

Deep River, Great Blackness
Ritual space & Black Power in the Art Ensemble of Chicago

Sean Feit 2010

*“Slave boy, leroy, from Newark Hill
If capitalism don’t kill me, racism will!”
(Amiri Baraka)¹*

When black people make music in America, ghosts gather around. These ghosts *are* the blues—they are the stories of Africans and African-Americans, from centuries of slavery through the long decades of oppression and violence that followed “emancipation”. Sometimes those ghosts sit in the audience, singing along, complaining, shouting, or they’re up and dancing; sometimes they are onstage with the musicians, playing a horn or thumping a guitar in time or out of time, or live in the horn itself, making it squawk and bleat a deeper sorrow than the player himself even knows; sometimes they lurk over the shoulder of the critic, watching for a misplaced word, a racist slip, waiting for a vindication, an honoring, some R.E.S.P.E.C.T., so long overdue. They are here now.

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What does it mean to call a piece of music—or any art—spiritual? The word melts at the gaze, like a figure glimpsed out of the corner of your eye, at the side of a room, never there when you turn to look. There’s music, of course, that straight up talks about God, either in words or context: prayer songs both inside and outside the churches, the devotional improvisations of Classical Indian music, meditations on the Divine in every culture and lineage, but is the *music* spiritual, or is it just music with a spiritual *theme*? What would make a piece of music, *itself*, spiritual? “Itself”—another word that melts, slips from view, the *ding an sich* a ghost—maybe it never was more than that, noumenon, the idea that can’t be grasped—but things and thoughts now show themselves only as contingency. “Spiritual” is more context than fundament. A snatch of Gregorian chant, once the tenor of a thousand years of Catholic praise, now flirts on top of a club track, one more flavor in a Saturday night mix for the bridge and tunnel crowd, or undergirds the violent grief of an action movie at its climax.

Maybe God has always been, but spiritual *things* are certainly a human production. And what is a spiritual thing again? The dictionary resorts to defining “spiritual” in opposition to what is material or physical. This opposition may be ontologically untenable, but the dissonance created between the material and the numinous is the energy that creates a new space, and it is that space—that experience—that we call spiritual. That dissonance, a colliding of multiple energies/spaces/ideas is the source energy for ritual space—discussed in this essay further on. Most easily, “spiritual” refers to an experience, and the “experience” thesis lives most comfortably, in the west, in phenomenology. Hegel’s “truth... yielding itself in the shape of consciousness” is a truth that depends on the witness, consciousness, for its existence.² That which is called spiritual is a produced experience dependent on a complex of conditions, the sum of which gives rise to the *perception* of the immaterial. Things are just things, manifestations of/in Henri Lefebvre’s “absolute space”³, the space of nature and what is and was prior to human economy, but manipulations of those things produce a sense of being in the presence of something larger or less physical, which is one way of talking about the spiritual.

Spiritual. Spirituals. Wade in the Water. Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen. Deep River. I put on the track “Deep River”, from *Goin’ Home*, Albert Ayler’s 1964 album, his pungent, mournful sax over skittering drums and a piano that wanders somewhere between blues porch, Pentecostal church and jazz club—you can almost hear the hum of a bright-robed Gospel chorus behind him or glasses clinking in the dark.⁴ Ayler believed that the “head”, or main melody, should retain its identity, be recognizable, and his melody sings plainly—you can hear the words if you know them. “Deep River, my home is over Jordan. Deep River, Lord. I want to cross over into campground.” The song creates two spaces, at least: the distant “home”, or “campground”, and the space where we hear the song now, created by Ayler and his trio, refracting the economic and social reality of black America in the early 60’s, “free jazz” in Cleveland, Paris, Chicago, New York, and all the years and places since, with their filters and prejudice. “My home is over Jordan”—the distant home *is* only a representation, not a place itself, not “absolute”. It doesn’t exist—except that it *does*, of course, because it’s in the song, which means in the hearts of millions of people. Representations *are* real, but materialist discourse falters in the face of spirit, which eludes the grim demarcation of spaces. After playing the song, the room now rings with “over Jordan”, both the song and the numinous place—the “campground” itself, and some echo/feeling of that which lives there. And it *is* the content of the song that effects that ringing, the text supplying the sign, as claimed by Susan Sontag in her writing about photographs and the meaning-making necessity for captions, text, context in words.⁵

To use Lefebvre’s tripartite model, the concept “over Jordan” is a *representation of space*, but the *experience* of “My home is...” is a *representational space*, a lived experience. Lefebvre defines

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representational space as “space directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols” [his emphasis].⁶ And the singing itself is a *spatial practice*. That “is” in “Deep river” connects the singer and empathic hearer to a longing, an intention, a prayer, and that prayer is as real as anything. The music serves to invoke the prayer, but the *feeling* only happens if the prayer is already there, at least in seed form. Is that true? Or can the music itself, without known words and cultural context, communicate the seed feeling “over Jordan”; not the specific black Christian reference of course, but something more... universal? Maybe “longing for a better place”, which is a trope repeated in almost every culture and religion? “Universal” certainly wilts under the microscope, but what of the direct emotive causation of notes, chords, rhythm? What of their independent signifying force?

A detour into neuroperception. Studies show a relationship between the perception of psychophysical elements in music (complexity, speed, timbre) and the perception of emotional content, demonstrated cross-culturally by Balkwill and Thompson (1999).⁷ Their study, of the perception (in western listeners) of specifically intended emotions in Hindustani Raga, confirms that people are able to reliably rate emotional content—in this case the presence of four general emotions: joy, sadness, anger, and peace—even in a musical system with which they are unfamiliar. (The precision of the subjects’ reading was lower for the emotion of peace than the other three, indicating that the musical cues that signify peace in Indian classical music did not communicate enough specificity for the naïve listeners to read the emotion. Another interpretation of the subjects’ imprecise reading of peace might posit that the western listeners have sufficiently little *experience* of peace that they can’t differentiate it from sadness or other moods communicated by slow tempo and soft timbre and volume. This interpretation would have to be justified by a study showing determination of the subject’s prior familiarity with shades of various emotions and ability to identify them before they are asked to rate the presence of such emotions in music.) From Balkwill and Thompson’s study, and others like it, it appears that *general* emotional cues can be read in pieces of music even when we’re unfamiliar with the cultural context, but there is little evidence that subtler emotional variations (like longing as a subset of sadness mixed with some joy—at the prospect of eternal life, or as a result of faith) will be read with precision.

The question of causation arises. When Lefebvre writes that a space is “*lived through*” its symbols, or signifiers, he seems to claim that to *live* means to *experience*, such that our experience of a certain space arises in dependence upon the “images and symbols” that define it, that signify it. Via Saussure, a sign is only meaningful inasmuch as we have learned its constituent parts, that we have associated a given signifier with communicable content: its signified. Each signifier-signified relationship is learned, and is the core mechanism that allows language to succeed as functional communication. In

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music, though general emotions can be reliably communicated in the absence of familiarity with stylistic context, specific expression of content must be accomplished through learned intracultural signs. Listening to Ayler play “Deep River”, my reading of emotion arises in dependence on a web of signs, including but not limited to: the words to the hymn, my awareness of black spiritual culture and the history of slavery, the bending of notes in the melody that triggers the memory-trope “blues”, Ayler’s manipulation of timing in his playing that reads as expression of intense emotion based on my familiarity with jazz style, the timbre of the tenor saxophone as it telegraphs the bop tradition and echoes (forward to) John Coltrane, and my knowledge of history including the struggle for Civil Rights, Ayler’s spiritual intention, his fall from popularity, possible mental instability, and 1970 suicide. I *live* my response to “Deep River” *through* these tropes, these symbols, as they arise.

The words to “Deep River” are a prayer, and prayer can be defined as an action arising from the intention to direct one’s attention toward spirit. When a prayer is enunciated publicly, the space in which it is enunciated takes on some energy of the prayer, as all spaces are shaped by the activities that take place in them. If prayer is the dominant social activity in a space, the space becomes “sacred”—sacralized by human activity and intention. Sacred space is traditionally judged primarily through reference to extra-human qualities such as physical distinctiveness (iconic natural elements, such as mountaintops, springs), and orientation in relation to the cardinal directions. David Wiles refers to three “basic forms” of sacred space in the west: the above two and the tomb, bringing in death as a consistently sacralizing event, and asserts that the “sense of the sacred is *maintained* by ritual” [my emphasis].⁸ But since *sacred* is a human experience, not a property of nature, any space can be *perceived* as sacred, not just “fragments of nature”, as Lefebvre (via Wiles) asserts.⁹ Human activity is the force that sacralizes, rather than sacredness adhering in nature on its own. And it is prayer that creates sacred space.

Since a prayer can precede the music that communicates it, it follows that any music, even without text or “extra-musical” content, can be imbued with prayer and intent, creating sacred space. The music of the black avant-garde in the 60’s and 70’s embodies this intent, even when there is little overt “captioning” or obvious program. When the caption *is* there, the intent is even clearer. “Deep River” announces its location plainly, and invites the listener to want what the anonymous original singer wants: to cross over. And Ayler makes it sing, his brash sound moving energy both in the “real” economic world as a gesture, a record that can be purchased, and in the spiritual, a black man in Jim Crow America remembering the ancient Exodus, longing again, as always, for the same distant home.

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In 1965, a group of musicians mostly living on the South Side of Chicago formed a nonprofit organization called the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM). The musicians were jazz players working the clubs and bars in the primarily black neighborhood and others who eschewed the name “jazz”, developing an experimental stream of music, working with improvisation and collectivist structures. The AACM developed out of a group led by pianist Muhal Richard Abrams called the Experimental Band, and was formed with the express intent to cultivate “creative musicians”, train youth, promote “serious music”, ensure equitable pay and conditions for musicians, and “stimulate spiritual growth in creative artists”.¹⁰ The AACM produced concerts involving a community of musicians, many of whom used jazz language in their music but were pulling in influences from the wider experimental music and art world, creating performances with elements of fluxus, agitprop, performance art, poetry, and a wide range of musical influences, from traditional black musics to Euro/American avant-garde techniques.

The Art Ensemble of Chicago (AEC), which would become one of the most well known of the AACM groups, began as the Roscoe Mitchell Art Ensemble in 1966. They evolved into the Art Ensemble of Chicago in 1969 during a year spent in Paris. From the beginning, the AEC was deeply theatrical on stage. Three of the five members often performed in African-inspired face paint and costumes,¹¹ and poetry and political texts were recited. The Ensemble had a broad musical sensibility, with of sounds of all kinds welcome, and a keen awareness of spatiality and the audience-performer relationship. They performed political skits and performance art (Lester Bowie walking around the stage with a shotgun, or wrapping audience members in aluminum foil), as well as events with layers of activity all happening at once (like Allan Kaprow’s and others’ “happenings” over in the white art world), all of it threaded through with improvised music.¹²

Central to the AEC’s performance was the intention of spiritual uplift, which was a stated goal of the AACM from the very beginning. The AACM included in their charter a list of nine purposes. Number nine was “To stimulate spiritual growth in creative artists through recitals, concerts, etc., through participation in programs.”¹³ The Art Ensemble manifested this spiritual growth partly through the use of ritual elements in their performances. The group early on brought African costumes and instruments into their vocabulary, tropes of both a generalized “Africa” as homeland, spiritual source, and cultural reference point, and material from specific countries: Nigeria, where Lester Bowie had played with Fela Kuti,¹⁴ Ghana, and Mali, where other members of the ensemble traveled. They brought in these influences not in order to reproduce a “pure” African utopia, but as one part of the

vast web they came to call “Great Black Music”. That web, tying together strands of traditional and popular black people’s music from every place on the planet, was in itself a spiritual gesture.

“Really, Great Black Music is an aspect of the Holy Ghost, for us as a people... It’s the music that brought us into existence. Great Black Music is one of the blessings that came with us standing up to a white world and saying, we’re going to do what we want to do, despite what you try to do to us. Great Black Music is a result of us having the courage to use our Great Blackness, and realizing that this is our only power.” (Ameen Muhammed)¹⁵

It is the contention of this paper that the Art Ensemble’s performance practice creates sacred space and a site of community ritual that redresses racial inequality and provides spiritual and political uplift for both the musicians and the audience. The investigation will continue an exploration of what constitutes ritual and sacred space, and then address the Art Ensemble specifically, looking at both the use of ritual and the structural aspects of improvisation and collectivity in their music for political resonance and social impact.

Ritual Creates Sacred Space

Ritual is comprised of actions that are repeated, but beyond that the definition is ambiguous. What makes a series of actions a ritual? Ritual actions occur in the formal ceremonies of every religion, as well as in the formal ceremonies of institutions of civic power—corporations, governing bodies, the military. Because sacred space is in large part produced through the arousal and focusing of intention, actions that assist that focus, like prayer, are necessary for the production of sacred space. Lefebvre aphorizes “(Social) space is a (social) product.”¹⁶ How necessary are the ellipses to his argument? His materialist thesis stands in vague Marxist abstraction without the specifics: “...space is a ...product”, but if the “social” content is simply content, just an adjective—as if other kinds of space are also produced *by their own kind of action*—we should be able to insert other kinds and qualities of space into the equation. Consider the possibility—I’ll retain Lefebvre’s ellipses—that “(Sacred) space is a (sacred) product.” At first glance it rings more tautological than the original. If sacredness is a space that must be produced, how can sacredness be the inherent quality of an action that would effect that production? Can there be sacred acts outside of sacred spaces, like the original seed gesture that simply was spirit, like that first word that “was with God, and... was God”,¹⁷ that started the whole show off? If a sacred act is an act imbued with the *intention* of sacrality—of blessing, praise, supplication—or an act that holds a primal identity as sacred, then the equation holds. Sacred space is a sacred product.

The myth of a primal sacred action is a tenuous thread to hang a discourse upon, however, and so the other option is the intention model. It leans toward Lefebvre's materiality, seeing sacred space as created through intent and the actions that arise from it, and therefore is a variation of social space, involving communities and thus relationships, and made solid by the movement of capital, resources, labor. The felt sacred space of the cathedral or art event is produced by the material labor of builders, the patronage of wealthy individual and institutional patrons, and the violence that grows wealth and sustains institutions, but seeing the space as produced in this way still situates the sacredness in the building or event. If sacredness exists as a product of intention, then the community, labor, and resources that bring it into being are also implicated as sacred. But it is not the building, even a building constructed with sacralizing intent, that transmits sacredness. Sacredness resides in the immaterial because the most potent actions that lead to its perception are psychoemotional, and thus echo the definition of "spiritual" in being immaterial. Some of the central immaterial resources that make a space sacred inhere in the social actions of ritual and ceremony. Sacred space is a social product.

Ritual, according to Catherine Bell, is "a type of critical juncture wherein some pair of opposing social or cultural forces comes together, ...a mechanistically discrete and paradigmatic means of sociocultural integration, appropriation, or transformation."¹⁸ Ritual gains its power by raising energy, and bringing opposing forces into proximity effects that amplification. One of the characteristics of ritual is that it operates outside of the realm of discursive thought. Claude Lévi-Strauss describes ritual as "condens[ing], into a concrete and unitary form, procedures which, otherwise, would have to be discursive ... gestures and objects serve in *loco verbi*, they are substitutes for words."¹⁹ Ritual is performative in that actions that operate outside discursive thought cause results rather than describe, and so produce a space that enacts sacrality rather than representing it. Some of the primary means by which ritual accomplishes sacrality are rhythm, physicality (costume, gesture, spatial order), intention, energy, and participation, or lack of a neutral observer—the sense that everyone present is taking part. Not every one of these is present in all ritual settings, but the list is one version of a taxonomy of ritual, some necessary elements in the production of sacred space.

The rhythmicity of formalized actions—their presence in the context of repetitive performed structures—is part of what makes an action ritual. Repetition, of course, is one of the governing structures of meaning making, and we ascribe meaning to places, events, words, and gestures on the basis of seeing their repetition. We imagine similar intent when witnessing multiple iterations of *anything*. Prehistoric ritual is rhythmic, mirroring oscillation in the natural world. The seasons, the

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moon cycle both celestial and in women's bodies, the rhythm of day and night, the rhythm of the breath—all are the roots of myth, and thus the objects of worship. Since the inspirations (speaking of breath) are rhythmic, the worship must be similarly rhythmic, and the ancient sacred world is defined in time by the performance of periodic ritual. Even now, in a secular worldview detached from natural cycles, beholden to the unwavering non-rhythm of 24/7 electricity and mediated interaction, we use the word ritual to refer to actions *repeated*, with potency accruing in the repetition. A description of the Art Ensemble of Chicago setting up for a performance describes the unpacking of crates of instruments, hundreds of which would slowly fill the stage, and a piece-by-piece setup process that takes on a clear ritual nature.²⁰ Ensemble member Joseph Jarman describes the setup in a beautiful prose poem accompanying the AEC's 1982 album *Urban Bushmen*, his poeticizing of the process framing it, and so establishing the setup, through intention and repetition, as ritual.²¹

The physicality of ritual actions manifests the consciousness that the performers are in sacred space. There is often an intentional costuming, sculpting the visual field with non-pedestrian references, and altering the consciousness of the wearer. In the AEC, three members performed in variations of traditional African dress, plus one in street clothes (an ordinary outfit made extraordinary by its uniqueness in the ensemble), and one (Lester Bowie) always in a white lab coat. The members who wore African dress would paint their faces in tribal patterns, further enacting a ritual separation from ordinary consciousness. Ritual changes the consciousness of participants, both actors (those who perform the ritual) and witnesses, by *enacting* rather than acting, and the wearing of a specific (and again, repeated) non-ordinary identity is a defining mark of the departure from ordinary social space. The costumes create a new social space, and do it, as per Bell and Lévi-Strauss by amplifying opposites. The street dress of the audience meets the semiotically charged costume of the Ensemble and everyone knows that *something is happening*. This something is ritual, and in this sense all theater holds a strand of the ancient thread of ritual and sacred space. That conflation has been frequently challenged, first by Aristotle, who associated ritual with the sacred, but theater with illusion and representation, thus fixing its identity in vulgar materiality.²² Recent theater makers and theorists have revisited the debate and found Aristotle's position as well untenable. To take a middle position: costume doesn't automatically make an event a ritual, but it is one strong element in ritual action.

In addition to costume and ritual setup, the AEC often use a physical gesture and the geometric arrangement of their instruments to situate each performance in ritual space. Reproducing one of Wiles' basic tropes of western sacred space, the ensemble all stand facing east for a few moments at the beginning of the evening. Their hundreds of instruments have been arranged in a large semicircle

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with a massive bass drum in the center. This setup and their entrance is charged with intention and overt spiritual language, described in Jarman's *Urban Bushmen* poem:

“They arrive, without name nor form but as the personators of GREAT BLACK MUSIC— ANCIENT TO THE FUTURE; as it flows from the then to now, the beginningless beginning to the endless end, from the center of the center to the unlimited bounds of the universe.”²³

Once established, through ritual, in sacred space, the performance itself can begin.

structure as resistance

The intention to *do* rather than *represent* is what makes an action sacred, and that basic performative turn describes the Art Ensemble's chosen musical structures as well. The music of the AEC is grounded in the practice of improvisation, as much jazz-related music of the 60's was, with two important differences: “free” improvisation and collectivity. Both structural choices can be seen as resistance to hegemonic, individualistic/egoic, and hierarchical power structures, creating a site of Black Power, furthering the struggle of the black community for justice and community uplift.

In mainstream jazz of the 50's and 60's, pieces tend to be structured around a pre-existing song, called a “standard” because the same tunes were used by many performers. A group would play the song once through, called the “head”, and then one by one the members would trade improvised solos, playing over the chord sequence, or “changes”, being repeated by the rest of the group. The song then loses its distinct melody and becomes a harmonic and rhythmic skeleton for the players to improvise *over*. In contrast to this practice, the AEC was one of many ensembles practicing what was sometimes (imprecisely and contentiously) called “free jazz”, after the title of Ornette Coleman's groundbreaking 1961 album.²⁴ AEC member Lester Bowie describes their process as “stoop and hit”:

“We put a basic sketch in our minds of what we may want to do... but at the same time we don't limit ourselves. We will play a song that we haven't said that we were going to play, and we've conditioned ourselves, if something comes up, to go with it. ... I mean, sometimes we go on the stage with no idea. We have what we call ‘stoop and hit,’ which means just hit. We ask, ‘Hey, what do you feel like playing?’ Nobody says anything. ‘Well, let's just stoop and hit.’ And we go on out there with no idea what we're going to play.”²⁵

The Ensemble would rehearse set tunes, compositions by one or another of the members, and learn them to the point of fluency, but then would go onstage with the intention to “go with” whatever “comes up”. They developed a shared vocabulary, not only practicing their original songs, but many different styles of music, from classical to pop, which they called the “Hot Twenty”.²⁶ This broad fluency allowed them to go on stage with no plan and be available for what any one of them might initiate. Paul Steinbeck’s analysis of an AEC performance reveals overlapping and interwoven references as the members initiate material and respond to each other’s initiation.²⁷ The abandoning of the “head” removes the rhythmic and harmonic organization of the more traditional jazz tune, and in the absence of that structure, the players are in a much more wide-open space. Anything can happen, and they will “go with it”. Their performance practice is then anarchic, leader-less. Not only is there no single ensemble leader (see collectivity, below), but there is no “standard”, no one song holding its harmonic and rhythmic grip on power. Free from the containing structure of the changes, the players make themselves available for temporary structures to arise in the moment, as one player initiates a fragment of a known tune or style, and the others are all free to join in the suggested direction *or not*. Even the “free jazz” of Coleman and his descendents was more structure than this. In 1972, Lester Bowie described his early experience in Mitchell’s band and the satisfaction he felt without being bound by the standard styles:

“With bebop and free jazz, the boundaries are defined. But with Mitchell there was no limitation about what you could deal from. It was a combination of any kind of way you could do it, and it was the only group I had seen that I could really do anything I wanted to without feeling self-conscious about it.”²⁸

Mirroring their freedom from the hierarchy of the standard, the Art Ensemble was a collective rather than a band surrounding (and named after) a single player. The ensemble began as the Roscoe Mitchell Art Ensemble, but when they formally assembled into an ongoing group they dropped Mitchell’s name and embraced a fully collective identity. Like the AACM, the AEC embraced collectivity as a political ideal, countering the dominant hierarchical structures with a communitarian ideal. In this ideal, the ensemble admitted shared roots with the primarily white hippie counterculture.²⁹ One of the primary goals of the AACM was to reclaim economic and political power from the white record companies and venue owners, and their collective structure was a reflection of the necessity of self-determination for an embattled black arts community. The shift toward communal structures for many artistic organizations and ensembles in the 60’s mirrored a concurrent shift in the rhetoric around racial identity.

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Since the 1920's, the dominant framework for discussing racial identity centered around the concept of ethnicity, discarding biological determinants of race in favor of social ones, focusing on culture and heredity.³⁰ The ethnicity discussion centered on the conflict between assimilationist and pluralist ideals, but itself was an insufficient theoretical model to cope with the upwelling of liberatory energy and ferment that would come with the Civil Rights era. Black nationalism blew away both assimilation and pluralism with its militant assertion of an understanding of race that was directly rooted in the ravages of colonialism.³¹ Nation-based identity connected the black community in the United States energetically to African nations oppressed by colonial powers, and black nationalists would propose both cultural and political transformation as *collective* necessities, displacing the earlier tropes of (individual) liberation and redemption.³² While the civil rights movement generally worked toward assimilation, black nationalists would propose variations of separatism, with prominent figures like Malcolm X advocating at times a separate self-governing black state. Malcolm X's increasing radicalization in the early 60's leading to his break from the Nation of Islam in 1964 coincided with the rise of free jazz and group improvisation. The AACM, which debated whether to be an all-black or integrated organization, mirrored the current trend in the movement toward separatism with its ethos of self-governance and self-determination, and decided to be an all-black group. In a telling of the AACM's founding, George Lewis transcribes conversations from the early meetings, revealing a potent conversation about race. He quotes Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, who would enunciate the ethos that was growing in black radical groups through the 60's, including the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1966:

“The concept of Black Power rests on a fundamental premise: *before a group can enter the open society, it must first close ranks.* By that we mean that group solidarity is necessary before a group can operate effectively from a bargaining position of strength in a pluralistic society.”³³

Lewis emphasizes the collective nature of the group from the beginning, and notes that a people “silenced by slavery” would naturally organize in such a way as to counteract that legacy. In the AACM meetings, “everyone would have their say, and the ring shout-like, performative nature” of the first meetings was a demonstration of the necessity and power in collectivity.³⁴ Can similar intent be discerned between the radical black power agenda and the musical values of group improvisation and collectivity? Frank Kofsky, a jazz musician and Marxist scholar, directly equates them, saying:

“The new musicians have been moving... toward a fresh concept of group, as opposed to individual, improvisation. The reasons for this shift are, as I have said, both musical and

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social... [C]ollective improvisation symbolizes the recognition among musicians that their art is... the musical expression of an entire people—the black people in America.”³⁵

Collective improvisation as practiced by the Art Ensemble is an embodied resistance to the hierarchical model of how ensembles/groups/nations should be organized, and a manifestation of a nation-based conception of race. It emerges out of traditional forms of musical hierarchy—like the standard model of individual creator and subservient interpreters—to express black power and spirit in resistance to the colonial power of the American state and white-dominated social order. Again, Ameen Muhammed, as quoted above,

“Great Black Music is one of the blessings that came with us standing up to a white world and saying, we’re going to do what we want to do, despite what you try to do to us. Great Black Music is a result of us having the courage to use our Great Blackness, and realizing that this is our only power.”³⁶

One more political-musical parallel of note is the relationship between the nation-based racial concept and the stylistic plurality of AACM and Art Ensemble music. One of the strengths of the national racial model as opposed to the ethnicity model is its diversity. It can include many aspects of racial oppression, including economic class, culture, land/territory, and political/social inequality under its purview, unlike the earlier models, which would focus on one defining aspect (like class or ethnic origin) to the exclusion of the others.³⁷ Black nationalism knew that the specific flavors of oppression were varied, but the source—colonialism—was the same. This pluralism dovetails with the stylistic plurality of the AEC’s music. As Lester Bowie reflected (above), the possibility of playing so freely, where anything was welcomed and considered, was a radical freedom, further opening the door for individual freedom in the context of a strongly held group container. Black nationalism did the same, welcoming pluralistic responses to the unifying oppressive force of colonialism. With the stylistic door thrown so far open, the AEC’s music becomes slippery, hard to define, hard to pin down, which was a constant feature of critical response to the AEC in its early years. The ability to take in the music, one French critic wrote, would uproot one’s whole artistic orientation.

“The AACM [AEC] does everything... watch out... you’ll be beaten, robbed, then abused, and sent back totally naked and crying for your mother. But certainly not back home... If you knew how to listen to the AACM of Chicago, you would become, all at once, a subversive terrorist.”³⁸

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The undertone of fear and the specter of wilderness in the critic's voice is unmistakable. He is not entirely comfortable where he is. The music is unclassifiable, and classification is a standard tool of the colonizers. If it can be named, it can be controlled, owned. It is again a resistance strategy, this unclassifiability. The flustered critic implies that to really take the music in will change the hearer's political stance. "You would become... subversive..." One cannot receive this music without challenging the (spiritual) hegemony *inside*, just as the players, improvising freely, taking control of their own performance logistics and working in collectives challenged the (social) hegemony *outside*.

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Ghosts sit around the room, an impromptu band. One plays a plastic saxophone, like Ornette Coleman, who couldn't afford a metal one when he started. One looks lost, fingering the air where a horn might have been—Archie Shepp had to pawn his tenor sax at one point he was so broke. I think about Lester Bowie and Leroy Jenkins, so recently gone, and the grandfathers, gone a long time ago—Bird, Dizzy, Trane. My own jazz piano teacher, Myra Melford, is a tiny white woman who specializes in the music of the AACM and plays with a ferocity and soul that belies both her size and color. The doors are even wider open than before, or they hang broken off their hinges. Justice and civil rights are still a dream. Young black men fill the prisons, few play jazz, and most hip-hop is far from radical or visionary. A few—the Roots, Gil Scott Heron, Arrested Development. A ghost coughs—"Don't lose focus. Say it and be done." Ok. The revolution never happened. Resistance is still necessary. The fight is still on. "Great Black Music—Ancient to the Future" means keep going. Keep playing, keep raising hell, keep taking control of our own lives, keep singing. "Deep River, Lord. I want to cross over." Keep it coming from spirit, from Great Blackness, from "from the then to now, the beginningless beginning to the endless end, from the center of the center to the unlimited bounds of the universe."³⁹ *May all be free.*

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²⁶ *Ibid.* 405, n. 41 (quote from Famoudou Don Moye).

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