

BOOK REVIEW

Antagonistic Cooperation: Jazz, Collage, Fiction, and the Shaping of African American Culture. By Robert G. O'Meally. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022. 296pp. \$120.00.

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In a world dominated by chaos and competition, Robert G. O'Meally's *Antagonistic Cooperation* offers a refreshing perspective on the power of collaboration and conflict. Over the course of five chapters, he delves into the rich tapestry of African American culture, highlighting the interconnectedness of different forms of artistic expression and the role they play in shaping our understanding of the world we live in. This work makes a significant contribution to jazz-as-democracy discourse through the exploration of the concept of “antagonistic cooperation,” which O'Meally describes “as a form of community building, of competition and coordination with a jazz player’s spirit of love” (2). Through these means, he shows how artists and intellectuals play with and against one another to create art and community.

In some ways, this book attempts to address the current democratic crisis in the United States. For instance, O'Meally opens the book with, “Now’s the time (Charlie Parker’s bebop anthem) to swing to the tune of antagonistic cooperation, the uniting theme of this book: to relearn, as American citizens of the planet, to move responsibly in the same direction, even though at times we’re at one another’s throats” (1). In this work, he theorizes a jazz-cadenced democratic nation-building, framing the jazz band as a model of a democracy in action that admits and welcomes difference. He argues that Americans need to move toward a jazzlike group interplay like the kind that happens at jam sessions, contending that the jam session provides a dynamic setting where all participants’ artistic capacities are quickened, and where all become careful listeners to what the others have to say, as each musician pushes self and opponent to higher and higher levels of articulation. He considers figures such as Romare Bearden, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Louis Armstrong, and Duke Ellington to be highly conscious jam-session players who play not only with those in their own artistic form but across the art forms. O'Meally's compelling and thought-provoking readings of these artists and their work helps us understand Black history and culture as beautifully

layered and complex. This is an ambitious project but one that I feel succeeds in its goal to demonstrate the meaning and power of antagonistic cooperation.

Chapter One focuses on the idea of Black music as a call to action, using Ralph Ellison's works as examples. O'Meally argues that jazz both embodies and demands an aesthetic action that is inherently political. To support this argument, the author examines lesser-known writings of Ellison to demonstrate how he regularly commented on Black music throughout his collection of works, and developed the concept of antagonistic cooperation as a practice and theory of art. The chapter also argues for the importance of artistic kinship and influence, exploring how young artists model themselves on the examples of others. In the second half of the chapter, the author delves deeper into the topic of Louis Armstrong, but primarily in the context of how Ellison wrote about him. In truth, Ellison's work serves as a through-line for the rest of O'Meally's exploration of antagonistic cooperation throughout the book. He focuses on how Ellison used the metaphor of invisibility to reveal Americans' inability to perceive one another or themselves. O'Meally argues that with Black citizenship continuing to be such a fundamental issue in American democracy, we need to be guided by Ellison's clear and strong voice. Throughout the chapter, the author's expertise as an Ellison scholar is evident, and he makes a persuasive case for reconsidering Armstrong and Ellison as "masters of antagonistic cooperation" who have been marginalized by history.

Chapter Two builds on the work of philosopher Michel de Montaigne and artist Romare Bearden to create a metaphor that views the globe as a collage of diverse human parts and pieces. O'Meally weaves together many different voices and ideas, to explore the theme of collage. Notably, he illustrates his thesis by demonstrating how Armstrong created collages through musical and theatrical performances. For instance, in his analysis of Louis Armstrong's 1955 performance of the aria "Vesti la giubba" on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, O'Meally unveils the intricate way Armstrong skillfully blended elements of art and popular music influences. Furthermore, O'Meally highlights Armstrong's masterful incorporation of sophisticated humor and his adept navigation of the racial politics prevalent during that era. Through this insightful analysis, Armstrong emerges as a remarkable collage-maker, shedding light on the profound layers of his persona and performance practices that have often been overshadowed by the controversy of his earlier minstrel performances. The subsequent sections of this chapter offer an in-depth exploration of the profound impact of Romare Bearden and Toni Morrison's use of collage practices on African American cultural expression. O'Meally skillfully emphasizes how their artistic works embody the improvisational spirit of a jam session and explore the

intricate interplay between identity, community, and democracy. By doing so, this chapter compels the reader to contemplate how the artistic practice of collage can reshape our perception of selfhood, foster a sense of interconnectedness within communities, and ultimately challenge the democratic framework itself.

Chapter Three explores issues of the Black community and creativity through the concept of an “open corner.” The concept represents an invitation for the audience to participate in the creation of a given work. The refusal or inability to develop a complete plan presents a sense of adventure, free play, and open-ended hospitality. The chapter tracks dynamic open corners in visual art, music, and literature, as well as in the everyday world of politics and policy. The idea of the open corner highlights actual physical spaces through which we move, where a sense of unfinishedness can be refreshing and offer room to move and grow. The author provides an example of Bearden's artistic strategy of leaving a portion of a given work “open” and considers these strategies of omission or understatement in literature and music to be an unpredictable and important creative space. O'Meally muses about what we can learn from the work of Toni Morrison, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, and Thelonious Monk, whom he considers masters of the open corner. I anticipate that jazz scholars and performers will find the concept of an open corner to be a useful way to think about musical practice and politics.

In Chapter Four, O'Meally examines a series of comic performances by Louis Armstrong, including his lesser-known music and films. Most notably, he closely studies Armstrong's controversial decision to wear a grass skirt and face paint to parade the streets of New Orleans as the King of the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club in 1949. Although his performance was viewed as demeaning by many, O'Meally argues that it held deep meaning for the working-class Black community in New Orleans. Furthermore, he explores Armstrongian humor, outside of the larger context of American race relations and rather as an intimate expression of joyfulness for himself that he performed regardless of whether white or Black individuals appreciated it. O'Meally asks us to reconsider how humor can function as a check-and-balancing act that turns the tables on Black racial jokes and turns them back on their enemies. This analysis of Black humor is a standout feature of the book.

The fifth chapter focuses on the 1961 film *Paris Blues* and tells its lesser-known history. He demonstrates how Hollywood executives pushed back against the original version of the film which centered around Black artists living freely in Paris, adult sexuality, interracial relationships, and social protest. Thus, the movie was transformed into a Black-white buddy film starring Paul Newman

and Sidney Poitier about two jazz musicians falling in love with culturally acceptable partners. O'Meally focuses on the roles played by Louis Armstrong, who appears in significant cameos, and by Duke Ellington, who composed the score. This interdisciplinary approach is particularly effective in this chapter and supports a sophisticated analysis of the racial politics of the film's casting decisions, demonstrating how they relate to the larger themes of the book. O'Meally presents a compelling argument that the movie should be regarded as a form of antagonistic cooperation, where Duke Ellington provided the soundtrack to a film he found himself at odds with. Ellington's frustration stemmed from revisions to the script and casting choices aimed at making the film more palatable to a broader, multiracial audience. These changes ultimately diluted the complex racial dynamics and sexual politics initially intended. Through this case study, O'Meally introduces the concept of "unruly Black cosmopolitanism," characterized by a bold determination to create truth-telling art, irrespective of whether it is universally liked or not. Guided by this ethos of musical resistance, Ellington staunchly refused to compromise his original vision for the score, which aimed to illuminate the Black experience in Paris. By doing so, he challenged the racist motives that had undermined the film's original intentions, demonstrating a commitment to preserving the authenticity and integrity of his artistic expression. O'Meally's exploration of this example of unruly Black cosmopolitanism provides valuable insights into the resilience and audacity of artists who strive to create meaningful and unapologetic work, even in the face of opposition or attempts at sanitization.

In the coda, O'Meally offers an insightful discussion on the disappointing reception of the movie *Paris Blues* and its implications. He highlights the collaboration between Sam Shaw, Romare Bearden, and Albert Murray, who embarked on their own project titled *Paris Blues*, an unpublished book that presented a Black-artist-in-Paris narrative free from the constraints imposed by Hollywood's standards of race, gender, and sexuality. Created two decades after the film's release, this project features collages of pictures and text, showcasing the creators' unfiltered artistic vision. By delving into the creation of this book, O'Meally provides readers with a fascinating perspective on the artistic process that illuminates the potential for artists to reclaim their narratives and challenge prevailing norms in innovative ways. With this analysis, O'Meally ends *Antagonistic Cooperation* by zooming out into an international context, providing readers with a broader perspective on the themes and concepts explored throughout the text. Although some readers may have been left desiring the closure of a more traditional conclusion, O'Meally's decision to end the book in this manner invites readers to contemplate the complexities of art and culture in

a global context, highlighting the potential for Black artists to challenge established norms and envision new possibilities.

O'Meally successfully demonstrates the power of antagonistic cooperation and reminds us of the revolutionary potential of jazz as a genre. This interdisciplinary work provides a reopening to an ongoing conversation for new generations of artists and scholars about how jazz has shaped American culture and provides a way for us to reflect on the ways in which jazz can be used to make the present moment and future better. Overall, *Antagonistic Cooperation* is an impressive work that could only be accomplished by a seasoned scholar like O'Meally, whose experience in literature, music, and visual art shines throughout the text. Through this interdisciplinary practice, O'Meally explores lesser-engaged themes of Black cultural production such as humor, reparations, collage, and imagination. This book also offers new insights in jazz historiography, highlighting the political stakes in telling the story of the music and evaluating the impact of its cultural circulation in the United States and worldwide. However, the book assumes that the reader is familiar with the arts, humanities, and cultural studies. While it is a compelling and thought-provoking read that provides a new perspective on African American creativity and aesthetics, some readers may find it challenging due to its interdisciplinary nature and the need for familiarity with the artwork and media referenced throughout the book. Nevertheless, those who are willing to put in the effort will find it to be a rich and rewarding read that provides a new understanding of Black cultural expression and hope for fulfilling the broken promises of American democracy.