to your work was when I heard you playing Monk. I heard Jason Moran playing Monk—I didn’t hear someone trying to re-create Monk in a straightforward, note-for-note, this-is-how-he-would’ve-done-it way. I realize that it’s the result of an incredibly intense research project. You figure out how he played as the base, and then you build your own vocabulary up.

Moran: For me, Monk is the best example. When he plays someone else’s work, it just sounds like him. I discovered Monk in the ’80s.... I was like 13.... He had his eyes set and he never wavered, and I thought, That’s how you’re supposed to do it—period. When I try to approach Monk’s work, I have to make sure that I have reckless abandon within it. I try to make sure I don’t let that sand castle just stand. It should start getting demolished from the bottom and move its way up to the top, dissolving into something else. I think that’s the problem with jazz in general. It’s still a young art form—a little over 100 years old now—and there’s the idea like, Shit, we’ve only had a couple of golden eras, and we really want to keep looking back at them. That will just get us stuck (Moran N.D.).

From this interview, one could say that Moran is trying to imitate Monk, quite seriously, in fact. But what he is trying to imitate/learn from/know is something not so easily located. It is something about seriousness, about devotion, about self-worth. Something about recognizing the importance and validity of making one’s own contribution while understanding that that “you” is also a part of the “them” you locate as your ancestors. While I believe MOPDTK also laments the excessive “looking back” of much of contemporary jazz, *Blue’s* “knowing of the

other” was a project about naming and difference and thus perpetuated a deep and old cultural disease. This is why MOPDTK’s obsessive copying did not “[dissolve] into something else,” in my view, and Moran’s did. An epistemology based on “objectivity” and naming will always look for the edges, but the edges are not there. In this absence one will then create the edges. Race and gender are primary places where the Western tradition has always found these edges. But these edges make us lonely and so we attempt to capture things to *have* them, to fill this loss. It is a self-perpetuating cycle that causes harm to both the one who is deemed “self” and the one who is deemed “other” in order to delineate this self.

Privileging the name (“jazz”) and the notation—the “what can be said”—is like looking for the answer only where the light is best. It is as if you lost your keys at night in a field, but you will only look under the lamppost—not where the keys actually are—because the thought of groping around in the dark seems like something that is just not done. If we could accept the impossibility and infinity of difference we wouldn’t need to re-do and point-to. We wouldn’t need to ponder the edges of our differences, nor be surprised again and again when we cannot capture and contain them. This demands perhaps an unaccustomed bravery and humility in being able to relate to and with and in a world that does not offer up answers in the ways many of us may want them.

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