MICHAEL MAGEE

Tribes of New York: Frank O’Hara, Amiri Baraka, and the Poetics of the Five Spot

No poetry has come out of England of major importance for forty years, yet there are would-be Negro poets who reject the gaudy excellence of 20th century American poetry in favor of disembowelled Academic models of second-rate English poetry. . . . It would be better if such a poet . . . listened to the tragic verse of a Billie Holiday, than be content to imperfectly imitate the bad poetry of the ruined minds of Europe.

LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Home: Social Essays

These structures . . . seem both to express and to live by virtue of the American dream of power, that power which shuns domination and subjection and exists purely to inspire love.

Frank O’Hara, on Franz Kline, Standing Still and Walking in New York

Frank O’Hara moved to New York at about the time Ralph Ellison was finishing Invisible Man. I note this fact to suggest an analogy. Ellison was a onetime jazz musician who found in the work of pragmatists from Emerson to Kenneth Burke an analogy for the symbolic action of jazz performance, a discovery which helped to produce his great first novel. Similarly, O’Hara was

In my thinking around the concept of O’Hara as pragmatist, I am indebted to the work of Andrew Epstein and the many conversations I have had with him. Lana Schwebel provided patient commentary on George Balachine’s production of Agon. In considering the role jazz may have played in O’Hara’s aesthetic, I have received invaluable feedback from Amiri Baraka, Bill Berkson, and Lorenzo Thomas.

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a poet (and trained pianist) who came to find, in the late 1950s, a style of jazz analogous to the work of the pragmatists with whom he was familiar—Emerson and Paul Goodman, as well as Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams (poets steeped in the work of William James and John Dewey, respectively). Both Ellison and O'Hara were interested in art which, in Ellison's words, "inspired . . . fledgling social forms and political processes with the egalitarian principles of democracy," art that functioned as democratic symbolic action ("Schweitzer Program" 4). In the late 1950s, O'Hara was introduced to the Five Spot, a downtown club featuring the live music of the new jazz avant-garde, music characterized by "its heavy emphasis on individual freedom within a collectively improvised context," as Nathaniel Mackey has put it (34). He would come to associate this music and the social milieu in which it was performed with other forms of egalitarian desire, including his own poetry and the Civil Rights movement. Over the course of this essay, I will argue that our recognition of O'Hara's concern with the politics of poetic form and his engagement with the downtown jazz culture of the late 1950s and early 1960s provides the groundwork for a new understanding of O'Hara as, among other things, a consciously political writer. O'Hara learned what Ellison had known for two decades: that jazz was the most effective, the most persuasive, form of democratic symbolic action, and that American writers would do well to consider both its formal and social implications.

One can see O'Hara doing just that in the following passage from

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1. For my discussion of Ellison's and O'Hara's places in a genealogy of pragmatism, see "Democratic Symbolic Action" and "Constituting Ellison." Paul Goodman was a self-proclaimed Jamesian pragmatist whose approach to language recalls Burke: "we must ask what the speakers and hearers of language are doing, because this will influence the forms" (Speaking 124; see also 5, 7). O'Hara was profoundly influenced by Goodman's 1951 essay "Advance-Guard Writing, 1900-1950," which argued for "a rhetorical attitude toward the audience" and "an experimental handling of the medium." The poet's "audience and his relation to his audience," Goodman wrote, "are his essential plastic medium"; "throughout there is the attractive and repulsive tampering of artist and audience with each other" (359, 378). O'Hara's glowing recommendation of Goodman and this essay can be found in two unpublished letters to Jane Freilicher, dated June 6 and August 1, 1951 ("Frank O'Hara Letters"). Interestingly, Goodman became a subject of O'Hara's letters again coincident with his move to Greenwich Village.
two related descriptions of his friend, the jazz-saxophone player and painter Larry Rivers. O’Hara takes both his painting and jazz into account in describing Rivers’s identity:

its name is not so simply sociological as “identity.” It might be more clearly and less lazily called risk. It is comfortable to ask yourself to risk, but it is more serious when the request comes from outside yourself. . . .

... [H]ere an analogy to jazz can be justified: his hundreds of drawings are each like a separate performance, with its own occasion and subject, and what has been “learned” from the performance is not just the technical facility of the classical pianists’ octaves or the studies in a Grande Chau-mièr e class, but the ability to deal with the increased skills that deepening of subject matter and the risks of anxiety-dictated variety demand for clear expression.

(Standing Still 95, 173)

We ought to spell out the logic of O’Hara’s concept of “risked identity.” Rivers’s identity “might be more clearly and less lazily called risk” because the request for risk comes from outside; to accept this request is to accept, necessarily, the risks of “variety” and the consequent “deepening of subject matter”; what one learns from each “separate performance” of one’s identity is “the ability to deal with . . . increased skills”; but in learning to deal with increased skills, one has necessarily “risked” one’s identity to such an extent that it has changed. In this stream of causalities, O’Hara suggests, there is an analogy to jazz. Whether any other form of art is “truly” analogous to jazz is of course a matter of endless debate, but one thing seems, to me, quite certain: that O’Hara’s description of how Rivers risks and performs his identity is analogous to jazz as Ralph Ellison understood it. As evidence I would turn to Ellison’s most famous description of jazz performance:

[J]azz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment (as distinct from the uninspired commercial performance) springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases

2. I quote two widely separated passages that can be linked according to the implicit logic of O’Hara’s discussion of “risked identity” which appears in both. Recall also Goodman’s insistence that “all original composition . . . risks . . . something unknown” (“Advance-Guard Writing” 357).
of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. Thus, because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it.

(Ellison, Shadow 234)

Not to put too fine a point on it, Ellison’s jazzman, being a “member of a collectivity,” improvises an identity in response to input from outside; this “contest of improvisational skill,” as Ellison calls it elsewhere (Shadow 208), implies a constantly risked, constantly changing “definition of his identity” (finding one identity, losing it, finding another), a process which is “like the successive canvases of a painter.” O’Hara’s and Ellison’s analogies are mirror images of each other, and they are of course implicitly including themselves in their analogies. Ellison’s description appeared in Saturday Review on May 17, 1958, and again in 1964 as part of Shadow and Act. O’Hara’s descriptions of Rivers are from 1959 and 1965. The likelihood that Ellison’s piece influenced O’Hara’s is substantial (indeed, O’Hara’s close friend and fellow New York–school poet Bill Berkson has remarked to me, “it’s not unlikely that Frank knew the Ellison text”).

O’Hara may well have met Ellison during this period, but he didn’t know him personally. He was, however, very close friends with Amiri Baraka, and the fact is that these three writers were united in an important way in the late 1950s and early 1960s. As I will discuss later, Baraka too—particularly during this period when he was known as LeRoi Jones, though also after his adoption of black nationalist and then third-world Marxist perspectives—has been interested in jazz as a form of democratic symbolic action. My focus, however, will be on how O’Hara came to be included in this “school,” and why this makes a difference to our reading of his work.

O’Hara’s famous statement on his poetics, “Personism: A Manifesto,” was written at a time of increased interest on his part in the politics of poetic form and the possibilities of collective improvisation. These interests, fostered in part by his conversations with

3. Berkson continues, “By the way, the only time I ever met Ellison was at Robert Motherwell & Helen Frankenthaler’s house in the mid 60s; I don’t recall if Frank was present, but it may not have been the only, or first, time Ellison attended one of their parties” (“Re: FOH”). O’Hara was a regular attendee at Motherwell and Frankenthaler’s, and the idea that he and Ellison may have conversed probably merits more investigation.
Baraka, were integrated with what he had learned earlier from Paul Goodman about "personal writing"—writing for the audience about them personally. As O'Hara tells it,

[O]ne of [Personism's] minimal aspects is to address itself to one person. . . . It was founded by me after lunch with LeRoi Jones on August 27, 1959, a day in which I was in love with someone (not Roi, by the way, a blond). I went back to work and wrote a poem for this person. While I was writing it I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born. . . . It puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person. . . . The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages.

(Collected Poems 499)

Personism, then, is not a theory ("There's nothing metaphysical about it," says O'Hara [499]), but a method by which the poem might encourage a particular kind of linguistic and social relation: like pragmatism as William James described it, "it stands in the midst of our theories like a corridor in a hotel" (Pragmatism 47). What Personism is designed to do is to prompt the sort of poem which lives as a set of uncertain terms "between two persons." "Between" suggests, on the one hand, that the poem is in an intermediate state, a state of betweenness, its position, the meanings of its various signifiers, unfixed, undecided. On the other hand, the word gestures toward confidentiality: "between you and me," "between you, me, and the lamppost." A good pragmatist, O'Hara wants both—the contingency of the poem and its communicative agency—so that at any moment what stands between you and me might be between you and me. O'Hara's sense of audience functions similarly: though the poem that engenders Personism ("Personal Poem") is ostensibly addressed to one person (Vincent Warren, "a blond"), O'Hara understands that its potential address is much wider. The poem itself recounts the conversation between O'Hara and Baraka, so it is in some sense already "between" them as much as it is "between" O'Hara and Warren. Perhaps most importantly, it is "between" O'Hara and his various, unpredictable readership.

4. James goes on to explain that in the various rooms of this hotel are people who may isolate themselves in private beliefs and pursuits, "but they all own the corridor, and all must pass through it if they want a practicable way of getting into or out of their respective rooms." It is his metaphor not only for the pragmatic method but for democratic interaction generally.
(Simply put, Personism is what happens when one reads Personism: it is the “attractive and repulsive tampering of the artist and the audience with each other” engendered by O’Hara’s style [“Advance-Guard Writing” 378].)

O’Hara’s introduction to Baraka coincided with his move to 90 University Place—in what he called “the free, glamorous Village”—in early 1957. If the intellectual milieu of “Personism: A Manifesto” is, as I have argued elsewhere, chiefly that of pragmatism, its social milieu is that of Greenwich Village. This is not to say that O’Hara’s social conscience was merely the product of a change in address. As Brad Gooch has pointed out, O’Hara “never swayed in his condemnation” of racism (75). He was, in his long-time friend and roommate Joe LeSueur’s words, “a liberal who supported civil rights early on, and he had a special interest in anything involving blacks—their culture, their music, their history” (Letter). His interest in African American culture had been an influence on his writing at least since, as a nineteen-year-old sailor, he began writing “Tribute to African Americans” shortly after having “enjoyed Duke Ellington at the Golden State Theater more than the San Carlo Opera Company’s production of Lucia di Lammermoor” (Gooch 84). But it was in the Village of 1957 that he came into contact with a culture dominated by African American expression, a culture which was self-evidently “jazz-shaped” in Ellison’s meaning of that term, and which—again in Ellison’s sense—was uniquely “American.” “I recognize no American style,” Ellison says, “which does not bear the mark of the American Negro” (“Indivisible Man” 174). In O’Hara’s Greenwich Village this statement was true on its face. It was here that O’Hara was introduced to Baraka—first, in late 1958, through his fledgling poetry journal Yugen and later, in early 1959, in person. Baraka, O’Hara wrote in 1959, was “a saint.”

The association of Personism with Baraka goes well beyond the


6. For O’Hara’s introduction to Yugen, see the letter to Allen Ginsberg dated November 11, 1958. This would have been Yugen 2, which featured poems by Baraka as well as Gregory Corso. The reference to Jones as “a saint” appears in a letter to John Ashbery dated October 29, 1959.
fact that "it was founded by [O'Hara] after lunch with LeRoi Jones on August 27, 1959." Both "Personal Poem" and "Personism: A Manifesto" first appear as public documents in Yugen, numbers 6 (1960) and 7 (1961), respectively. By this time Baraka and O'Hara had become close friends, and O'Hara was involved in Baraka's other publishing projects, the journals The Floating Bear and Kulchur, as frequent contributor to the first and contributing editor to the second. Though Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, and Allen Ginsberg were all frequent contributors to these ventures, O'Hara singled out Baraka and the African American poet A. B. Spellman for praise, telling Vincent Warren that Baraka's System of Dante's Hell was "one of the best and most important works of our time." By 1963 Baraka was comfortable enough with O'Hara to ask him for comments on a draft of his play The Toilet, and the two of them were soliciting work for a special Civil Rights issue of the journal Kulchur.7 Baraka's essay "Expressive Language" appeared in that issue. Among his many insights was a sentence whose basic premise echoed Emerson's statement on emancipation in the British West Indies (that "the negro has saved himself, and the white man very patronizingly says, I have saved you" [126]), as well as Ellison's many declarations regarding the centrality of African American culture to the evolution of American democracy. Baraka put it this way: "Very soon after the first generations of Afro-Americans mastered this language they invented white people called Abolitionists" (79).

A statement such as Baraka's here provides an interesting—and I think proper—context for the sentiments expressed by O'Hara in his 1963 poem, "Answer to Voznesensky & Evtushenko" (468). Directed toward "two Russian poets he felt had drawn overly simplistic political cartoons of the American race situation in their po-

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7. In spring 1959, O'Hara's poems appeared in Yugen 4 alongside work by Olson, Creeley, Baraka, Corso, Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac. O'Hara's praise for Spellman and Baraka's System of Dante's Hell appears in a letter to Vincent Warren dated July 17, 1961. O'Hara undercuts the formal, hyperbolic quality of his praise for The System of Dante's Hell with the self-effacing comment, "I'm getting like J. Donald Adams." For O'Hara's reading of The Toilet, see his letter to Larry Rivers dated April 7, 1963. Baraka's play appeared shortly thereafter in Kulchur. For O'Hara's solicitations for the Civil Rights issue of Kulchur, see his letter to Rivers dated July 21, 1963.
etry" (Gooch 426), O'Hara's poem announces, "we are tired / of your dreary tourist ideas of our Negro selves," asserting, "you shall not take my friends away from me / because they live in Harlem." O'Hara's conflation of "we poets of America" with "our Negro selves" should not be taken as casual. Indeed, as a pragmatist immersed in the culture surrounding Yugen, The Floating Bear, and Kulchur, insisting that the self be mediated by social forces, aspiring toward art that functioned like an ideal democracy, what else would he have concluded? In the same year, Creeley had said (thinking specifically of Baraka), that "the Negro consciousness" was the "reality, which has become the dominant reality in the States today" (Creeley 531–32). We should disregard as immaterial debates over the truth or falsehood of such statements and ask rather what they were (and are) designed to do. I would say that, like Ellison, O'Hara and Creeley made African American cultural expression the prime mover behind the "experimental attitude" of the American avant-garde—not only because they believed that it was in fact the impetus behind much advance-guard art, but because doing so kept the connection between that art and social activity such as the Civil Rights movement operative and in the foreground. One's "experimental attitude," as Ellison insisted, was the method by which one "return(ed) to the mood of personal moral responsibility for democracy" (102). O'Hara makes this connection between one's aesthetics and one's politics more clearly in the conclusion to "Answer to Voznesensky & Evtushenko":

I consider myself to be black and you not even part
where you see death
you see a dance of death
which is
imperialist, implies training, requires techniques
our ballet does not employ

O'Hara's critique here of European conventions such as danse macabre and of the notoriously strict, grand, rigid Imperial Ballet of Russia involves comparing them with his alternative "ballet" operating under the sign of an ideal democracy which "does not employ" such "imperialist" strategies. And we should not lose sight of the fact that in "Answer to Voznesensky & Evtushenko"
this juxtaposition between the democratic and the imperial is syntactically an explanation of and elaboration on the juxtaposition that precedes it: "I consider myself to be black and you not even part." Insofar as American art was democratic in form and content, it was "black art."8

One source for O'Hara's juxtaposition of race, ballet, and democracy was George Balanchine's production of Igor Stravinsky's Agon, which debuted with the New York City Ballet the year O'Hara moved to the Village. There was much in the structure of both the score and choreography that facilitated O'Hara's contrast of it to the Imperial Ballet mode. His friend Edwin Denby had reviewed Agon in Evergreen Review, noting, "The general effect is an amusing deformation of classic shapes due to an unclassic drive or attack"(460), emphasizing and analogizing "the atonal harmonies of the score" and the "dissonant harmony" of the dancing (464). In his poem, O'Hara (whom Denby quotes in the conclusion to his article) implicitly likens these paradoxical qualities in "our ballet" to the paradoxical "antagonistic cooperation" of American democracy. He also seizes on the social subtext of Balanchine's choice of dancers: the pas de deux in Agon is performed by the black dancer Arthur Mitchell and the white dancer Diana Adams. This integrationist gesture, the first of its kind, performed on opening night (by pure coincidence?) exactly two years to the day after Rosa Parks was arrested for violating the segregated seating ordinance on a Montgomery city bus, was synthesized with choreography which, in Denby's words, "turn[ed] pas de deux conventions upside down," as "classic movements turned inside out" and "a pose

8. I am struck by how different the phrase "I consider myself to be black" is from "I am black." There seems a suggestion in its syntax that "I" and "myself" are separate entities, and that "to" should be read as "in order to." Read this way, the phrase seems to be a gesture toward W. E. B. Du Bois's idea of double consciousness. Baraka, in a letter to me, relates Du Bois's concept to the Greenwich Village culture of this period, as well as to jazz generally: "The music, Jazz, like anything hooked up with black people, is non-conformist at base, because it is the music of Americans who have never been allowed to be that. So it comes, like WEB's double consciousness, as the amalgamated expression of a 'twoness' (his word). So with an idealism ubiquitous in GV, at that time, I could find a parallel between the bohemian 'outness,' proclaimed and the actual outness of the music." For Du Bois's explanation of double consciousness, see Du Bois 214–15.
forced way beyond its classic ending reveal[ed] a novel harmony’’ (462). The pas de deux between Mitchell and Adams, as Kenneth Burke would put it, ‘‘promptly integrates considerations of ‘form’ and ‘content’’’ (90). In saying so, I don’t mean to suggest that such was Balanchine’s intention (a stickier issue on which I’ll defer to critics of the ballet proper), but rather that such seems to have been O’Hara’s conclusion as it found its way into ‘‘Answer to Voznesensky & Evtushenko.’’ And, in truth, it seems to me that Balanchine’s New York City Ballet was a reference point more useful for its relevance to O’Hara’s debate with the Russian poets than to his description of a model of democratic symbolic action. If O’Hara, by 1963, saw Agon as ‘‘a function of American democracy,’’ he was able to do so because of the other models—poetic and musical—at his disposal.

The pas de deux of Agon was only one of several implied reference points for O’Hara’s ‘‘ballet.’’ The poem asks us to treat ‘‘our Negro selves’’ as the basic fact (one might even say cause) behind ‘‘we poets of America’’ and ‘‘our ballet.’’ If we accept this proposition, then the term ‘‘ballet’’ begins to lose its Eurocentric specificity: it blurs and refracts until it is something more like a vague metaphor for collective performance, which might be directed this way or that depending on its context. And in the context of ‘‘our Negro selves,’’ in the context of a collectivity which ‘‘considers itself to be black’’ by birth or culture, collective performance circa 1963 gestures toward one thing: ‘‘our ballet’’ is jazz. (Thinking of O’Hara’s critique of an imperialist ballet, I note a recent comment of Baraka’s in a letter to me, that ‘‘Bourgeois European music, as Max Roach says, has the score as the law, the composer as God, the conductor as the jailer.’’) To understand how O’Hara might casually transgress

9. Leigh Witchel has written two pieces relevant to a more specific discussion of ballet, ‘‘Racism and Dance’’ and ‘‘Four Decades of Agon.’’ In the former, Witchel suggests the difficulties involved in any attempt to make democracy and ballet conform: ‘‘The style that I know as classical has an entire aesthetic and power structure that has to be accepted and embraced in order to make it resonate. It’s not a veneer. You can’t just look classical—you have to buy into its values; hook, line and sinker. In a telling comment made in the sixties (OTTMH [off the top of my head]) Arthur Mitchell was asked how he thought about the elegance necessary to do Divertimento No. 15. ‘Think White’ he responded. Are blacks not elegant? A ridiculous thought. But are they elegant in that way? That is a question of cultural values.’’
the boundaries between ballet and jazz on his way to an argument about art and democracy, we need to understand that at the time of *Agon*’s opening, there was another gig in town which O’Hara attended, most likely several times: it was the storied, six-month run by Thelonious Monk and John Coltrane at the Five Spot.\(^\text{10}\)

Monk’s and Coltrane’s performances drew the best jazz musicians in New York and brought the artists and poets of the downtown scene into the Five Spot and of course into close proximity with one another. Bop trombonist J. J. Johnson called it “[t]he most electrifying sound I’ve heard since Bird and Diz [Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie]” (qtd. in Nisenson 46). Thinking of this extended gig, Coltrane would later note two things about Monk that perfectly illustrate the “betweenness” I have discussed in relation to O’Hara’s Personism. On the one hand, Coltrane says, “I always had to be alert with Monk, because if you didn’t keep aware all the time of what was going on you’d suddenly feel as if you’d stepped into an empty elevator shaft.” On the other hand, the sense of connectedness between the two musicians was intense: “Monk just looked at my horn and ‘felt’ the mechanics” (qtd. in Nisenson 45–46). O’Hara was witnessing the interplay between contingency and communicative agency in the Thelonious Monk Quartet two years before he made that interplay the catalyst of his Personism.\(^\text{11}\)

To be convincing regarding the influence of jazz on O’Hara’s “personal poetry,” one must survey O’Hara’s Village landscape with

\(^{10}\) Monk and Coltrane played the Five Spot during a six-month stretch from July to December 1957. Monk returned again for the summer and fall of 1958, with Coltrane sitting in during September. In a letter to Mike Goldberg, dated August 26, 1957, O’Hara lamented, “How I long for the Five Spot,” and a September 19 letter to Larry Rivers indicates that he was in the Five Spot the night of September 18.

\(^{11}\) Thinking specifically of Monk’s and Coltrane’s run at the Five Spot, Eric Nisenson sounds remarkably similar to O’Hara and Ellison in the passages that I compare at the outset of this essay: “Picture a jazz musician walking on the stand, knowing exactly what he is after musically, but having no idea what he will play until the notes come out of his instrument, and you can perceive the paradox that is at the heart of jazz. In addition, he will be interacting with the other members of his group, who will also be improvising, and they will force him to alter his musical conception in order to create an apposite group sound. Is jazz the music of the individual or that of the group consciousness? Once again, it is both, simultaneously” (53–54).
a good deal of care. Two facts have generally discouraged poets and critics from considering what jazz might have meant to O'Hara's poetics. First, O'Hara seemingly had as many selves as he did friends, and with the great majority of them, particularly those uninterested in jazz, he seems not to have discussed it at all. Second, O'Hara never approached jazz fawningly. We need to keep in mind that the Beat movement, which most freely associated jazz with poetry during this period, was, as Nathaniel Mackey has pointed out, burdened with a tendency toward "romanticization of 'the Negro,' with the inaccuracy of labels, with the popularization that eventually co-opted their stance of revolt" (63). Throughout his friendship with Baraka, O'Hara remained keenly aware of their differences and, at the same time, willing to let Baraka's influence impress upon and shape his identity and aesthetic. It should be obvious that this was a rather thin tightrope O'Hara was attempting to walk, but I would argue that the attempt was a successful one. In "A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island," O'Hara writes, "always embrace things, people earth / sky stars, as I do, freely and with / the appropriate sense of space" (307). In "Bathroom," he writes, "So that the pliant / and persuadable map / will appeal to you I'll / imagine that my skin / is infinitely extensible" (473). The first is a formula for ensuring that difference is not swallowed by "freedom." The second is a formula for permitting difference to shape the "pliant and persuadable map" of one's identity. Together they represent the dialectic of O'Hara's approach to African American culture. In regard to jazz, we might say that what begins as a decision to maintain "the appropriate sense of space" develops under Baraka's influence into a nuanced relationship to jazz which is itself "jazz-shaped."

In 1957, poetry readings performed to jazz were in vogue, and O'Hara began to receive invitations to participate in them himself,

12. The quotation from "A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island"—spoken by the sun—is followed, interestingly, by the sun speculating, "Maybe we'll speak again in Africa, of which I too am specially fond." The poem was composed July 10, 1958, the day after "Ode: Salute to the French Negro Poets" (Collected Poems 305), where O'Hara writes, "if there is fortuity it's in the love we bear each other's differences / in race." "Bathroom" was written on June 20, 1963, as O'Hara was helping to prepare the special Civil Rights issue of Kulchur.
invitations that he always turned down. Early on, his rationale was that jazz simply didn’t “go with” the poems he had written to that point—and his confusion over those who were reading to jazz is telling. Of Howard Hart and Philip Lamantia—who were reading at the time “with a French hornist as the Jazz Poetry Trio”—O’Hara wrote to Gregory Corso, “I don’t really get their jazz stimulus,” and then embarked on a lengthy analogy to his interest in abstract expressionism based on the premise that “where jazz is fleeting (in time) and therefore poignant, de K[ooning] is final and therefore tragic.” Two things should be highlighted regarding O’Hara’s explanation to Corso: first, that by 1959 O’Hara had abandoned the idea that his own writing was tragic, switching gears in the casual style of Personism: “it used to be that I could only write when I was miserable; now I can only write when I’m happy.” Second, the explanation itself casts doubt on O’Hara’s own commitment to it: “This may not be too interesting,” he says, “and I don’t know whether I really believe it or not—but I do.” He muses about reading in front of a painting by Jackson Pollock or Willem de Kooning and ends with a befuddled last attempt at explanation: “I guess my point is that painting doesn’t intrude upon poetry. What got me off on this?”13 Again, as O’Hara’s interest in collective improvisation evolves, the sensitivity here—regarding what intrudes upon what—goes by the wayside.

At some point in 1958, it seems, O’Hara began to make useful, usable, connections between what was going on in jazz and Goodman’s idea of “attractive and repulsive tampering of the artist and the audience with each other.” What remained constant, however, was his aversion to striking any sort of jazz-poetry pose that might devolve into cliché. His highest compliment for Corso, for instance, was that he was “the only poet who, to my taste, has adopted successfully the rhythms and figures of speech of the jazz musician’s world without embarrassment” (Standing Still 83). The “embarrassment” O’Hara speaks of is the embarrassment of appropriation, the kind which would go along with the self-discovery that

one’s writing was replaying the motif of jazz’s “cooptation by white ‘swing’ bandleaders like the aptly named Paul Whiteman,’” to use Eric Lott’s words (Lott 248)\textsuperscript{14}—this was a very productive kind of embarrassment indeed. It was the corrective which kept O’Hara from merely writing about jazz—as Creeley put it, “trying to be some curious social edge of that imagined permission” (591)—and which eventually assisted him in developing an aesthetic that was analogous to jazz. Two months after his letter to Corso about the Jazz Poetry Trio (“I don’t get their jazz stimulus’’), O’Hara wrote “Elegy on Causality in the Five Spot Café” (this would later become the first seven lines of “Ode on Causality”). The poem began with the sentence, “There is the sense of neurotic coherence” (302). Here perhaps was a first stab at defining the “antagonistic cooperation” of jazz.\textsuperscript{15} And in July 1958, O’Hara dealt head-on with the issue of collaboration across racial lines in “Ode: Salute to the French Negro Poets,” announcing, “like Whitman my great predecessor, I call / to the spirits of other lands to make fecund my existence” (305).

In his ode, O’Hara brought his pragmatic belief that “the only truth is face to face” into contact with questions of racial difference, addressing Aimé Césaire by saying, “if there is fortuity it’s in the love we bear each other’s differences / in race which is the poetic ground on which we rear our smiles.” “[D]ying in black and white,” O’Hara wrote, “we fight for what we love, not are’” (305). O’Hara’s repetition of “love” is crucial to both his navigation of questions of race and identity and to his growing interest in the collective improvisation characteristic of jazz. O’Hara was putting love in the service of his pragmatism, drawing on that aspect of pragmatism which, as James Livingston has written, “foregrounds the sensational, desiring body as the necessary and enduring condition of self-consciousness and selfhood.” As a pragmatist, O’Hara understood that, in Livingston’s words, the “notion of selfhood as the effect of entanglement in externality enables a new,

\textsuperscript{14} Lott reads bebop as a reaction to this co-optation.
\textsuperscript{15} Monk, among other jazz innovators, was sometimes referred to as “neurotic.” See Keepnews 111. Here O’Hara turns the term into a positive via its counterintuitive ability to “cohere.”
discursive model of personality’’ (138). Selfhood is the doings and operations of O’Hara’s lover-on-the-telephone. As he says in his ode, “we fight for what we love, not are.’’ A model of selfhood based on what we “are’’ implies a self utterly unchanged by “the love we bear each other’s differences in race.’’ In contrast, a model of selfhood based on “what we love’’ holds out the possibility of an active self approaching racial difference in such a way that “the distinction between knower and known, self and other . . . must be re-created and embodied in time and in new social forms, not assumed to be fixed, or given by the past.’’ In short, O’Hara was coming to terms with the role race played in his pragmatic vision of the self as “personality as the consequence of ‘reciprocal exteriority’’’ (Livingston 209, 236).

Again, the line O’Hara was trying to walk between “entangle-ment’’ and appropriation was a fine one. But the conclusion of his ode suggests that he was well aware of the distinction. “[T]he beauty of America,’’ he writes, is “‘neither cool jazz nor devoured Egyptian heroes,’’ and in these lines there is evidence that O’Hara was becoming aware of debates within the jazz community itself, debates which were insistently for someone like Baraka. Miles Davis (who appears in O’Hara’s “Personal Poem’’ being “clubbed 12 / times last night outside BIRDLAND by a cop’’ [335]) recalled in his autobiography the subtext of “cool jazz’’ during this period:

16. Livingston’s discussion of the concept of “reciprocal exteriority’’—of the fully contingent and yet social self—occurs in the course of a broader discussion of Henri Bergson’s relation to pragmatism. My reading of “Ode: Salute to the French Negro Poets’’ runs counter to that of Aldon Nielsen in his generally excellent Reading Race. Nielsen misrepresents the lines “‘the love we bear each other’s differences / in race which is the poetic ground on which we rear our smiles,’’ clipping the line so that it reads, “‘race which is the poetic ground on which we rear our smiles,’’ a maneuver that sets up his conclusion that O’Hara is “‘seeking some white equivalent of Césaire’s poetics of ‘negri-tude’’’’ (157). Without claiming any bad faith, I would simply say that Nielsen’s reading (uncharacteristic for such a careful critic) ignores the complexity of a phrase such as “each other’s differences’’ as it ignores the specifics of O’Hara’s social ground: O’Hara was, as I argue earlier, aware of the ongoing debates about race relations within jazz culture; he was also aware of and interested in African liberation movements, a fact surely relevant to a reading of his representation of Césaire. In “For the Chinese New Year and for Bill Berkson” (Collected Poems 389–93), published in The Floating Bear in 1961, he wonders about the fate of Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of the independent Republic of the Congo, who had been assassinated the month before O’Hara wrote his poem.
[A] lot of white musicians like Stan Getz, Chet Baker, and Dave Brubeck—who had been influenced by my records—were recording all over the place. Now they were calling the kind of music they were playing “cool jazz.” I guess it was supposed to be some kind of alternative to bebop, or black music, or “hot jazz,” which in white people’s minds, meant black. But it was the same old story, black shit was being ripped off all over again.

Baraka, following Davis’s lead, compared “cool jazz” to “arranged big-band swing,” “the tepid new popular music of the white middle-brow middle class” (Blues People 213).17 O’Hara was at pains not to follow the “cool jazz” model (“black shit . . . being ripped off all over again”) and thus insistent that it was not part of the “beauty of America.” The reference to “devoured Egyptian heroes” is also interesting in relation to black and white conflict, black and white dichotomies. It seems to be O’Hara’s joke on the Judgment of the Deceased in Egyptian mythology. The deceased come to the Hall of Judgment to convince Osiris that they are pure and worthy. If they are judged impure and unworthy, then they are thrown to “Amemait the devourer,” a hybrid monster—part lion, part hippo, part crocodile. In pairing and dismissing “cool jazz” and “devoured Egyptian heroes,” O’Hara seemed to be attempting to do away with judgments based on the purity of distinctions. But in emphasizing “the love we bear each other’s differences,” he was also underscoring that one loves (becomes entangled with) what one does not know. O’Hara’s “love” was a rejection of the “spectator theory of knowledge”—that theory John Dewey warned against in The Quest for Certainty, whereby “the real object is the object so fixed in its regal aloofness that it is a king to any beholding mind that may gaze upon it” (23–24). If the jazz musician were treated as such an object, he or she might be gazed at romantically in a dreamed moment of transcendental “knowing,” or imitated as in photo-realistic portraiture, but what wouldn’t be happening is anything akin to the activity of jazz itself.

17. See also Baraka’s description of the “deadly cool of ’50’s ‘West Coast’ jazz,” in The Autobiography (260).
Romanticization, O'Hara understood, was merely the flip side of negation, and so most of his poetic engagements with jazz and African American culture are marked by, on the one hand, a mix of purposefully clumsy, intentionally awkward boundary-crossings ("attractive and repulsive tampering"), and, on the other, moments of hesitancy, of communicative impediment, of not-knowing. The stress is on the incompleteness or instability of any single description. Again, O'Hara's strategy helps him to avoid a lot of pitfalls. In late 1962 he explained to Rivers, "I didn't read in the Five Spot because the idea made me nervous and I thought I'd be no good at it."\(^\text{18}\) Out of context, this statement might be taken as a nervousness about jazz as such, but in fact it is quite the opposite. As Rivers knew, the kind of reading he was asking O'Hara to do had long since regressed into parody, the best example being a performance in which Rivers and Kenneth Koch parodied poetry-jazz improvisation at the Five Spot, "Koch reading from the phone book." Billie Holiday (whom O'Hara had once called "better than Picasso")—was in attendance, and afterward she smiled at Koch, commenting, "Man, your poetry is weird."\(^\text{19}\) Holiday's comment to Koch most likely preceded

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18. Letter from O'Hara to Rivers dated October 4, 1962. See also Rivers 455–56, where Rivers recalls O'Hara bringing up the jazz-poetry night issue again in 1966, as part of a very complicated exchange involving a racially volatile sculpture of Rivers's called "Lampman Loves It," which depicted "a black man fucking a white woman" (with the face of jazz musician Bob Wails and the body of Playboy playmate Jo Collins). Rivers's difficulties included Sidney Janis's refusal to show the piece and Collins's threat to sue him. The way Rivers remembers it, O'Hara suggested he be practical and have a black actress O'Hara knew model for him in place of Collins—though it doesn't seem to me that O'Hara's motive was as simple as practicality. O'Hara reminded Rivers of an incident at one of the Five Spot jazz-poetry events in which some of the musicians, including Mal Waldron, expressed discomfort with playing "funny music" behind Kenneth Koch's funny poetry. Rivers, O'Hara reminded him, had argued that the performance would not reflect on their identity as jazz musicians. While Rivers recalls O'Hara validating his point in 1966, that recollection seems dubious to me given the hesitancies expressed in the October 1962 letter—though it is certainly possible that O'Hara imported the Five Spot anecdote for new purposes in 1966, because it was expedient to do so at the time. In any event, the motives for his nervousness circa 1962 seem clear.

19. O'Hara's comment about Holiday ("Well, I guess she's better than Picasso") was made after seeing her at the Lowe's Sheridan in the summer of 1957 (Gooch 327). Holiday's comment to Koch is mentioned by Bill Berkson ("Re: All That"). This may have been the same night referred to by Koch in his contributor's note to The New American Poetry: "Last year Larry Rivers and I tried to kill poetry-and-jazz by parodying it" (440). In an odd reversal, David Shapiro recalls "Kenneth Koch walking out of Frank's place..."
her impromptu concert at the Five Spot, the one recorded by O'Hara in "The Day Lady Died." In any event it seems clear that O'Hara's nervousness about the appropriative and/or parodic dangers of "jazz-poetry nights" is one resonant subtext for that poem.

"The Day Lady Died" is one of the "I do this I do that poems," where the notion that words do supplants the notion that words mean, and where truth happens to one's words in the course of their reception and redirection. O'Hara clearly wants to celebrate Holiday—much as Baraka would do in juxtaposing her to "disemboweled Academic models of second-rate English poetry" (Home 113)20—but, contrary to most critical views of the poem, he is well aware of the hazards involved in his undertaking, and the poem is designed so that it might avoid descending into either "traditional elegy" (Blasing 50) or cliché rendition of the "white intellectual worshipping a black jazz performer (Ross 385).21 The title itself is one night when LeRoi Jones had all these people together about to play blues. Kenneth said something like 'I'm not going to take this cliché'" (Gooch 421). It's safe to say that, in terms of what would be classified as cliché when it came to racial expression, O'Hara would have supported Baraka. Despite being "intimate friends" with Koch, O'Hara was not afraid to say, 'I hate his social ideas,' and he bristled at what he once called Koch's "sophomoric intellectual snobbishness involving ideas of 'people who matter' and 'what is really interesting.'" See O'Hara's letter to Freilicher dated April 1954. These complaints would seem to complement Baraka's recent comparison of O'Hara and Koch: "Frank at least had a political sense. Kenneth Koch and Kenward Elmslie and all those people were always highly anti-political, which is why I couldn't get along with them longer than two minutes" (qtd. in Gooch 425).

20. Mackey discusses this juxtaposition as well (2).

21. Mutlu Konuk Blasing's reading of the poem seems particularly ahistorical; her view that O'Hara's "concept of the artist and art is as 'bourgeois' as you can get"—besides being needlessly hyperbolic and fundamentally inaccurate—seems to prevent her from addressing the most obvious contexts for the poem, namely, O'Hara's friendship with Baraka and the Five Spot itself. Andrew Ross, despite his claims to having "comb[ed] through O'Hara's entire oeuvre," ignores a great deal in order to come to the conclusion that "jazz almost never figures into the taste milieu within which [O'Hara] represented himself." He quotes Baraka's poem "Jitterbugs" as if it were a corrective to O'Hara's view of jazz, without mentioning that at the time O'Hara wrote "The Day Lady Died," he and Baraka were close friends. He questions the relevance of O'Hara's work to the Civil Rights movement without mentioning that Baraka and O'Hara put together a special Civil Rights issue of Kulchur in the early sixties. In short, Ross's mapping of "a highly romantic form of Racism" onto "The Day Lady Died" overlooks much evidence to the contrary. Ross finally wants to see O'Hara's "white intellectual" as ironized (invoking O'Hara's "camp ethic" as his saving grace); I'm arguing that his identity as mediated by events in the Five Spot is in fact much more radical.
one aspect of O'Hara's strategy: the elegiac, transcendent bearing of the syntax ("The Day Lady Died," accentuating "Day" so as to remove it from the continuum of days, as in "The Day the Earth Stood Still") is undercut by O'Hara's play on Holiday's nickname, "Lady Day." A second possibility arises, that the title is a plain statement of fact: "The Day Lady" (Lady Day, Billie Holiday) died. Keeping in mind that the poem is contemporaneous with O'Hara's invention of Personism, we should recognize the importance of O'Hara's wordplay, the way he figures Holiday's death as one in a series of everyday events.

I can think of no better answer to Dewey's call "to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience which are works of art and the everyday events, doings" than O'Hara's poem. Likewise, in reading the poem I am reminded of how Dewey's panegyric on "operations in experience" is based on his sense of how such operations are anathema to all processes of objectification (Art 3). The first four stanzas of O'Hara's poem are built on a series of plain, present-tense, declarative statements: "I go...I walk...I go...I get...I do think...I stick with...I just stroll...I go." The sense of rapid movement is enhanced by his use of specific times (12:20, 4:19, 7:15), and the whole passage is a model of what James called "reactive spontaneity" (Psychology 1: 402).22 "I don't know the people who will feed me," O'Hara insists, and each encounter is an entanglement in externality, a literal modification in his discursive self, the complexity of which is registered in his vernacular expressions. He buys "an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING to see what the poets / in Ghana are doing these days," as if reading across boundaries of race and culture were as casual and egalitarian as knocking on a neighbor's door or calling her on the telephone and in that way the antithesis of the romantic act of

22. James explains that experience is marked by attention rather than receptivity, and that one's attention within the stream of experience is emblematic of the "fact that subjective experience may, by laying its weighty index-finger on particular items of experience, so accent them as to give to the least frequent associations far more power to shape our thought than the most frequent ones possess" (403). But our subjective attention, our reactive spontaneity, does not leave us unchanged, since "every experience undergone by the brain leaves in it a modification which is one factor in determining what manner of experiences the following ones shall be" (499).
“discovery” (in which the operative question is not “What are you doing?” but “Who are you, what do you represent?”). Lastly, he turns around; in describing that turning, he reveals just how actively the social text is mediating the poetic text: “then I go back where I came from to 6th Avenue.” This is of course a joke on the racist question, “Why don’t you go back where you came from?” and O’Hara’s answer renders the question absurd—where he came from isn’t Africa or Mississippi, Massachusetts or China, Mexico or Ireland; it’s “6th Avenue.” Just as “the only truth is face to face,” O’Hara measures origins in blocks. The joke is a gesture in the direction of his vision of New York as a multi-ethnic radical democracy. Notice that with more than 80 percent of the poem gone, Holiday hasn’t even been mentioned. And yet we can read O’Hara’s Personism-style games as prelude to the final stanza, or as a return to where the games “came from.”

I have mentioned how Holiday’s performance at the Five Spot and O’Hara’s nervousness over the jazz-poetry events held there are relevant subtexts for the poem; but there is another generally neglected subtext for the poem that I believe needs to be reinstated: namely, the music most associated with the Five Spot itself, the music of the new jazz avant-garde characterized, as I mentioned earlier, by “its heavy emphasis on individual freedom within a collectively improvised context.” That music, as Mackey has argued, “proposed a model social order, an ideal, even utopic balance between personal impulse and group demands” (34). I noted earlier how O’Hara’s move to the “free, glamorous Village” coincided with Thelonious Monk’s famous run with John Coltrane at the Five Spot. Monk’s influence on the young jazz avant-garde that congregated at the Five Spot (Coltrane, Davis, Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, and others) was profound. Stanley Crouch explains, “the Five Spot had begun its music policy in 1956 with the band of Cecil Taylor . . . [whose] style can be almost totally traced to Work, a composition performed by Monk in the early fifties” (261). Monk himself was something of a “new thing” at this moment since, as Orrin Keepnews points out, “in 1957, for the first time in many years, Thelonious became regularly available to New York nightclub audiences” (116). In fact, Monk’s run that year at the Five Spot was booked at the suggestion of O’Hara’s good friend Rivers (Riv-
ers 342). Moreover, Monk’s influence extended beyond young jazz musicians to include young poets such as Baraka, Spellman, and Creeley. O’Hara, I think, belongs in this mix: the kinds of associations Mackey makes between Creeley and Baraka and Monk, Taylor, and Coleman might just as valuably be made between these musicians and O’Hara.

Mackey’s associations are strengthened by the fact that these musicians and poets were actually in dialogue with one another, largely through Baraka’s initiative: if Taylor, for instance, was reading the work of Duncan, Baraka, Olson, and Creeley, which became “absorbed in his music” (Mackey 32), then surely Baraka, Creeley, and, I would say, O’Hara would have been influenced by Taylor’s descriptions of jazz improvisation: “Each ensemble member as an active / community agent attempting a special / social function (human)” (34). (Berkson notes that Taylor helped to run off copies of The Floating Bear in the early sixties [“Re: All That”], and O’Hara, as a highly skilled pianist, would no doubt have been interested in Taylor’s combination of, in his words, “European technical facility” and the “uninhibited collective improvisation” of avant-garde jazz [qtd. in Hentoff].) As Baraka explains in Blues People, “the reciprocity of this relationship became actively decisive during the fifties when scores of young Negroes and, of course, young Negro musicians began to address themselves to the formal canons of Western nonconformity, as formally understood refusals of the hollowness of American life, especially in its address to the Negro” (231). I can’t pass by Baraka’s characterizations of the times without noting that the most obvious canon “of Western nonconformity” is Emerson’s—“whoso would be a man must be a non-conformist”; “for non-conformity the world whips you with its displeasure” (Essays 31, 34)—prescriptions and warnings for the writer who would use language as democratic symbolic action. And what we have in the milieu of the Five Spot is an instance where artists involved in different mediums were consciously tampering with each other—consciously transgressing the law of genre—in order to invent new forms of democratic symbolic action. Insofar as O’Hara’s “The Day Lady Died” represents activity in the Five Spot, it is one of these new forms.
The strategy at work in the last stanza of “The Day Lady Died,” which I would like to highlight, is one Mackey calls “a heterogeneous inclusiveness evoked in terms of non-availability” (254). “Heterogeneous inclusiveness” is one of those oxymoronic phrases—like Ellison’s “antagonistic cooperation”—which gestures toward the workings of an ideal democracy. A tactical emphasis on nonavailability, on the disruption of signifying systems, on the betweenness of all communicative gestures, serves to voice “reminders of the axiomatic exclusions upon which posittings of identity and meaning depend” (19). James called this “the reinstatement of the vague,” a linguistic tactic, a mediation of the definitive nature of “grammatical scheme,” designed to make signification flexible (Psychology 1: 254). To admit the inaudible message is to acknowledge that the source of that message is resistant to all fixed classification; it is to circumvent the issues of objectification and romanticization without precluding the possibilities of extemporaneous dialogue. The poem that foregrounds nonavailability is “at odds with hypostasis, the reification of fixed identities that has been the bane of socially marginalized groups . . . with taxonomies and categorizations that obscure the fact of heterogeneity and mix” (20). Like identity itself, words and sentences are rendered transitional: on the fly which is open, so to speak. Always mediating against fixity, the poem is not at odds with the idea of language as evocative. Recall that O’Hara quite literally plays the evocator in “Ode: Salute to the French Negro Poets” (calling to spirits of other lands to make fecund his existence), and that any sense of “heterogeneous inclusiveness” in that poem—between O’Hara and Césaire for instance—is predicated on O’Hara’s insistence that he does not know who Césaire is, or who the two of them are as a fixed “we.” O’Hara banks on a refusal to posit “our desires and allegiances” as reified, rational entities. “That’s not why you fell in love in the first place,” as he says in “Personism: A Manifesto,” “so you have to take your chances and avoid being logical.” O’Hara’s critique of the logical is, more specifically, a critique of logocentrism—of the reasonable, proportionate, referential word.

As I have already argued, Personism is a catalyst for poems that live as a set of uncertain terms between people, poems that encour-
age a particularly democratic social relationship. What is most interesting to me about the conclusion to "The Day Lady Died" is that it is a practical application of Personism:

and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of
leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT
while she whispered a song along the keyboard
to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing

To whom did Holiday whisper, and who stopped breathing? The absence of punctuation is an impediment, precludes a definitive answer. Did she whisper "to Mal Waldron and everyone" or only to "Mal Waldron," her fellow black jazz musician, and to no one else? And what of "I," which, in such a chatty, vernacular poem, seems to want to be an indirect object despite the rules of grammar? Then, if "everyone" and "I" are separate objects, did Holiday whisper "to Mal Waldron and everyone" or "to Mal Waldron and everyone and I"—that is, has O'Hara somehow been left out of the communicative loop? Whether O'Hara heard and how he heard are only tentatively defined. What we have as evidence of his reception are a physiological response ("stopped breathing") and the writing of a poem called "The Day Lady Died." What we do not have is anything we might confidently call "understanding" or "knowing." The fact that we cannot decide whether the members of this collective are subjects or objects has the uncanny effect of obscuring their position in space. Much is dependent on whether Waldron and O'Hara can both be included in "everyone"—the only noun which, in true grammatical fashion, occupies the position of both subject and object. And here is the genius of O'Hara's invention: Waldron and O'Hara are irreconcilable subjects mediated by a collective "everyone" which creates the potential position between subject and object, though neither of them occupies it alone, and their inclusion is dependent on dispensing with the grammatical laws that would separate them.

The scene bears the markings of what Mackey calls "the obliquity of a utopian aspiration": "The accent that falls upon the insufficiency of the visual image," he explains, "is consistent with . . . an anesthetic-synesthetic enablement that displaces the privileged eye" (255). To observe is to be overcome with, first, a sense of anes-
thesia (blurring to the point of blindness) and, second, the need for a synesthetic leap of faith: the “privileged eye” (“I”) is supplanted by an unnamed actor who chooses verse (versatility) over verity (verisimilitude). Faced with the irresolvable tangle of subjects and objects, the operative metaphor becomes not the eye but the keyboard: “she whispered along the keyboard.” O’Hara’s choice of prepositions has the effect of emphasizing just how long the keyboard is, to the exclusion of several common definitions of “key”: “something that secures or controls entrance to a place”; “a systematic explanation of symbols.” The multiplicity of interpretive possibilities implied by the keyboard puts to rest these more confining definitions. Even the common musical definition—“the relationship perceived between all tones in a given unit of music and a single tone or key note”—won’t accommodate O’Hara’s verbal play. For Holiday does not sing in a key but, rather, whispers along a keyboard. In doing so she gestures outside the realm of Western musical notation.

Holiday’s whisper is a symbolic action of the kind Mackey refers to as “noise”: “a resonance that interferes with the audition of a message in the process of emission” (Attali 26; qtd. in Mackey 19). Keep in mind that the question of who “receives” Holiday’s whisper is open. “Noise is whatever the signifying system, in a particular situation, is not intended to transmit, be the system a poem, a piece of music, a novel, or an entire society. Open form,” Mackey says, “is a gesture in the direction of noise” (19–20). In relation to a strict sense of “key,” jazz musicians have always employed noise (Ellington called it “the dirt”) in the form of manipulations of timbre, all sorts of tonal inflections via pitch bending, muting, the bluing of notes, even Louis Armstrong’s characteristic rips (his quick rises in pitch directly preceding a tone). In keeping with O’Hara’s keyboard metaphor, we might cite Monk’s “voicing” of chords—the unpredictable ways in which he pulls notes away from the position they hold within a single octave, spreading the chord over the range of the keyboard (or, conversely, compacting chords by using “diads,” that is, striking two notes only one whole

step or half-step apart, with his fourth and fifth fingers, at once. In his improvisations, Monk is always omitting typical notes and adding atypical ones to the chord (his voicing, it was said, "could make an in-tune piano sound out of tune"). Monk described his voicing strategies simply as "How to use notes differently. That's it. Just how to use notes differently" (qtd. in Mackey 275). But we should also understand that using notes differently was (is) a response to the fact that "no written notes sounded right" (qtd. in Keepnews 112). In the late 1950s, Monk more than anyone else represented the eccentric individual jazz musician employing noise as a way to gesture outside of the already inscribed.

Still, if Monk represents some culminating moment in the use of noise within the jazz idiom, this should not preclude one from recognizing similar gestures among his predecessors. Holiday's vocal inflections might be included along with examples in the work of an Armstrong or an Ellington. Moreover, O'Hara's poem erects a generational bridge when it introduces Mal Waldron. It is clear enough that, as the final scene of "The Day Lady Died" takes place in the Five Spot, one would have to at least loosely associate it with the aesthetic environment of that venue. But the fact that Waldron is one of the players should provoke further scrutiny. Gooch identifies Waldron as "a black pianist who usually accompanied Holiday" (328), but this is misleading in its suggestion that Waldron would have been identified by the Five Spot community simply as Holiday's pianist. In fact, Waldron was an important member of the jazz avant-garde who figured prominently in groups led by Charles Mingus and Eric Dolphy among others, and who was heavily influenced by Monk. In October 1958 (while Monk was still holding forth at the Five Spot), Waldron played on Steve Lacy's Reflections: Steve Lacy Plays Thelonious Monk, along with Elvin Jones (soon to become Coltrane's legendary drummer). A few months later he played on Mingus's famous Blues and Roots recording. The point is that by the time O'Hara composed "The Day Lady Died," Waldron's significance as a player lay much more clearly with the jazz musicians being touted by Baraka than with Billie Holiday. (Nevertheless, as I've said, neither Baraka nor O'Hara would have hesitated to include Holiday among those jazz musicians whose music was a "formally understood refusal of the
hollowness of American life." That Waldron’s brief performance with Holiday at the Five Spot was soon followed by his remarkable two-week engagement there alongside Eric Dolphy and Booker Little did not constitute a radical departure.) 24 Our reading of the "whisper along the keyboard" should take into account the fact that O'Hara—as an accomplished pianist familiar with Monk, Cecil Taylor, and Waldron and conversing with (and reading) Baraka—was aware of the imminent jazz experiments in liberating "key" from even its flexible meaning as defined in bop improvisation.

For the Five Spot community, this liberation of key would culminate in the arrival of Ornette Coleman, who debuted at the Five Spot in late 1959, at the exact same time that O'Hara was developing "ideas about suitable prosody for musical setting of American diction." 25 Spellman described Coleman's arrival as "the greatest furor jazz had seen in fifteen years" (80). 26 In Blues People, Baraka quotes George Russell on Coleman's impact: "His pieces don't readily infer key. They could almost be in any key or no key.... this approach liberates the improviser to sing his own song really, without having to meet the deadline of any particular chord." "The implications of this music," Baraka writes, "are extraordinarily profound" (227). Baraka's pragmatic view of Coleman's music (its structure, he concludes, is designed to liberate the improviser) is informative. 27 While Russell takes some musicological liberties

24. Waldron's engagement with Dolphy, Little, Richard Davis, and Eddie Blackwell is captured on the recording Eric Dolphy at the Five Spot.

25. This expression of purpose appears in a document entitled "Statement to the Ford Foundation" found in "The Frank O'Hara Letters" and dated "late 1959." O'Hara was proposing to write a libretto. Among his suggestions for collaborators was Morton Feldman, whose music, Berkson has noted, "felt close to Monk (did he agree? I never had the temerity to ask)" ("Re: All That"). Berkson's apprehensiveness underscores the cultural distance mediating against his multiracial hearing. O'Hara of course was notorious for his attempts to bridge cultural distance. In any event, my point is not to argue for an analogy between Feldman's work and Monk's so much as to point out that if O'Hara was developing "ideas about suitable prosody for musical setting of American diction" with Feldman in mind, then the music he was hearing at the Five Spot during this period may well have figured into his considerations.

26. Spellman began reviewing music in Kulchur in 1962, at the same time that Baraka made O'Hara the art editor.

27. Coleman himself designed the song titles on his LP To Whom Keeps a Record in the form of a joke only a pragmatist could make: when read in succession, the titles
(Coleman's music is never precisely in "no key" but, more accurately, employs shifting tone centers), his and Baraka's reading of the music's mood is quite accurate. That Baraka and Coleman were friends is also significant: as he did with Cecil Taylor, Baraka was exchanging aesthetic notions, his metaphors one half of a synthetic two-way street. Other close friends of O'Hara's, such as Berkson, were analogizing just as freely. Berkson writes, "Monk and Coleman were instructive about tone, [about] what a structure or syntax might accommodate, what the ear could not just tolerate but actually enjoy" ("Re: All That"). Notice how Berkson moves liberally from discussing musical tonality to discussing syntax. Again, the context of Greenwich Village seems to have validated such gestures, just as it validated Taylor's liberal application of Black Mountain, "open field" poetics to his own musical experimentation.28

Frank O'Hara was an active participant in the scene I have been describing. Though, as I have suggested, the very multiplicity of O'Hara's personae precludes one from arguing for the centrality of any scene vis-à-vis his artistic production, this milieu is at least supplemental to the others in which he involved himself. In the summer of 1960 (as "Personal Poem" appeared in Yugen 6, as "The Day Lady Died" and "Ode: Salute to the French Negro Poets" appeared in print for the first time in The New American Poetry), O'Hara was very excited about Ornette Coleman. Part of the occasion for that excitement was the affair going on between Coleman and O'Hara's friend Diana Powell. In a letter telling Don Allen about the affair, O'Hara underscores Coleman's name as "**ORNETTE COLEMAN!!!**" and in a contemporaneous letter to Vincent Warren he notes seeing Coleman at the Five Spot, prompting Warren's memory by describing the group as "the one with the little trumpet [Don Cherry's pocket trumpet] and sax." While the references are typically gossipy, and while O'Hara's interest in Coleman included...
his usual lack of distinction between the artistic, the personal, and the sexual, they lead in the direction of a provocatively different version of O'Hara than the one commonly invoked. As Baraka has recently explained,

Frank dug the music, went to the 5 Spot often. We were all hit with the heavy impact in G[reenwich] V[illage] of Ornette C[oleman]. He was a New Thing, in that era of new things . . . Jazz was New York! It was urban, new, hot, revelatory, &c, it was the anthemic back and foreground of the art denizens of the then and there. Like language and city sounds . . . Frank was always looking for inspiration. The music inspired him. (Letter)

Baraka goes on to suggest what it was about Coleman that would have inspired O'Hara: "Jazz is Democratic in form, it basically is collective improvisation. It is about singular and collective spontaneity, and composition, both formal and mise-en-scène." In this instance—thinking about Coleman, thinking about O'Hara—Baraka's view is remarkably close to Ellison's: the jazz band puts democracy into aesthetic action. Coleman's music—as released on a series of Atlantic LPs between 1959 and 1962 and as played at the Five Spot and the Jazz Gallery during this time—sent jazz musicians and poets alike scrambling for phrases equivalent to Ellison's "antagonistic cooperation." Mingus called it "organized disorganization, or playing wrong right." Spellman said that Coleman was "changing the relationships within the group until the gap between soloist and rhythm accompanist diminished to the

29. LeSueur has written to me restating what Gooch makes clear in his biography, namely, that "Frank was himself very attracted to black men," and suggesting that O'Hara's conversations with Powell were most likely about her relationship with Coleman rather than about Coleman's music. See also Gooch 195–96. I would argue that Baraka is the more authoritative voice regarding O'Hara's interest in Coleman, and that we should be cautious about categorizing O'Hara's sexual relationships and desires as merely sexual, particularly as they took place in late-1950s Greenwich Village; as Berkson explains, "that downtown scene permitted what seemed at the time very specific, un-categorizable relations: race relations, gender relations, sexual-orientation relations, & alllikethat. It was after all in that context as well as in the permissive Arcadia of my own self-image that Frank & I acted as we did with each other" ("Re: Reading"). The ambiguity of O'Hara's relationship with Berkson was not unlike the ambiguity of his relationship with Baraka. See Gooch 337.
disappearing point’” (79), a point on which Gunther Schuller concurred:

Although everyone is a soloist in [Coleman’s] Free Jazz—relatively independent and equal with the seven others—the word solo has to be reinterpreted from its conventional meaning. There is no one soloist, and there are no merely supporting accompanists. Everyone is equal, and in a sense everyone is at all times simultaneously leading (soloing) and supporting (complementing).30

What Spellman and Schuller were suggesting, in effect, was that Coleman was conceiving anew the relationship at the heart of jazz improvisation, whereby each musician is always playing both “within and against the group.” (Coleman would sometimes remind members of his group to “play against the piece” [qtd. in Williams 56].) For Ellison, this “contest,” as he calls it, is the predicate by which jazz becomes “a function of American democracy.” Here, then, was a highly cathetic counterpart to O’Hara’s Personism, staring him in the face. Recall that Ellison (in 1958) analogized jazz improvisation to “the successive canvases of a painter,” and that O’Hara saw Rivers’s canvases as akin to jazz performances. We ought to consider both of these comparisons in relation to the fact that less than a month before he began turning up in O’Hara’s letters, Coleman described in print (in the liner notes to his Change of the Century) “certain continually evolving strands of thought that link all my compositions together” and provided his own analogy: “Maybe it’s like the paintings of Jackson Pollock.” Baraka considered Coleman’s suggestion reasonable enough to include it in Blues People (234). The relevant authority on Pollock at this moment was of course Frank O’Hara, whose monograph Jack-

30. Coleman’s Atlantic LPs during this period were The Shape of Jazz to Come, Change of the Century, This Is Our Music, Free Jazz, Ornette!, and Ornette on Tenor. All of this music is contained in a single set, Beauty Is a Rare Thing: The Complete Atlantic Recordings. Mingus’s comment appears in the booklet accompanying Beauty Is a Rare Thing (28). The title track of Free Jazz is a thirty-seven-minute piece directed ad hoc by Coleman and performed simultaneously by two separate quartets using similar instrumentation with a polyphonic freeness and nontonal idiom, the result of Coleman’s request that each musician go as “far out” as possible. The idea, Coleman says, “was for us to play together, all at the same time, without getting in each other’s way.”
son Pollock had been published just nine months before Coleman's statement.\textsuperscript{31}

O'Hara's Personism, his "personal pragmatism," evolves in the context of his relationship with Baraka and his response to the "new thing" jazz of the period. The connection Ellison draws between "the American vernacular as symbolic action" and jazz as symbolic action (namely that they are both forms of democratic symbolic action) is a connection O'Hara makes as well, almost inevitably: the poet who has embraced pragmatism will, given the chance, recognize the most pragmatic American art form (jazz) as collateral to (and catalyst to) his own project. Again, evidence of O'Hara's interest in jazz as it relates to the politics of poetic form provides the groundwork for a new understanding of O'Hara as, among other things, a consciously political writer.

During a month in 1964 in which O'Hara told Rivers that he and Baraka were "getting to be like the Bobsy [sic] Twins" (Gooch 426), he also suggested to the artist Jan Cremer that they collaborate on drawings and poems to be called "THE NEW YORK AMSTERDAM SET (set as in 'jazz set')." His alternative title, interestingly, was "THE END OF THE FAR WEST . . . the far west being western civilization" (Collected Poems 556). In one of the poems for this proposed collaboration, "Here in New York We Are Having a Lot of Trouble with the World's Fair" (480–81), O'Hara writes,

If every Negro in New York
    cruised over the Fair
in his fan-jet plane
    and ran out of fuel
the World
    would really learn something about the affluent
society.

The poem ends with the wry observation, "We pay a lot for our entertainment. All right, / roll over." In fact, the poems O'Hara sent to Cremer are full of biting commentary on the state of Western culture ("The Shakespeare Gardens in / Central Park / glisten with blood"; "You can't have much of a / revolution on three dol-

\textsuperscript{31} See also Baraka's description of O'Hara as "one of the most incisive and knowledgeable critics of painting in New York at the time" (Autobiography 233).
lars''; "I'm going to plant some corpses"). The implied alternative to a bankrupt Western tradition was the improvised collaboration itself, a kind of collective improvisation that O'Hara increasingly sought out in the early sixties and that he saw as analogous to the "jazz set." O'Hara's collaborative form was the imminent ideology proposed as corrective to that which he critiqued. Just as Rivers's drawings were, in O'Hara's view, each like a separate jazz performance, so with O'Hara's poems—and more so, if they could be produced under the peculiar demands of collective, as opposed to individual, improvisation. By 1964, O'Hara's pragmatic inheritance finds itself here, in his self-consciously jazz-shaped collaborations.

Rhode Island School of Design

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