

Jeanne Lee's Voice¹

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On 52nd Street I realized Jean [sic] Lee is clothed and fed by her voice. That's the same street my aunts and uncles were born and black on, so 52nd and 10th means something to me – like a people who come out with what they can carry: love, sweat, blood and song. Though everything we know is wonderful and rich, we, as a people, hide, to keep it safe. Jean Lee don't. [. . .] Aretha addresses God, Billie Holiday seduced him. Tina Turner made the devil think twice/but Jean Lee is mingling among us. [. . .] She is not afraid of all this body that moves so sweet I dare you/ and isn't this more than you ever imagined; her body is song. [. . .] We got a woman among us who isn't afraid of the sound of her own voice. She might lay up nights, wondering how are we staying alive 'cause we didn't hear what she just heard/or sing it. Well. Did I hear the congregation say Amen.

She sings.

Jean Lee/ She sings

Ntozake Shange's review of a 1981 performance at Soundscape in New York (quoted above) sets the stage for understanding Jeanne Lee's extraordinary voice. Noting the function of song in a society defined by its slave past, placing Lee among a tradition of black women vocalists, referencing the way she fused the aesthetics of dance and vocal art in performance, and suggesting that she was invested in a politics of the everyday are all relevant tactics for making sense of Lee and her music. Despite the force of her voice, Lee was not fully audible to various interpretive communities over the course of her 40-year professional career because of her position as a woman, working mother, black person, and, as she described herself shortly before her death in 2000, "a jazz singer, poet/lyricist, composer/improviser, who since the 1960s [had] extended the vocal jazz tradition to keep pace with the innovations made by instrumentalists [. . .] [and] extended the jazz song into a foundation for multi-disciplinary (music, dance, slides, film) performance" (Lee, "Overview"). Shange's analysis, however, begins to fill in the gaps in the textual record and makes Lee and her music more intelligible by balancing documentation and recuperation with a creative historicization of her work.

Following her lead, I seek here to engage Jeanne Lee's life, art, and ideas within the contexts Shange identifies. Moreover, the scarcity of published and archival information on Lee, her genre-bending artistic legacy, her sometimes cryptic remarks about the significance of her work, and the occasionally explicit but often subtle ideological codes permeating the production and reception of improvisational practices suggest the value of drawing inspiration, as Shange does, from Lee's unorthodox, multidisciplinary practice while making sense of her project.

By adopting such an approach, I hope, on one level, to begin to recuperate the legacy of an important artist whose work has gone largely unnoticed by scholars. The more immediate goal here is to address the cultural politics of Lee's work, within the music world in which she operated as well as within the broader discursive field imbuing improvisational music with meaning. Using Lee's 1979 performance of her poem "In These Last Days" as a point of reference, I examine the ways her multidisciplinary artistic practice extended the parameters of improvised vocal music and articulated utopian social goals. Building from both long-standing histories of African American cultural practice as well as from her own immersions in the jazz world and intermedia arts scene, Lee expressed a unique vision while participating in the development of the hybrid aesthetic orientation and the post-nationalist and post-cultural nationalist social imaginary that informed the creative and intellectual work of other African American improvisers during the 1970s and has helped define experimental, improvised music through the present.

I also examine how Lee's performance of gender in the piece (and its performativity) addressed issues pertaining to the material and discursive terrain female improvisers had to negotiate. I show how Lee's re-articulation in a new context of the performance practices in which she had been immersed enabled her both to carve out space for herself in the improvised music world and to implicitly comment on its gendered exclusions. In other words, the social and aesthetic vision Lee voiced through her words and the performance of them on "In These Last Days" was a kind of repetition with a difference of the modes of raced and gendered imagining evident in the work and reception of the improvising communities with whom she had been in dialogue.

I conclude by suggesting that “In These Last Days” may be re-read, in somewhat trans-historical terms, as a meditation on the writing of jazz and improvised music history and the power embedded in such narratives. When we listen to Lee’s unorthodox and multidisciplinary creative project, her troubling of gender conventions, and her post-nationalist and post-cultural nationalist orientation, we not only gain a better sense of the cultural politics of often-ignored experimental improvisations from the 1970s, we also hear a response to some of the familiar, politically compelling, yet somewhat restrictive narratives of jazz and improvised music history in the present. Her work thus encourages us to rethink jazz and improvised music history in ways that are consistent with her project. As Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble remind us, “Improvisation (in theory and practice) challenges all musical orthodoxies, all musical taxonomies, even its own” (31).

WE GOT A WOMAN AMONG US WHO ISN’T AFRAID OF THE SOUND OF HER OWN VOICE

Born in 1939, Lee said her creative sensibility early in her life was deeply influenced by her father, concert and church singer S. Alonzo Lee, as well as by the education she received at the Wolver School, a private institution that followed the pragmatist philosophy of Henry David Thoreau. Lee graduated from Bard College in 1961, where she studied literature, psychology and dance, choreographing along the way pieces to music by Bartók, Bach, Ives, Schoenberg, and Kodály, as well as that of jazz composers and improvisers. Soon after graduating from college, Lee recorded the album *The Newest Sound Around*, with pianist and fellow Bard alumnus Ran Blake. Although her work with Blake was popular in Europe – which led to a successful tour in 1963 – the duo never caught on back home. Almost a year after the recording of *The Newest Sound Around* Lee and Blake had yet to get a nightclub gig in the United States (Coss).

Lee more or less disappeared from the jazz scene in the mid 1960s, and instead devoted more of her time to collaborations with people in other artistic movements. She developed over the decade a multidisciplinary approach to improvisation that took her beyond the parameters defining much jazz singing. We may understand her approach as an outgrowth of her existing immersion in jazz, poetry, and dance, which recombined already mutually constitutive “Afrological” and “Eurological” (G. Lewis, “Afterword” 168) cultural practices, and a product of her involvement with the intermedia arts scene developing in the San Francisco Bay Area and elsewhere during the 1960s.

Lee was briefly married to and collaborated with sound poet David Hazelton and worked with other artists affiliated with sound poetry, Fluxus, and Happenings. She became interested in sound poetry’s dedication to conveying emotional meaning through intonation, communicating via non-verbal utterances, and connecting poetry to bodily movement and sensation. Lee was also drawn to the experimentalism, ritual, audience participation, and iconoclasm associated with Fluxus and Happenings.² Lee claimed that her interest in these artistic movements stemmed in part from her recognition of the limitations of jazz singing, although she clearly brought her own skills as an improviser and a composer to these movements. As Lee described this phase of her development:

As an improvising singer, there was always the option to scat, thus imitating the jazz instrumental sounds. There were also jazz lyricists who set words to instrumental solos. Since neither of these options allowed space for the natural rhythms and sonorities or the emotional content of words, I started composing music for the sound-poetry of Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, Dieter Rot, Ian Hamilton Finlay and Henri Schaeffer, first at the Open Theater in Berkeley, California, as part of a multi-disciplinary company of musicians, painters/slide projectionists, sound poets and dancers (1964-1966). (“Narrative”)

Once asked about the influence of instrumentalists on her singing, she said, “I’m more interested in what the voice is in itself.” She suggested that it was in the mid 1960s when she realized “I was moving away from the conventional idea of music. I could take music out of musicality, add space and silence.” One way she achieved this was to integrate her own poetry and music into improvisational performances. But rather than merely read poems over musical accompaniment, she began, as she put it, to “take poetry as a point of departure for improvisation” (Riggins 4). She explored the tonal possibilities of verbal poetic utterances, repeating words, syllables and vowel and consonant sounds and fusing them with grunts, clicks, screams and other vocalizations not necessarily related to speech. Lee was also interested in vocal performance as a process in which meaning located in the body could be communicated to the audience,

and she drew upon her training in dance to develop this technique. As she described it:

The voice is a very important instrument, it's part of the body and can emulate bodily feelings. [. . .] [S]o using the psoas muscles and the diaphragm together you can take it into dance or voice or both [. . .] you learn to work with the dynamics of the feeling [. . .] you learn to work with the emotions [. . .]. [W]hen your body is working you don't have to think of a horn but you can think of body movement. (Riggins 5)

After beginning a creative and romantic relationship with German multi-instrumentalist Günter Hampel in the late 1960s, Lee re-established herself as a major voice in African American and European improvised music circles. And from this period forward, she regularly integrated aspects of poetry and dance into her musical work. In addition to working regularly during this period with Hampel, she recorded and/or performed during the late 1960s and 1970s with Carla Bley, Anthony Braxton, Marion Brown, Andrew Cyrille, Sheila Jordan, Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Jimmie Lyons, Grachan Moncur III, Archie Shepp, Cecil Taylor, Reggie Workman, and a number of other American and European improvisers. She participated in several performances of John Cage's bicentennial composition *Renga and Apartment Building 1776* – an experience that inspired her to compose her own extended works. Funded by a 1976 NEA grant, Lee combined poetry, music, and dance in her two act, ten scene jazz oratorio *Prayer for our Time*, based on the 13th-century Persian poet Farid Ud-din Attar's "Conference of the Birds." In the decade preceding her death, her primary performing outlets were the Jeanne Lee Ensemble, which combined poetry, music, and dance, and the Jeanne Lee/ Mal Waldron Duo.

Lee also maintained a commitment to arts education, and she spoke of the influence on her educational vision of theorists ranging from psychologist Carl Jung to choreographer and ethnographer Pearl Primus to dance therapist Irmgard Bartenieff to percussionist Badal Roy (Foote). She received an M.A. in Education from New York University in 1972 and subsequently developed her own curriculum and taught classes, conducted workshops, and held residencies in various educational institutions in the United States and Europe, ranging from elementary schools to universities. Educational writings included short features on music and folklore for the *Amsterdam News*, curricular plans for elementary schools, and short stories for children. In 1999 Lee published *Jam!: The Story of Jazz Music*, a textbook for grades four through seven.

LIKE A PEOPLE WHO COME OUT WITH WHAT THEY CAN CARRY

Lee's multidisciplinary project, foregrounding vocal art as an embodied process, suggests that we can continue this analysis by keeping in mind Lindon Barrett's comments about the African American singing voice as a mode of expression through which "African Americans may exchange an expended, valueless self in the New World for a productive, recognized self." As an alternative to Eurocentric ideas of literacy (or "signing voices"), through which exclusive definitions of humanity have been produced, the "singing voice provides the allowance for African Americans to enter or subvert symbolic, legal, material, and imaginative economies to which we are most usually denied access" (57). African American singing voices accomplish this, Barrett argues, through their "disturbance" by means of various vocal techniques of the systems of signification through which the social order is scripted and "foreground[ing] and play[ing] upon bodily dimensions of vocal action usually taken for granted [. . .] a signal cultural moment and revision for those who would be confined, according to dominant wisdom, to the supplemental role of the body" (78-79). By collapsing the dichotomous parsing of mind and body, literacy and orality, Barrett suggests, the African American singing voice has drawn attention to a black social and imaginative presence while producing alternative, less exclusive, conceptions of "human value" (85). Barrett's conceptualization provides a useful, general frame for understanding the recuperative, disruptive work that African American singing voices may accomplish, but it begs the question of how this story has played out in distinct ways in different times and places. Thus, the following analysis attempts to build on Barrett's insights while remaining interested in the historical and spatial specifics of how Lee's voice announced her presence and re-inscribed human value, given her methods of performance, the distinct positionalities she articulated, and the different modes of exclusion she encountered.

Lee's 1973 poem/composition "In These Last Days," improvised and recorded in 1979 with drummer Andrew Cyrille and saxophonist Jimmy Lyons on the album *Nuba*, helps situate the development of Lee's multidisciplinary project in its historical context, referencing as it does the social struggles and political and economic dislocations of the 1970s. It provides insight, as well, of an aesthetic vision that included a

commitment to social change through creative endeavors in general, and improvised music in particular. But analysis based on content alone would remain incomplete without an attention to how Lee improvises the poem in performance. For it is her intonation, her repetition and elongation of words and syllables, her screams and non-linguistic utterances, and her interactions with the other instrumentalists on the piece that allow us to better understand how her improvising voice and body may also have been engaged in a less evident kind of tactical work in both its social moment and in relation to the wider system of meanings embedded in improvisational practices.

*In these Last Days
of Total
Dis-in-te-gra-tion,
where every day
Is a struggle
against becoming
An object in
someone else's
nightmare:
There is great joy
in being
Naima's Mother
and unassailable strength
In being
on the Way*

Lee's performance of "In These Last Days" expresses a social vision that dovetails with the utopian aspirations she expressed in interviews and her arts education projects during this period. The words/lyrics "these Last Days/ of Total/ Dis-in-te-gra-tion/ where every day/ Is a struggle/ against becoming/An object in/ someone else's/ nightmare" are improvised and repeated in different registers, across varying ranges of intervals. There is particular focus on the word "struggle," which is elongated and distorted, ultimately becoming a scream. All of this conveys a sense of urgency that situates the poem in the crisis that resonated within various communities in the United States during the late 1960s and early 1970s in the wake of the limited gains and very real failures of the ethnic mobilizations of the previous two decades, the embrace and rejection of various forms of identity politics, the repressive backlash against these movements, the divisive and violent war in Vietnam, and the political and economic crises of the 1970s. It was indeed a moment when the collective, utopian dreams had for many turned into living nightmares, and human beings struggled against their objectification both within various repressive apparatuses and in light of the limitations of oppositional, identity-based movements.

Yet, Lee maintains a sense of optimism, evident in the concluding lines: "There is great joy/ in being/ Naima's Mother/ and unassailable strength in being on the Way." "The Way" may be read as her commitment as a practicing musician to social change. During the 1970s Lee focused on creativity and imagination as tools in social struggles and suggested on more than one occasion during the decade that encouraging creative thought and activities might well provide an antidote to the alienation that human beings experienced in de-industrializing, capitalist societies. She emphasized the general importance of rituals that would allow people "to stay alive" and "rediscover the places where we are human" (Terlizzi, et al. 7-8). As an educator, Lee held a particular interest in the pedagogical possibilities of ritual. She viewed dance (particularly, African dance) as a refinement of the rituals of everyday life, which, in turn, could convey a sense of collective identity, history, and purpose. During this period she developed a non-profit corporation, Earthforms Rituals, which promoted concerts and educational programs revolving around participatory rituals conducted by her and others, and she at times performed using the stage name Earthforms. Lee's rituals fused her own poetry and music and the work of "other contemporary non-classical composers and poets," grounding them in a "thematic, rhythmic and kinetic genesis in our daily lives." The ritual "People and Places," for example, was "a musical and choreographic study of climatic and environmental effect on survival habits and their evolution into rituals of people around the world" ("Compositions and Arrangements"). Lee performed some of these rituals on her 1974 recording *Conspiracy*, released on the short-lived "artist-owned" record label, also called Earthforms.³

Lee's activist and educational vision falls within a genealogy of black surrealism that Robin Kelley begins to chart in his book, *Freedom Dreams*. Kelley defines surrealism as "a living, mutable, creative vision of a world where love, play, human dignity, an end to poverty and want, and imagination are the pillars of freedom. . . . It is a movement that invites dreaming, urges us to improvise and invent, and recognizes the

imagination as our most powerful weapon" (158-159). Recognizing that avant-garde, future-oriented imagining is no substitute for protest and social activism focused on present-day economic and political needs, Kelley stresses the complementary importance of a vision that imagines a "total transformation of society, [. . .] new social relationships, new ways of living and interacting, new attitudes toward work and leisure and community" (5).

More specifically, Lee's work can be situated in the post-cultural nationalist, intercultural, internationalist, and therapeutic humanism that defined the projects of other members of the African American musical avant-garde at this moment. Like multi-instrumentalists Anthony Braxton and Wadada Leo Smith, Lee maintained a Black Arts Movement commitment to community-building through creative educational projects while recognizing the limitations of narrowly conceived identity politics and the necessity of creative exchanges across cultural and national boundaries. Improvising musicians' movements across national boundaries (primarily between the U.S. and various European countries) and their attempts to define socially relevant roles for themselves have to be understood in part as a response to their critical denigration and financial exploitation at this moment. Lee herself found no shortage of difficulties trying to earn a living as a performer. Yet she tried to maintain an optimistic take on the possibilities inherent in an immersion in multiple communities of performers, on the cross-cultural influences that helped shape her own creative vision, and on the technologies that facilitated these exchanges. As she put it in 1979:

[T]his country is just building a culture, the culture to sum itself up is coming out of the new 'Jazz' musicians [. . .] the shapers of the culture [. . .] fountainheads of the culture, I look at my own work as a bridge [. . .]. The music has been borrowing from all cultures and sects [. . .] laying the mandates from which the culture will grow. (Riggins 5)

She believed, as well: "Technology is not an evil in itself, although it has to be used in the proper way. For the first time in the history of the world it is possible to have all the knowledge that has always been growing in every place, accessible to everybody. No one place should dominate the system of knowledge" (Terlizzi, et al. 8).

Lee conceptualized a cultural politics that sought to center the "work of the imagination" at a moment, as Arjun Appadurai argues, when the globalizing forces of new electronic media technologies and the movement of bodies across national boundaries were beginning to create "diasporas of hope, diasporas of terror, and diasporas of despair." He continues:

These diasporas bring the force of the imagination, as both memory and desire, into the lives of many ordinary people, into mythographies [. . .] [that] are charters for new social projects, and not just the counterpoint to the certainties of daily life. They move the glacial force of the habitus into the quickened beat of improvisation for large groups of people. (6)

Like Braxton, Smith, and others who were theorizing the practice of improvisation during the 1970s, Lee conceived of a new social imaginary that was attuned to human liberation. Her vision exceeded the limitations of nation and race. It maintained an ethical and political commitment stemming from her immersion in her artistic communities, foregrounding the role that improvisation could play in building new social groups.

In addition to theorizing this imaginary, Lee enacted it in performance. During the late 1970s, Lee sometimes described herself as a "voice environmentalist":

I look at myself as already an environment, the environment is there and it comes through me in sound. In turn the music is created as a total environment to the audience. I'm always trying to allow the environment to manifest itself through me [. . .] when I'm working with a musician I'm trying to deal with the sound. When I want to direct the music I create a poem and then there's a more deliberate environmental frame and we all work within that. (Riggins 4)

On the one hand, this concept suggests a commitment to human interactivity during the creative process that creates non-hierarchical relationships among performers and audience members and invites the audience to participate in the creation of meaning around the performance. It is an ethos that can be found in the work of Fluxus and Happenings participants, as well as that of African American improvisers such as members of the AACM and multi-instrumentalist Marion Brown, on whose *Afternoon of a Georgia Faun* Lee performed.⁴

But we can also locate in Lee's commitment to a more democratic performance through voice environmentalism an articulation of her vision for a more democratic social order performed through, and ideally enabled by, rituals incorporating improvisation. Lee spoke of jazz as a "very fine microcosmic demonstration of democracy" and of the need for performative flexibility and collectivity to enable its production (D. Lewis 6). Voice environmentalism may be read as a mechanism for refocusing Lee's utopian, futuristic longing on everyday acts of survival through improvisation. In an eloquent gloss of the work of Michel de Certeau that is geared toward understanding multidisciplinary performance, Susan Foster describes his project of locating in the often erratic, "thought-filled gestures" of everyday life "a vital reservoir of resistance to the overwhelming force exerted by dominant orderings of the social." Although such "tactics" are generally sustained only momentarily and do not express the "cohesiveness" necessary for implementing substantial social changes, "they are a perpetual source of resistance to the normative" that is overdetermined by multiple "strategic structures." As a means of making his points, de Certeau, "imbues action with thought. [. . .] extend[ing] to all bodily articulation, whether spoken or moved, the same capacity to enunciate" (5-7).

Foster's observations have profound implications for improvisational performance practices, which often replicate, transform into art, and ritualize the unscripted thoughts and activities of everyday life. For they help us understand the work improvisational projects implicitly and explicitly do by responding to (and encouraging responses to) social orderings of power. Returning to "In These Last Days" with Foster's analysis in mind, we may view Lee's interactions with her fellow improvisers Lyons and Cyrille--non-hierarchical, mutually generative, and committed to exploring the sound of being on "the Way"--as a re-staging of a world where performing and listening (if we consider the audience for this recording) bodies interact with one another in a tactical negotiation of the strategic structures conspiring to make "objects" of human beings at this moment. In addition to performing a utopian, democratic future through Lee's utterances of its lyrics, "In These Last Days" links sounds, bodies, and minds through Lee's voice environmentalism in an everyday project of allowing people "to stay alive" and "rediscover the places where we are human" (Terlizzi, et al. 6-7).

SHE IS NOT AFRAID OF ALL THIS BODY THAT MOVES SO SWEET

"In These Last Days," in its lyrical content and its articulation, may also be read as a negotiation of the linked politics of race and gender in the improvised music world of the 1960s and 1970s; gender being one of the modalities, to paraphrase Paul Gilroy paraphrasing Stuart Hall, through which politicized and redemptive black music has articulated race and class (85). Clearly, some of Lee's male colleagues in the African American improvised musicians' community were aware of the problems stemming from the exclusion or devaluation of women musicians. Braxton, for example, insisted that a successful cultural politics coming out of this community must not only include women but address legacies of sexism within it (Braxton 3: 429-441). Still, the practice of and critical discussion around improvised music, even when radically oppositional along other axes, was often shortsighted when it came to gender.

Lee's reference in "In these Last Days" to her "great joy in being Naima's Mother," performed on record calmly and melodically in the lower registers of her voice, asserts her identities as an improvising artist *and* as a woman with a child (she had two more children after writing the poem). This assertion of identity speaks of the way Lee's work negotiated, if not necessarily transformed, gendered definitions of improvised artistry and looked toward a kind of musical synthesis that other women in music were striving for at this moment. As Dana Reason suggests, the marginalization of women in improvised music circles stems, in part, from a lack of attention to their existence (i.e., "a myth of absence") and from an attention that recognizes their existence but, because of gendered conceptions of artistry, deems their work substandard or distinctive in a sense that otherwise limits their full participation in the improvised music world.

Lee's performance of "In These Last Days," then, recorded at a moment when women were making some inroads into the jazz and larger improvised music worlds as business people and instrumentalists may be seen as a negotiation of this two-pronged system of exclusion. She makes herself visible and intelligible as a black woman improviser by presenting herself in her social role as mother—something she also

accomplished by bringing her children onstage from time to time—and engaging in a mode of performance (and explanations of performance in contemporaneous interviews) that draws attention to itself as an emotional and embodied practice.

Such performance clearly conforms in some ways to long-standing prejudices against vocal music in musicians' and critics' circles, because vocal music has often been linked with women and the female body, which in turn have been associated with emotions, irrationality, and sexuality, rather than with the masculine mind or heroic romanticism assumed to be the generative force for serious improvised art. Yet, this presentation of self also calls attention to the difficulties of balancing careers in music and family commitments, precisely because of such gendered expectations. Lee confirmed this near the end of her life, when she attributed the relative paucity of recordings under her own name to the fact that she had been busy raising children (D. Lewis 9-10).

Moreover, thinking about Lee's performance in terms of performativity, as a kind of repetition with a difference of gendered modes of performance and assumptions about the same, makes intelligible the disruption in this piece. As Judith Butler writes,

Performativity describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a 'pure' opposition, a 'transcendence' of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure. (241)

Lee, in a sense, creates an "alternative modality" of both performance and self-empowerment by drawing from, synthesizing, and de-stabilizing the gendered (and raced) improvisatory traditions in which she was immersed.

George Lewis has identified two fundamental, "opposing tropes" that have been used to make sense of late-twentieth and twenty-first century improvised artistry: "(1) the image of the heroic, mystically ego-driven Romantic improviser, imprisoned by his own will; (2) the detached disengaged, ego-transcending artist who simply lets sounds be themselves" ("Afterword" 169-170). These tropes have been applied to what Lewis calls, following Braxton, the post-Bird and post-Cage (i.e., African American avant-garde and European and European American) aesthetic traditions. Although Lewis's primary concern in this particular analysis is the way such tropes reinforce racialized assumptions about art – and consequently the marginalization of and "furtive" appropriation of the Afrological tradition – they may be considered products of both raced and gendered modes of performance and interpretation. In other words, these tropes marginalize women improvisers, while reinforcing a racial hierarchy in their opposition. As a multidisciplinary performer, Lee drew from aesthetic traditions that were in part defined by these tropes. As she synthesized sonic experimentalism, a de-centering of the will via voice environmentalism, emotion, and embodiment, she developed a vocal practice that exceeded the restrictive definitions of female vocal art through a re-articulation of these forms.

Lee's earliest work as a professional jazz singer and her work in intermedia performance in the 1960s provide the method for such synthesis and anticipate the later project through their own cultural politics. Lee's performance on 1961's *The Newest Sound Around* simultaneously builds from and exceeds conventions established in jazz vocal practice. One of the striking things about the album is Lee's engagement with Abbey Lincoln's music. Lee's vocal inflections resemble Lincoln's and she builds upon Lincoln's explorations of the instrumental qualities of the voice through improvised, non-verbal vocal lines. Lee also performs at the session material written and/or included by Lincoln on her own 1961 album *Straight Ahead*: Thelonious Monk's "Blue Monk," for which Lincoln had written lyrics; the Billie Holiday/Mal Waldron composition "Left Alone"; and the title track, with words by Lincoln and music by Waldron.⁵

Lincoln's work on *Straight Ahead* represented a critical moment in her flight from the musical and ideological baggage associated with material available to jazz singers. During the late 1950s and early 1960s Lincoln made an effort to move away from romantic ballads that spoke of abusive and dysfunctional heterosexual relationships; she began performing material which described healthier relationships between men and women, provided varying degrees of social commentary, and demanded a more "instrumental" approach to singing. Moreover, Lincoln's shift in material also spoke to her commitment to the mutual liberation of black men and women in the political context of the black freedom movement

(Porter 149-190).

Although the extent to which Lee shared Lincoln's political commitments is unclear, Lee remembered that Lincoln's work allowed her to move beyond the limitations of jazz singing and pointed her to a more poetic and social sensibility. Looking back on the early part of her career, Lee said:

The person who left the most impression on me in terms of life-situations as well as what she was doing with her voice was Abbey Lincoln. From the credibility of her craft and her own reality and not so much as a "style." It was like using the energy as a painting. Billie Holiday too, but she comes from another era, Billie has the same kind of thing musically, but Abbey advances that type of understanding, [. . .] Abbey is more human, it's not just a woman who's a victim of her role. (Riggins 4)

Again speaking about Lincoln, Lee said: "this woman made it possible for me to have faith in the fact that I am a poet and I did not have to sing standards in order to be a Jazz singer. I could find a way of putting my own perception into musical terms" (D. Lewis 12).

By disrupting the close relationship between jazz singing and the feminized sphere of popular vocal music, and by bringing a level of technical virtuosity to their work, Lincoln and Lee challenged the idea that female vocal jazz artists, while an important element of the jazz tradition, did not quite measure up to the artistry and genius of male instrumentalists and were a secondary class of performers. That Lee was able to disrupt this dichotomous juxtaposition of female vocalist bodies with male instrumentalist minds is evident in the critical responses to her by some European jazz writers who commended her improvisational skills. As one of them put it: "Miss Lee, as far as I know, is the first to fulfill 100 percent what most jazz singers wish for in their dreams --namely a complete disregard of the former borderline between the human voice and an improvising horn" (Williams 16).

We see a somewhat different negotiation of modes of exclusion in Lee's participation in the intermedia arts scene, which may be read as rejecting, at a symbolic level at least, the art world's erasure of black culture-based improvisational practices as well as the belief that an immersion in such communities would produce a better kind of black artist. As George Lewis suggests, members of this art world often theorized improvisation as a human or mechanical spontaneity in ways that sometimes denied the influence of African American cultural practices or which acknowledged them but only as an incorporative other to be transcended ("Improvised" 96-109).⁶ Lee negotiated this exclusion simply through her presence, while her performances themselves sometimes retooled the formal mechanisms of erasure and denigration into vehicles for the re-articulation of black cultural priorities.

Lee's 1966 Town Hall performance with Jackson Mac Low of his composition "The text on the opposite page may be used in any way as a score for solo or group readings, musical or dramatic performances, looking, smelling, anything else &/or nothing at all" provides an example. Drawing upon Buddhism and following the lead of John Cage (with whom he had studied), Earle Browne, and other experimental concert music composers, Mac Low was, by the 1950s, using "systematic-chance operations, regulated improvisation, and indeterminacy into the compositions and performance of verbal and theatrical works." "The text on the opposite page . . ." exemplifies this approach. The piece was created by assigning two-digit numbers to the keys of a typewriter and then depressing the keys in an order determined by the occurrence of random-digit couplets in the RAND Corporation table *A Million Random Digits with 100,000 Normal Deviates*. The Town Hall performance had Mac Low and Lee holding negatives of the score in front of a blinking red light, creating sounds suggested by characters they chose at random during the periods the score was illuminated. Playing in the background was a manipulated audiotape of an earlier performance of the composition by electronic composer Max Neuhaus, who subsequently lowered the pitches of the voices on the tape to produce "thunderlike (or oceanlike) waves of sound" (Liner notes, *Jackson Mac Low*).

Lee's and Mac Low's performance upholds the "systematic-chance operations, regulated improvisation, and indeterminacy" that structure the piece by both the random selection of the characters they read and the deadpan tone with which they produce the sounds indicated by these characters. Yet at various moments, Lee brings a sound poet's attention to repetition and non-verbal utterance that begins to make new meanings. She speaks the punctuation marks * and ' first as their verbal signifiers (i.e., "asterisk" and

“apostrophe”) but then voices them in non-verbal ways through a series of clicks and grunts. Lee speaks the word “comma” and then she employs it to explore the various sounds that can be extracted from the aural signifier. Most notably, comma becomes “mama,” itself a signifier of, among other things, the black--and, with her on stage, black female--vernacular vocal practice of the blues. Also notable is Lee’s introduction of syncopated rhythmic conception into her reading.

Lee thus fuses a jazz-based ethos of improvisation with an improvisational approach grounded in sound poetry, and in so doing she creates a new vocal technology that disrupts the logical structure of a piece that, intentionally or not, participates in an art world conceptualization of improvisation that distances it from its black antecedents. Although Lee does respond to the score’s instructions to improvise randomly and adheres to a post-structuralist suspicion of cultural or linguistic determinacy, the particulars of her improvisational performance exceed the “score.” Through intonation and phrasing she references and expands upon the art of scat singing, thus disrupting the deracinating tendency of the postwar American art world that was radical in other ways and re-inscribing black women’s vocal art within its practice.⁷

Lee, then, emerged from the 1960s as someone whose work had challenged the exclusion of female jazz singers from the category of genius in jazz and challenged the elision of African Americans from art world aesthetics for being the wrong kind of genius. She accomplished this by drawing upon, synthesizing, and re-articulating the codes that defined these oppositions. Later in her career, as we can see with “In These Last Days,” “tak[ing] poetry as a point of departure for improvisation” and exploring “the natural rhythms and sonorities or the emotional content of words,” as Lee put it, allowed her to further negotiate and disrupt raced and gendered definitions of improvisational artistry (Riggins 4; “Narrative”).

Lee’s performance of “In These Last Days”--her use of huge intervals, screams, groans, melodic passages, dramatic changes in the timbre of her voice, and especially her repetitions of such techniques--defines her work through the emotions inflected in her utterances and in the irruption of the syntactical order of her text. And it is within this embodied verbal excess that Lee blurs gendered distinctions of improvised performance, as she moves beyond the limitations of voice imposed by genre and standard techniques (not to mention everyday speech). Lee presents herself, to build upon Carla Peterson’s phrase, as an “eccentric black female [voice and] body,” expressing a “freedom of movement stemming from the lack of central control and hence new possibilities of difference conceived as an empowering oddness” (xii).

As she communicates with Andrew Cyrille and Jimmy Lyons in a sonic exchange beyond the limitations of words, she builds a more egalitarian creative ethos between improvising male instrumentalists and female vocalists on the bandstand. Lee is not so much being backed by the other musicians as she is fully integrated into the ensemble. As she put it in an interview that year, her goal was to “live the spaces in the music fully [. . .] to work with the people as musicians and not just as ‘fill-in’ ”(Riggins 4). We can also locate in Lee’s repetitive fusing of voice, dance and poetry into excessive performance, tactical disruptions of normative ideas about gender and race that were brought to bear on improvising musicians and embedded in discourses around improvisational practices. Re-articulating through fusion and repetition the assumed codes of masculine and feminine improvisations collapses their distinction, not only challenging the idea that male improvising instrumentalists engage in a musicianship superior to that of female vocalists but threatening the very logic of the categories as well.

In other interviews from the period, Lee validated spaces where improvising women could get together to make art, while looking toward a kind of gendered synthesis that her improvised work on “In These Last Days” suggests. When asked to comment about her participation in a salute to women in jazz, she remarked: “There’s something to be shared in female sensibilities, with men and women. I think each person has an individual balance, and how that balance manifests is due to the individual. Some women want to use a driving, masculine force and some go through another type of thing. It’s all like a dance with everyone trying to get the right balance and configurations” (Riggins 4).⁸ Although arguments like this clearly tread on dangerous ground by naturalizing essentialist notions of gendered modes of creativity, they do reflect the way that women in experimental music, caught between the dual problems of invisibility through the “myth of absence” and invisibility through stereotype, tried in some ways not so much to seek inclusion in a masculine sphere but to transform the cultural and discursive spaces in which they operated as a means of negotiating the gendered constructs imposed upon them.⁹ It parallels, as well, the technique we hear on “In These Last Days.”

SHE MIGHT LAY UP NIGHTS, WONDERING HOW ARE WE STAYING ALIVE ‘CAUSE WE DIDN’T HEAR WHAT SHE JUST HEARD/OR SING IT.

Jeanne Lee's artistic and intellectual project also suggests we step back and think in historiographic terms about the implications of placing this artist, who traveled in and out of jazz, into the popular and scholarly enterprises of jazz and improvised music history. Lee's historical grounding and future imagining suggest that her unorthodox project may be productively analyzed in its temporally and spatially immediate surroundings and be read against the exclusionary narratives that continue to make sense of the music in the present.

As I hope this analysis has already made clear, Lee's multidisciplinary and experimental artistic and intellectual project encourages us to challenge the gendered exclusions in jazz and improvised music history, paying close attention to the diverse experiences of women artists and to center gender as a category of analysis in jazz and improvised music studies (Tucker). Lee's work also highlights the importance of often-understudied improvisational practices developed during the 1970s, in which artists from various cultural and geographical backgrounds drew upon multiple histories and experiences, while developing their work across various genres and media, in dialogue with the social transformations and identitarian social movements of the period. As such it affirms George Lewis's "optimistic" championing of the perspective that American experimentalism in music "grow up and assert its character as multicultural and multiethnic, with a variety of perspectives, histories, traditions, and methods" rather than "remain an ethnically bound and ultimately limited tradition that appropriates freely, yet furtively, from its presumed Others" ("Afterword" 170).

But Lee's work also challenges us to interrogate and complicate the very narratives affirming black humanity through music from which we might draw more sustenance. We may see Lee operating within, made intelligible by, and sometimes working against, to invoke and augment Ronald Radano, a "discursively constituted black music standing between as it embodies the textual and musical as resonance." This textual, sonic dialogic, he suggests, with roots in the white supremacist ideological projects accompanying slavery and colonialism, continues to "give shape to resoundingly racialized [and gendered] constructions of difference" but also holds within its contours the power to disrupt such orthodoxies (11-12).

Returning, then, to Lee's disruptive, eccentric vocal performance on "In These Last Days," and situating it again as an extension of her social vision and her insistence on the embodied aspects of improvisation, we can hear this piece speaking against the disciplining, imperial projects that jazz has sometimes been asked to serve. During the 1970s many straight-ahead and avant-garde jazz projects alike were increasingly wedded to the project of nation through recuperative terms like "America's classical music" or "Afro American classical music." Musicians and other commentators had long inscribed onto elements of "black music" (including improvisation) values that located black citizen subjects within the national imaginary in the face of various forms of racist exclusion, as a means of garnering respect for the music from the guardians of high culture, and, beginning in the 1970s, for tapping into the limited funding available from government agencies. The most obvious and perhaps successful outgrowth of this strategy may be found in the "African American exceptionalist" (and masculinist) vision of Wynton Marsalis, Stanley Crouch, and Albert Murray, deployed in the development of Jazz at Lincoln Center and as the central narrative of the Ken Burns *Jazz* documentary.¹⁰ Similarly, the U.S. House of Representatives' 1987 determination that jazz was a "rare and valuable national treasure," stemming from African American experience and reflecting "the highest ideals and aspirations of our republic" (Walser 332-333) speaks of the influence of various trajectories of musicians' activism and attempts by critics and scholars to define it as such.

Although a necessary move in many respects, given the precarious position of jazz artists and black people in U.S. society, the long history of Cold War-era State Department-sponsored tours of jazz musicians has shown that this celebration of improvised music on the grounds of its consistency with American values, as well as its symbolic incorporation of black people into the national body politic, could be consistent with the version of American exceptionalism that has underwritten United States' imperialism at various moments during the post World War II era (Von Eschen). The United States' role as a "virtuous" source, and guarantor, of human freedoms has been predicated in part on the nation's ability to emphasize its transcendence of its own history as a slave society and its desire to include at least some of its racial subjects into its citizenry. Promoting jazz as a national art form has been one way to do this.

In a recent meditation on representations of African American women's singing voices on the national stage—Marion Anderson at the Lincoln Memorial in 1939, Fannie Lou Hamer at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, Chaka Khan at the 2000 Republican National Convention, etc.—Farah Jasmine Griffin suggests that such voices have often been called upon to serve a kind of "mammy" function by "healing" and "nurturing" the majority culture in times of crisis. Such representations stand in contrast with others, wherein black women's voices speak clearly to and for "disenfranchised black people, as a voice that

poses a challenge to the United States revealing its democratic pretense as a lie.” In other words, “Representations of the voice suggest that it is like a hinge, a place where things can both come together and break apart” (104, 108).

By improvising the lyrics “an object in someone else’s nightmare” in disruptive intervals and augmenting them with non-linguistic utterances, Lee both reproduces and exceeds the literal meanings of these lyrics and speaks for and against this project of national unity that to which jazz in general and black women’s jazz voices in particular have been asked to sing. In its excess, Lee’s performance enacts the experimentalism and communication beyond language that has defined black women’s vocal art and invokes a particular history out of which such art developed. Lee’s insistent embodiment interrogates the decorporealization and depoliticization of the black (female) voice and thus bears traces of a moment of origins (i.e., slavery) for both her improvisational practice and for the condition of being an object in the present. By improvising objectification in this way, Lee bridges past and present and comments on the long and global history of black and female bodies being treated as material objects *and* on the ways that history anticipates the ways other laboring bodies at this postindustrial moment were increasingly treated like replaceable machine parts by the economic regime of flexible accumulation. In other words, Lee’s voice refuses the erasure of the role of slavery in the production of black (and black female) bodies and improvised music and it demands that this history be connected to those of people who live under the then emergent conditions of globalization.

Performing these lyrics through an improvised aesthetic of excess, which had rejected both the deracinating indeterminacy of the art world and the masculinist prescriptions of improvised music, troubles the role of “jazz” in the recuperative humanism that would reclaim black people merely as national citizen subjects or participants in a triumphant multiculturalism *and* in its somewhat different position as one of a variety of place-based ethnic exotica that has been used to sell a neoliberal political-economic order to workers and consumers. Lee’s conception and performance, then, simultaneously post-nationalist and post-cultural nationalist, yet beholden to an originating African American moment, speaks to a kind of cultural politics that is resistant to ethnic particularism yet also attentive to the specifics of local struggles and experiences. It is a move beyond racial prescriptions of the present, but not one of racial amnesia. It calls on musicians and their allies to move toward a progressive, humanist vision that is still concerned with the particulars of lived black experiences and creative projects across the globe.

Notes

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² Documentation of these movements indicating similarities with Lee’s work can be found in Higgins, *Modernism Since Postmodernism* and “A Taxonomy of Sound Poetry”; Sandford, *Happenings and Other Acts*.

³ This record was originally made for the label Seeds, which went out of business during its production. After some legal wrangling, Jeanne Lee acquired ownership and rights to the album and released it on her Earthforms label.

⁴ Brown self-consciously drew from West African musical practice to create an environment for a collective, egalitarian approach to making improvised music, especially on the piece “Djinji’s Corner.” He was also invested in depicting the natural environment on the title track. Lee spoke briefly about Brown’s influence in her interview with David Lewis.

⁵ Neither “Left Alone” nor “Straight Ahead” made it onto the original release of *The Newest Sound Around*; they are included on the re-issue.

⁶ My thinking here is also influenced by Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh's discussion of "musical modernism, postmodernism, and others" in their Introduction to *Western Music and Its Others* (12-21).

⁷ For example, Dick Higgins locates a "sound poetry tradition" in African American music, namely in scat singing, but he presents it primarily as an antecedent to the self-conscious genre that comes to fruition in the 1950s. See "A Taxonomy of Sound Poetry" (1-2).

⁸ Lee speaks briefly about exploring a female sensibility in Weinreich, "Play It Momma."

⁹ This performative strategy mirrors comments made by feminist improviser/ composer Pauline Oliveros, who during the 1970s argued for a kind of musical synthesis that privileged elements of musical practice culturally determined as "female" (i.e., "receptive" and "intuitive") as a means of validating the work of women practitioners while simultaneously calling such cultural definitions of creativity into question. The entry of more women into the world of composition, she suggests, could redeem the intuitive mode of creativity, thereby creating a more balanced and potentially liberating creative synthesis available to all human beings and dismantling the gendered cultural constructs that marginalize women in the music world. See Pauline Oliveros, "The Contribution of Women Composers," *Software for People* (132-36).

¹⁰ For discussions of the Ken Burns jazz series that simultaneously understand the value and limitation of its narrative, see Lipsitz, "Songs of the Unsung: The Darby Hicks History of Jazz" and Jacques, et al., "A Roundtable on Ken Burns's Jazz."

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