Conclusion: “Too Many Books For Our Eyes”; Future Politics, Future Poetries

A feminist jazz poetics addresses both creative and critical practices by interrogating the ways in which contemporary social and artistic movements marginalize women’s art. Women have helped to shape the histories of both jazz and American experimental poetics, yet the public imaginary often perceives their work as a sideline to men’s accomplishments. Black art and popular culture occupy a similarly vexed position in relation to the white mainstream, while many national feminist movements have overlooked the politics of black women’s lives. The authors in this study, who find their experimental, jazz-based poetry triply marginalized in the context of race, gender, and artistic canon, seek to carve out spaces for the voices and perspectives absent from American literary histories. Their work’s imbrication in this complex set of power relationships aligns their social and aesthetic philosophies with those of global theory; by interrogating social concerns that resonate beyond American borders, this poetry demonstrates the role that art can play in crossing, challenging, and unmaking cultural divisions. The poetry’s formal strategies, which refuse the traditional confines of language, structure, and poetic form, echo its themes’ transnational scope.

The work of all five poets in this study seeks to increase American awareness of feminist struggle outside the country’s borders by underlining the experiences, both contemporary and historical, of women marginalized through gender, race, cultural affiliation, sexuality, regional identity, and professional status. While they each cultivate a unique approach to experimental feminist poetics, Sherley Anne Williams,

J. D. Ryan, Post-Jazz Poetics
© Jennifer D. Ryan 2010
Sonia Sanchez, Jayne Cortez, Wanda Coleman, and Harryette Mullen also share several compositional elements that can be identified as key strands in the history of radical black poetry traditions. Other African-American women poets have pursued similar projects—among them, Gwendolyn Brooks, Thulani Davis, Colleen McElroy, Carolyn Rodgers, and Elizabeth Alexander. However, the writers whose work I examine here have created techniques and modes of political expression that distinguish them from most of their contemporaries. Their poetry responds directly to traditions established within the history of white Western literature while accommodating the themes and concerns that persist in a post–Civil Rights America. They contribute to the ongoing history of experimental poetics through their development of new forms like the jazz elegy, the blues haiku, the jazz sonnet, and the jazz catalogue. Yet their sometimes fraught relationships to such artistic “schools” as the Black Arts Movement and the Language group indicate that they seek to imbue poetic forms with social meaning by referencing the real lives whose stories threaten to dissolve the boundaries of aesthetic tradition.

Most of these writers also work within the American academy, or have done so at some point in their careers, using higher education as a forum in which not only to make wide-ranging political statements but also to critique the inequalities that such institutions continue to support.

The five subjects of this study also recognize a common history undergirding their work. Their poetry owes creative and political debts to 1960s and 1970s Black Arts writers, while the history of 1920s classic-blues singers like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey inspires a palette of emotional tones, provides subject matter through which to explore feminist themes, and references an artistic tradition that their readers can immediately access. The work also responds directly to contemporary developments in the history of jazz and blues music, articulating the same kinds of social and compositional concerns that have preoccupied musicians themselves. Like the history of jazz, the history that forms the background to these poems inevitably contains fissures, gaps, and other markers of incompleteness. The relatively coherent narrative of creation discussed in Chapters 1, 2, and 3, which examine 1920s blues, bebop, and free jazz as influences in the poetry, fragments in Chapters 4 and 5. This dissolution does not signal a lack of coherence; rather, it provides evidence of the post-jazz atmosphere in which these poets invent. Their poetry evolves through an ongoing incorporation of compositional techniques, tributes, and references to the conflicted history of the music's most famous and little-known performances and performers, producing a vocabulary that interpellates jazz fans, political organizers, and students of experimental poetics. This post-jazz language reframes persistent