Cecil Taylor's Posthumanistic Musical Score
Jessie Cox

"He would play the line, and we would repeat it. That way we got a more natural feeling for the tune and we got to understand what Cecil wanted."[1] Archie Shepp's recount of working with Cecil Taylor in 1959 sparked my inquiry into Taylor's use of musical scores. The music exists, it is written, not on a sheet of paper that is handed to the interpreter, but as a score that is communicated through Taylor demonstrating the piece on the piano.[2] I will read this practice of musical scoring alongside Taylor's own writing; specifically, "Sound Structure of Subculture Becoming Major Breath/Naked Fire Gesture," the liner notes to the record *Unit Structures*.[3] These scores, which are taught via playing the music for the interpreters, are aura-visual as well as embodied through/in the act of piano playing. Taylor writes that "Western notation" is a "blocking" of "total absorption in the 'action' playing,"[4] where he conceives of "action" as both internal and external—as the interactivity between the musicians.[5] I propose to hear this via intra-action[6] (Barad's term for the co-making of differences [subjects/objects, concepts, instruments, etc.]), elaborated via Glissantian créolité,[7] which relies on opacity and the unforseeable.[8] This approach to composition problematizes the location and function of musical scores and at the same time, of course, also interpretation. By using an aura-visual-embodied-score the idea of the musical material, process, and performance is completely altered—*re-sonating* the embodiment of the mental/psychic. ("Would then

Cecil Taylor in New Orleans, 1995
Photo by Michael Wilderman

define the pelvis as cathartic region prime undulation, ultimate communion, internal while life is becoming visible physical conversation between all body's limbs: Rhythm is life the space of time danced thru."[9]) These scores transgress the aural, visual, and physical and become a *sonance* of Taylor himself—his self being performatively enacted through process, through improvisation, through the creation/manifestation of the score. As he mentions: "Practice is speech to one's self out of that self metamorphosing life's 'act' a musical symbol having become 'which' that has placement in creation language arrived at."[10] In this sense, the notion of the musical score can be transposed, can be read posthumanistically, can be diffracted onto other bodies.[11] The reading of texts can be transposed onto bodies (both "human" and not) and movement. This type of textuality is enacted in Taylor's thought-writing-sounding-gesturing via three main steps:

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- The improvisational composition, or practicing, of self.
- A conception of self, and other wholes, as creole, that is arrived at with instruments/bodies.
- Opaque intra-action with others, both human and not.

Note that these individualized steps are not clearly delineable, nor are they ordered; they are in complex and quasi-causal relations not reducible to spatial or temporal linearity. These markings aid in our performative extrapolation of the seemingly unlocatable posthumanistic musical score—a score that negates itself through its (un)scorability (after all scoring means to measure and to cut). The scoring of anything, is the cut (or break) that marks, that makes things matter, that brings to matter.[12] In this way the score/delineation becomes the very mechanism, or technology, which through its (re)sounding opens the possibility for the gap— "measurement of sound is its silence."[13]

Score

Taylor's score is the non-place of a conjunction of instrument, body, and being. Self is articulated and *scored* via practicing ("Practice is speech to one's self …")[14] as well as via further intra-actions with others, which include not just human agents but also histories, instruments, bodies, (musical) knowledges, etc. By intra-action is meant an interaction that is formative to the agents involved. Taylor notes that "the player advances to the area, an unknown totality, made whole thru self analysis (improvisation)."[15] This improvisation is the performance of (creole) *being*, brought forth by scoring, cutting. This unknown totality I hear via, and with, Glissantian créolité that relies on opacity and a poetics of relation, as well as the unpredictability of encounters. An unknown totality, or open totality, allows for the possibility of not being while being, of a becoming within being itself. If practicing is the creation of the self via acting then we can see a conception of self-existence as contingent, as dependent on the environment, which includes other and more/less, which is itself contingent on the act of the subject as well—an intra-active account of how this opaque totality comes to matter. This outside-inside entanglement becomes via Taylor the "act;" it is gesturing, it is technology and technique, an intra-action with technologies/instruments that are themselves to be understood as being entangled in a complex network of intra-actions. To intra-act with an instrument (or any body, even one's own) is to improvisationally compose oneself and the world. To elaborate, the instrument and the musical material, and/or the technique, as well as the composers' musical ideas, are related.[16] There is a coupling between the instrument's affordances and the performer, listener, and composer's body and mind. The instrument's affordances are themselves entangled with its history and the musicians that interacted with it. This account of instruments is akin to Barad's development of the notion of intra-action via/in quantum mechanics, which speaks to the interconnectedness and co-making of instruments, the instrument-handler, and the probed. What is, in my view, crucial to note in relation to and with intra-action, and what becomes even clearer here, is the importance of Glissant's poetics of relation, which relies on, and demands, opacity and the unforseeable: an intra-active creole mattering, improvisational possibility of blackened being and becoming together-a-part. In other words, an instrumental interaction, in Taylor's case, can be found between him and his own body, which happens via the piano, but also between himself and the piano, himself and the musical material, and, eventually, himself, his environment, and his others (as in "action playing" where band member's interaction is of utmost importance to the improvisational composition of self). Interestingly, this complex network of scoring is not fixed in one time-space position, since, for example, a (possible or actual) future act can affect the conception of self/other, environment, and object in the present (or the past) through practicing or improvisational making whole, as it is an unknown, or open, totality. Hear their close similarities: An open totality points to how something can be added in the future, or that it is ambiguous in its boundaries in space; whereas the unknown totality points to how not all can be known in a moment about such totality, which is, if conceived with improvisation, as Taylor does, or as Glissant does via the unforeseeable, outside the indeterminate or determinate, a possibility for futures, and/or alter-destinies. In the same manner, practices of other band-members affect Cecil Taylor's wholeness, which involves a sort of space-time multi-locality. This spooky action at a distance that defies time-space in many ways becomes apparent due to the musical

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scoring that is enacted in Taylor's practice. This scoring is not fixed *onto* a piece of paper—i.e. *one* place. This multi-localizability (in both time and space) changes what we can consider part of the music(al work). Maybe this whole, that Cecil Taylor mentioned is a (w)hole[17]— its hole is what allows its wholeness, and its wholeness is marked by being holed. Of course, a musical work can not only be marked through fixation on a sheet of paper, but also through other kinds of recordings. Alessandro Arbo mentions that different musical recordings have different relations to the musical work: some document and others constitute.[18] But it becomes clear that it is even more complex than that because the very act of documentation has an influence on *what is* and *what can be* (a constituent of the musical work). This means that the marking that makes something a work of art might not be as easily to discern from scoring as a form of documenting since documenting means to prove something exists and so involves measuring and marking. If this is heard in relation to Barad's work on apparatuses, measuring, the measured, and the measurer, then the scoring of something is an intra-action, which would mean that there is no "objective" and non-constituting documenting. In other words, the measuring or scoring of something is a defining agent in the creation of it: via intra-action it is conceived not through sameness nor independence, but a *différance that is not of/from singular wholes, but from black (w) holes—opaque and open totalities*. What is this unit structure that documents Taylor's work (of art/music)? And, if his (musical) work can be theorized, can we then hear, or find, his music?

Music

To answer the question of the work of art in relation to Cecil Taylor's musical score, we'll have to confront his conception of wholeness, or what Cecil Taylor calls unit structures: both a unit made of structures as well as structures made of units. The unit structure is a whole and a part, and also holed as it can only be in relation—there is no unit without structures nor a structure without units. This (w) hole is a scoring, a marking, that does not reduce the complexity, it allows for Glissantian opacity; it is blackened. Cecil Taylor's music, written onto paper, and onto bodies, and sounded in various ways, allows, through its opaqueness, that self can manifest within sounding. There is a difficulty in locating black (w)holes as they are, as mentioned above, multi-local and they have, of course, no measurable center. They are Cecil Taylor, Cecil Taylor and his piano, the ensemble, and more. At the same time, black (w)holes are also placed in space-time. They are not nowhere; they are materially quasi there/here.

A [supermassive black hole](#) image taken by [Event Horizon Telescope](#)

If the score is redefined in this fashion then what, and where, is the music? If the locality of the musical work is multi, then how does that relate to the music itself? Is this music localizable? How does it score (mark, define) itself? In "Sound Structure" Taylor does not explicitly state a definition of music, but one can nonetheless gain an opaque understanding of his conception of music. There is a brief definition of at least "a" music, which is: "as gesture Jazz became." Guerino Mazzola and Paul B. Cherlin mention that "originally, scores encoded the gestural hints in the graphemes of Medieval neumes."[19] Thus, one can ask whether the music can be found in the gestures since they are the origin and the outcome of musical notation. Here I want to *re*-turn to scoring, but this time the scoring of gesture as a medium for music, or sound. The scoring of sound is mentioned by Taylor in relation to silence (silence as the measurement of sound itself); but, in relation

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to this scoring of sound by silence, he also offers another dimensional thinking of such rhythmic markings namely rhythm-sound: "rhythm-sound energy found in the amplitude of each time unit."[20] This concept of the rhythm-sound seems to be the notion of unit structures at work. There is a rhythm within rhythm—the amplitude—that translates to rhythm also being, like the amplitude, made of both a sound and a silence. The rhythm-sound is not measured by the silence of sound, nor the absence of sound, but the very silence that makes rhythm, which is also sound. Ergo, sound is silence as well as sound. Furthermore, it is felt in the body, in the "undulation of the pelvis," as a dancing through time, and through such dancing time is marked, and made in relation. Here I want to ask again the question of what/where is the music? Rhythm and sound involve bodily actions and/or activations (motions), but there is also a sort of spookiness (or spectrality) to the contours, or localities, of such bodies in/with motion.

> "The paths of harmonic and melodic light, give architecture sound structures acts creating flight. Each instrument has strata. Physiognomy, inherent matter-calling-stretched existing bodies of sound."

> "Emotion being aggressive participation defines the 'acts' particularity the root of rhythm is its central unit of change eye acting upon motor responses directing motions internal movement (wave)."[21]

These two passages out of Cecil Taylor's "Sound Structure" extend our inquiry of scoring further into multi-dimensional space and bent time. This scoring is unit structures at work, it is a black (w)hole. So where/what is the music? Music is at the horizon, and also evaporating (flying) away, is what comes to the observer and what escapes at the same time, and so it is also the core/center, since what appears at the horizon is what fell into the center of the black hole. Then it must be in-between. But, since there is nothing to be in-between of, except (not-)itself and (not-)itself, while also being the black (w)hole, it is *not-in-between*.[22] As Fred Moten, points to CLR James' critical thought as a dialecticism that refuses it at the same time, or, more accurately, bends it,[23] so too am I here projecting this Black radical tradition out from Cecil Taylor's scoring. Hegel's (or "the") concrete universal, which is also a whole with a gap, is refused, or resisted, in the black (w)hole through affirmation of what it is "not" (namely a non-historical abstract concept without socio-economic and ideological basis), through that which is absent and abject in it, and that which marks its own phantasmagoric origin and end—the Black, and a particular kind of relation to such (othering). Black (w)holes are the sound of an intra-active creole *articulation* of worlding: a kind of *tout-monde*/creole that does not abject something but sits with this (quasi-)opacity of space, this spookiness of places/traces, this (quasi-)scoring that misses and at the same time marks and makes. As such it remains with the unknown through the known by being open for improvisational practicing through rhythm-sound, which is that which can close and open, and open and close: oscillating *polyrhythmia* in multi-dimensional-superpositions. The music of coming to matter and disappearing into/out-from black (w)holes.

Notes

1. Archie Shepp quoted in Alfred Bennett Spellman, *Four Lives in the Bebop Business* (Limelight Edition, 1966, 1992), 43. (This does, of course, not mean Cecil Taylor did not also write music in other ways, including but not limited to, sheet music.)

2. Of course it is up to further inquiry as to what happens to such scores once someone besides Taylor demonstrates them, or when they're demonstrated on a different instrument. Here I also point to the relation of this conception of writing, as in/with orality, to Jacques Derrida's work. Fred Moten elaborates my concern poignantly: "The complex interplay between speech and writing (rather than the simple reversal of the valorization of speech over writing to which that interplay is often reduced) that animates [Derrida's] *Of Grammatology* touches on issues fundamental to the black radical tradition that [C.L.R.] James explores and embodies." "Not In Between," 3–4.

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3. This piece was first presented at *Unit Structures: The Art of Cecil Taylor*, one and a half years after his passing, organized by Michelle Yom. To Michelle, I'd like to extend my gratitude for making this piece come to life.

4. Cecil Taylor, "Sound Structure of Subculture Becoming Major Breath/Naked Fire Gesture." Liner notes for *Unit Structures* by Cecil Taylor. Blue Note BLP 4237, LP.

5. Ibid.

6. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Duke University Press, 2007).

7. As Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant mention: "Our history is a braid of histories...Creoleness is 'the world diffracted but recomposed,' a maelstrom of signifieds in a single signifier: a Totality." *Éloge de la créolité*, translated by Mohamed Bouya Taleb-Khyar (Gallimard, 1993), 88. Glissant, specifically, roots creoleness in a poetics of relation, a relational making that relies on opacity that has to take power structures into account so as to not reproduce them. For an elaboration specifically in relation to improvisation see Jessie Cox and Sam Yulsman, "Listening through Webs for/of Creole Improvisation." *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation* 14, no. 2–3 (2021).

8. See Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (University of Michigan Press, 1997), and *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity* (Liverpool University Press, 2020), 8.

9. Taylor, "Sound Structure."

10. Ibid.

11. Posthumanism is the critical rethinking and reworking of humanism and a redrawing of who/what gets to have agency. As Neil Badmington points out: "the "post-" of posthumanism does not (and, moreover, cannot) mark or make an absolute break from the legacy of humanism. "Post-"s speak (to) ghosts, and cultural criticism must not forget that it cannot simply forget the past." In "Theorizing posthumanism," *Cultural Critique* 53 (2003), 21–22. As important as it is to note that posthumanism does not break with humanism in a manner that forgets the past, there is at the same time the danger in this view of posthumanism to continue humanism's colonial and racist legacy, for it continues to locate theory as coming from inside humanism alone. In other words, if posthumanism sees its own postness as emerging from only humanism disregarding the conditions of its existence (again), then post- ends up being just a reperformance of humanism's ideologies. In this essay I practice an intervention into this historiography and genealogies of posthumanism. Thinkers who have critically dismantled the human, including by thinking through the not-quite-human—how Black life has been functioning as sub-human along with the brutality of global colonialism that has served as the foundation of humanism—, and whose own status as human is challenged because of the color of their skin, articulate discourses that dismantle and rework the human.

12. Playing here on Karen Barad's conception of mattering: "Mattering is a matter of what comes to matter and what doesn't." "Diffracting diffraction: Cutting together-apart," *Parallax* 20, no. 3 (2014), 175. This coupling of physical matter and mattering as in meaning making is rooted in Barad's rethinking of what difference is.

13. Taylor, "Sound Structure."

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Jonathan De Souza, *Music at Hand: Instruments, Bodies, and Cognition* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

17. A term I borrow from Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

18. Alessandro Arbo, "From the document to the work: Ontological reflections on the preservation and restoration of musical artefacts," *Journal of New Music Research* 47, no. 4 (2018), 300–8.

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19. Guerino Mazzola and Paul B. Cherlin, *Flow, Gesture, and Spaces in Free Jazz: Towards a Theory of Collaboration* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2008), 66.

20. Taylor, "Sound Structure."

21. Ibid.

22. Referencing here Fred Moten's term from *Black and Blur* (Duke University Press, 2017).

23. Ibid., 9.