Playin(g) iterability and iteratin(g) *play*: Tradition and innovation in jazz standards

Francesco Paradiso

Jazz standards are defined by a constant *play* of tradition and innovation. On the one hand, they are characterised by the repetition of a series of melodic, harmonic and rhythmic patterns that constitute a tune and make it part of tradition. On the other hand, there is the invention of new elements through improvisation that gesture towards innovation. Similarities emerge with those attributes that belong to Jacques Derrida's deconstructive reading of texts.

This study investigates the link between deconstructive reading and jazz standards. It is inspired by the relatively unexplored Derrida's interest in jazz music and improvisation. As well known, Derrida and jazz saxophonist Ornette Coleman attempted to interweave improvised sounds and improvised words on the stage at the Paris La Villette jazz festival in 1997. However, the attempt failed[1]. The audience, unaccustomed to such experimentations, drove Derrida off the stage before he could even get into his stride[2]. His contribution to the event was foreshortened, and he was left shaken by the "painful experience[3]". Nevertheless, his interest in jazz remained strong[4].

This study is also inspired by the fact that, as Judith Butler says, Derrida has not only "taught us how to read, but gave the act of reading a new significance and a new promise[5]". Reading, in fact, is an act that manifests a constant tension between the old that is handed down through writing and the new that is generated by iterating it. Although jazz standards are simply one among numerous approaches to jazz and improvisation, they exemplify in a unique way the *play* of tradition and innovation that characterizes reading.

In *The Work of Mourning*, Derrida gives this account of a "rule of hermeneutical method", in terms of deconstructive reading:

In a protocol that laid down certain reading positions […] I recalled a rule of hermeneutical method that still seems to me valid for the historian of philosophy […] namely the necessity of first ascertaining a surface or manifest meaning […] the necessity of gaining a good understanding, in a quasi-scholastic way, philologically and grammatically, by taking into account the dominant and stable conventions […] *before and in order to* destabilize, wherever this is possible and if it is necessary, the authority of canonical interpretations.[6]

Reading is a practice based on a double gesture: on the one hand the gaining of a good understanding of texts that requires a form of reading relying on the repetition of conventions, such as the stable grammatical rules that we learn in order to understand

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[1] Nettelbeck, 2004, p. 198
[2] *Ibid*.
[3] Stein, 2002
[4] Murphy, 2004
[5] Butler, 2004
[6] Derrida, Brault & Naas, 2001, p. 84

texts. On the other hand, reading is an activity that destabilizes the meaning of texts by iterating them. In order to explain Derrida's approach, Simon Critchley has used the expression "double reading". In his book *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, he gives this account:

What takes place in deconstruction is reading, and I shall argue, what distinguishes deconstruction as textual practice is *double reading*. That is to say, a reading that interlaces at least two motifs or layers of reading, most often by first repeating what Derrida calls "the dominant interpretation" of a text in the guise of a commentary and second, within and through this repetition, leaving the order of commentary and opening a text up to the blind spots or ellipses within the dominant interpretation.[7]

In other words, deconstructive reading asks for an active involvement of readers, who are encouraged to generate new approaches to and understandings of texts. On the one hand, there is the repetition of the dominant interpretation of a text that, in *Of Grammatology* Derrida calls "respectful doubling of commentary[8]". On the other hand, we find the destabilization of that commentary through a form of reading that aims to unveil the blind spots, tensions, contradictions, and counter-forces that move within texts and put the ordinary understanding of them into question. The act of reading no longer refers only to an act that repeats or doubles the dominant understanding of a text, but aims primarily to question it through a performative act of the reader, who reiterating and innovates.

It must be clarified that according to Derrida the doubling of commentary does not presume any unifying, fixed, and objective element that assures a univocal understanding of a text. If that was the case, the doubling of commentary would put into question the reason of being of deconstructive reading itself, and perhaps, in a much broader perspective, would challenge the entire theoretical building of deconstruction. Such a unifying element, indeed, would assume that a transcendental form of meaning is possible, and its "dominant" understanding would highlight that it is something fixed and shielded from any deconstructive incursion. As Derrida clarifies in "Afterword" to *Limted Inc.*, "The moment of what I called, perhaps clumsily, 'doubling commentary' does not suppose the self-identity of 'meaning', but a relative stability of the dominant interpretation of the text being commented upon[9]". There is indeed an unavoidable need for a competence in reading and writing such that the dominant interpretation of a text can be reconstructed as a necessary and indispensable reading[10]. "Otherwise", Derrida writes, echoing a sentence from *Of Grammatology* effectively ignored by many of its opponents and proponents alike, "one could indeed say just anything at all and I have never accepted saying, or being encouraged to say, just anything at all[11]". Nevertheless, what is being repeated, mimed or copied will never be the *same* as its *original*[12].

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[7] Critchley, 1999, p. 23
[8] Derrida, 1997, p. 158
[9] *Ibid*., p. 143
[10] Critchley & Mooney, 1994, p. 367
[11] *Ibid*.
[12] Pada, 2009, p. 82

With regard to texts, tradition builds on an underlying framework of rules that enable repetition and lead to general consensus. These rules refer to authorial elements and conventions we use when we read texts, such as grammatical rules, the corpus of an author as a whole, the philosophical, political, social, and historical context in which the text has been produced. All these elements belong to what one might call the deconstructive duty of scholarship, which is to say what reflects the minimal consensus concerning the intelligibility of texts for a community of readers. This might be acknowledged as the starting point for the *understanding* of a given text[13]. At the same time, readers are called upon to generate new meaning by questioning, challenging, adding and substituting.

Writing a scholarly paper, for instance, relies on this underlying set of rules that makes possible to generate new perspectives and contribute to knowledge by iterating what has been represented through a *grapheme*. All this is, in fact, the consequence of writing. Derrida makes that clear in *Limited Inc.*, when he says

To write is to produce a mark that will constitute a sort of machine which is productive in turn, and which my future disappearance will not, in principle, hinder its functioning, offering things and itself to be read and to be rewritten […] For a writing to be a writing it must continue to "act" and to be readable even when what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written, for what he seems to have signed[14].

In the light of this, deconstructive reading aims to locate a "point of otherness[15]" that will open texts to new meanings. It is from this position of alterity that according to Derrida deconstruction can displace what he calls logocentrism[16]. The moment of deconstructive reading, indeed, brings the text into contradiction with itself, opening the dominant understanding of it, onto an alterity which goes against what the text wants to say or mean[17].

In order to clarify this, it is important to remember that according to Derrida, Western philosophy has always been structured in terms of dichotomies and polarities, the most significant example of which can be seen in the following oppositions: good vs. evil, being vs. nothingness, presence vs. absence, truth vs. error, identity vs. difference, mind vs. matter, West vs. East, white vs. black, and inside vs. outside[18]. According to Derrida, the particularity of this philosophical arrangement is to be found in the fact that the second term is considered the negative and undesirable version of the first. As a consequence, the two terms are not simply opposed in their meanings, but they are arranged in a hierarchical order, which gives the first term *priority*, in both the temporal and the qualitative sense of the word, so that unity, identity, immediacy, and spatial and temporal presence are always privileged over distance, difference, deferment, and dissimulation[19]. However, despite the privilege accorded to one of the terms of each dichotomy, the other term will always be

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[13] Critchley & Mooney, 1994, pp. 365-391

[14] Derrida, 1988, p. 8

[15] Critchley & Mooney, 1994, p. 368

[16] *Ibid*.

[17] *Ibid*., pp. 368-69

[18] Derrida, 1981, p. viii

[19] *Ibid*.

there, as necessary difference, and as *absent* term that justifies the presence of the privileged one. Therefore, deconstruction, as Martin McQuillan puts it, might be acknowledge as "hybridity" because "it seeks to undo this logic of 'outside' and 'inside', showing the ways in which terms within binary opposition are not independent of one another but rely on each other through mutual contamination[20]".

The point of otherness generates what Derrida calls "signifying structure[21]", which does not aim to point out the flaws or weaknesses of an author, but the "*necessity* with which what [they] *do* see is systematically related to what [they] do *not* see[22]". In fact, according to Derrida, meaning is a malleable element that cannot be stable, as its "other" will always haunt and destabilize it. An example of this is given in *Of Grammatology*, where in his deconstructive reading of Rousseau, Derrida illustrates how the word "supplement" "harbors within itself two significations whose cohabitation is as strange as it is necessary[23]". On the one hand, "the supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude[24]"; on the other hand, the supplement "supplements", which is to say it replaces; or as Derrida puts it: "It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuate itself *in-the-place-of*[25]". The two meanings cannot be separated, they will necessary coexist and operate within Rousseau's text. Therefore, this approach to reading will fracture the neatness of the binary opposition between the significations A and B of the word. As Derrida says in *Dissemination*, instead of "A is opposed to B", we see how "B is both added to A and replaces A[26]". A and B are no longer opposed, yet, at the same time, they are not equivalent.

The politics of dichotomies is also evident in the case of the concept of "jazz", which is defined by the polarity between white and black that stems from its historical and sociological development. Going back to the twenties and thirties of the twentieth century, for instance, there is a clear white appropriation and commoditization of black music[27]. Amiri Baraka uses the expression "swing - from verb to noun[28]" to illustrate the transformation of the verb "to swing" into a commercial genre of music "Swing". This marks the erasure of black performative and dynamic inventiveness, which is linked to the verb, and affirms the white commodification of the noun. Nathaniel Mackey, investigating the socio-political implications stemming from this transformation, highlights how black people used music to fight back and generate artistic innovation[29].

An example of this artistic innovation can be found in Bebop. During the period between 1939 and 1941, Bebop identifies a phase of jazz development in which improvisation played

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[20] McQuillan, 2000, p. 15
[21] Derrida, 1997, p. 158
[22] Derrida, 1981, p. xv
[23] Derrida, 1997, p. 144
[24] *Ibid*.
[25] *Ibid*.
[26] Derrida, 1981, p. xiii
[27] Baraka, 1963, pp. 212-13
[28] *Ibid.*
[29] Mackey, 1995

the most important role in a performance. The attention moved from the controlled and structured performances of jazz bands in the early years of nineteenth century to the spontaneous elements of creation. During the performance of standards, the original composition was subverted and subjected to a new creative force[30]. During the gatherings in Harlem venues, where musicians met after an evening of playing in swing bands and orchestras, they just began to play tunes, continuing for hours, without stopping or even speaking[31].

According to these dynamics and forces, then, jazz is marked by a signifying structure that moves between the "two discursive universes of black and white[32]". Despite the criticisms linked to the inclusion of white elements within a music genre that has black origins[33], indeed, jazz is characterized by a unique ability to transcend ethnic differences[34] and becoming a unifying language[35]. As David Wills argues, jazz is a music born of the "impossibility of absolute racial definition[36]". Therefore, this analysis highlights also the deconstructive character that jazz, as disruptive element, brings to the dichotomy black/white, as place where cultural diversity, innovation, invention and change thrive on otherness[37].

Deconstructive reading is defined by the iterability of what has been represented as sign within a set of rules and the absence of the other that haunts this sign and opens it to a *play* of possible substitutions. In "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", Derrida writes

One could say – rigorously using that word whose scandalous signification is always obliterated in French – that this movement of play, permitted by the lack or absence of a center or origin, is the movement of *supplemetarity*. One cannot determine the center and exhaust totalization because the sign which replaces the center, which supplements it, taking the center's place in its absence – this sign is added, occurs as a surplus, as a *supplement*. The movement of signification adds something, which results in the fact that there is always more […]. Play is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain[38].

This *play* becomes also the symptom of singularity as the other that disrupts universality, invention as the other that disrupts law, and innovation as the other that disrupts tradition. By reading what has been written according to a system of conventions that rely on universality, rules and tradition, we are caught indeed within the system of differences that define signs. In reading this study, readers will certainly rely on all the conventions and understanding, upon which a minimal consensus about Derrida's texts has been built. At the

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[30] DeVeaux, 1997, p. 202, p. 377

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 203

[32] Gates, 1988, pp. 75-76

[33] Monson, 1996

[34] *Ibid.*, pp. 200-201

[35] see UNESCO International Jazz Day <http://jazzday.com/about/ >

[36] Wills, 1998, p. 139

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 76

[38] Derrida, 1978, pp. 365-69

same time, the very nature of writing will make meaning polysemic in its transference and will inevitably produce new views, meanings, understandings, and ideas that most likely will become new text. After all, is it not writing "original" contributions to human knowledge the very scholar's duty? Invention demands its simultaneous capture within a system of conventions that will ensure its position more generally in culture and society[39].

Deconstructive reading then involves repetition with difference and by questioning meaning of texts, calls for inventiveness. At this point, it is important to acknowledge that improvisation matters to Derrida[40] because "deconstruction is inventive or it is nothing at all[41]". In order to be inventive, deconstruction needs to open to the other, the absent, the unknown and the unpredictable. Readers are encouraged to be inventive and this marks the generation of new readings and meanings within tradition. Derrida says: "The very concept of improvisation verges upon reading, since what we often understand by improvisation is the creation of something new, yet something which doesn't exclude the pre-written framework that makes it possible[42]". Therefore, it might be argued that deconstructive reading is the expression of a paradox, by iterating texts and moving within a pre-written framework, it manifests tradition. At the same time, the iteration generates innovation. There is a constant *play* of tradition and innovation, known and unknown and universal and singular that characterizes deconstructive reading. It is this play that according to Ramshaw defines invention. She writes

The singular "event" of invention demands its simultaneous capture within a "system" of conventions that will ensure its position more generally in culture and society. Thus, whilst the event of invention can take place only once, invention more generally must be essentially repeatable, transmissible, and transposable; to take place as an event, it must already compromise its singularity with the conditions of recognisability that take the form of structures of repeatability or iterability. It is therefore a paradox or aporia that invention is constituted by its originality […] and yet wholly dependent on recognition and legitimation (and therefore subject to codes and law)[43].

While improvisation and invention are by no means identical, they do share certain qualities. For instance, both concepts are linked to something that is new, singular and without precedent[44]. Both are responsive to otherness *and* have some stable or determined dimension in order to endure as improvisation/invention.

The *play* of tradition and innovation that defines deconstructive reading and invention characterizes also jazz standards. Jazz standards are defined by the same tension between conventional rules that are repeated and the new that improvisation generates. Before digging into this, however, it must be clarified that the comparative framework between deconstructive reading and jazz improvisation assumes that there are similarities between language and music. There is an ongoing research debate on this topic that would require a separate study for its theoretical thickness and complexity. This study agrees with Ingrid

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[39] Ramshaw, 2006, p. 5

[40] *Ibid*., p. 6

[41] Derrida, 1989, p. 42

[42] qtd in Murphy, 2004, p. 322

[43] Ramshaw, 2006, p. 5

[44] Derrida, 1989

Monson's argument that there are similarities between language and music/sound that make a comparative study between the two possible[45].

Among the many definitions of jazz standards one finds the following: "A musical piece of sufficiently enduring popularity to be made part of a permanent repertoire, especially a popular song that is held in continuing esteem and is commonly used as the basis of jazz arrangements or improvisations[46]"; or "Composition or song that has, by dint of its lasting memorability and general worth, become a regularly used item in some field of music -a jazz standard, for example[47]". The recurrent element that characterizes many of these definitions is repetition. Some tunes function as vehicles for generations of players[48], becoming a sort of core repertoire. It is well known how jazz musicians are expected to memorize dozens, even hundreds of standards, which make up the most frequently played fare at gigs and jam sessions[49]. As David Ake writes compositions based on the twelve-bar blues form have remained "favourites of musicians since the earliest days of jazz and are likely heard, in one style or another, at least once during any given performance[50]".

Ted Gioia points out that jazz standards are crucial during the training of young jazz musicians and a jazz performer needed to learn these songs "the same way a classical musician studied the works of Bach, Beethoven, or Mozart[51]". The element of iterability that characterizes the study and transmission of this repertoire consisting of around 200 or 300 compositions[52] has transformed them into a cornerstone of jazz tradition. Ake draws attention to the fact that beyond describing simply the repertoire of many musicians, standards in jazz began to imply "a statement – revealing an awareness of and reverence for a legacy handed down by the music's forebears[53]" and connected to musicians' relationship to "the tradition[54]".

Ake notes also that it is important to consider the ways and places in which the compositions have been recorded, published or written[55]. For instance, as discussed above, jazz standards have been published in "fake books", whose most known is the *Real Book*. Its contribution to the durability is unquestionable, as it has become one of the key element in the equipment that jazz musicians carry with them for their performances[56]. For this study, such perspective becomes even more relevant, as it makes evident the practice of reading that we can frame in the case of jazz standards. At the same time, each repetition or

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[45] Monson, 1996, pp. 207-211

[46] *The Unabridged Random House Dictionary* 1967 Random House, Inc.

[47] Gammond, 1991

[48] Ake, 2002, p. 149

[49] *Ibid*.

[50] *Ibid.*

[51] Gioia, 2012, p. xiii

[52] *ibid*.

[53] Ake, 2002, p. 151

[54] *Ibid*.

[55] *Ibid*., p. 149

[56] *ibid*.

"version", as Gioia calls them[57] is unique, *different*, as the reading/playing entails always the addition and invention/improvisation of new elements.

A standard is based on the repetition of choruses. A chorus can be defined as "one complete statement of the harmonic and metric progression[58]"of a composition. In other words, each chorus is characterized by melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic elements that make it recognizable every time it is played or listened to. These elements provide the ground on which musicians perform their improvisation[59]. Berliner gives us this account:

Composed pieces or tunes, consisting of a melody and an accompanying harmonic progression, have provided the structure for improvisations throughout most of the history of jazz […]. Performers commonly refer to the melody or theme as the head, and to the progression as chord changes. It has become the convention for musicians to perform the melody and its accompaniment at the opening and closing of a piece's performance. In between, they take turns improvising solos within the piece's cyclical rhythmic form. A solo can comprise a single pass through the cycle, known as chorus, or it can be extended to include multiple choruses[60].

Although this is not the only structure of a jazz standard, we might indeed consider a *free* jazz version of a jazz standard, for instance, in which it would be rather difficult to recognize a structure at all, or a version that does not have any improvisative part at all; Berliner's account exemplifies a *traditional* way of performing standards. What he describes as the "convention" for musicians to perform the theme and its accompaniment as opening and closing of a standard, responds to a form of reading that reproduces what has been written or recorded following all the rules linked to music theory, such as notation system, chords, time signature, and so on. Musicians iterate the dominant and stable conventions behind musical writing/recording and reading/playing, which allow them to ascertain the "surface or manifest meaning[61]" of a musical composition.

In the light of this, the manifest meaning might be understood as the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic patterns that stem from the iterability of a written musical composition. In other words, the manifest meaning is given by the elements that, thanks to the score or record, are repeatable, assuring that tunes maintain a relative character of stability.
As in the case of texts, once it has been composed and transcribed, a standard becomes detached from its author. This is a crucial point that has been highlighted earlier in this study, as it refers to writing – and in this case recording as well – as a "mark that will constitute a sort of machine which is productive in turn, and which my future disappearance will not, in principle, hinder its functioning, offering things and itself to be read and to be rewritten[62]".

By *playing* jazz standards, musicians iterate a set of rules and conventions, and contribute to build tradition. This happens since the collective improvisations of New Orleans musicians

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[57] Gioia, 2012, p. 5

[58] Kernfeld, 1995, p. 41

[59] Berliner, 1994, p. 63

[60] *Ibid*.

[61] Derrida, Brault & Naas, 2001, p. 84

[62] Derrida, 1988, p. 8

and bands that can be heard on the earliest jazz recordings. In fact, many of those early tunes are still with us. There is resemblance to the moment that Derrida calls "respectful doubling of commentary". The dominant understanding of standards, indeed, lays the foundation of what will be the moment when improvisation will take on tradition. As Monson says, the function of repetition is a crucial one in jazz, as it creates a "participatory musical framework against which highly idiosyncratic and innovative improvisation can take place[63]".

Improvisation indeed marks the moment when singularity and invention disrupt universality and tradition. Between the opening and the closing of a piece's performance, musicians perform their solos by creating new forms that although linked to the iterable structure of the written/recorded composition, innovate, transform and generate new meanings. Often, improvisations of standards become standards themselves, transforming the original song into a completely new setting that when played by others contain allusions to its sources. In this way, one might say, a new element of tradition has been added to tradition itself. Although responsive to a set of rules and general consensus which make a tune iterable and part of a "standard" repertoire, improvisation becomes the supplement that on the one hand "adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude[64]"; on the other hand, it replaces; or as Derrida puts it: "It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuate itself *in-the-place-of*[65]". This supplementarity relies on a constant *play* between tradition and innovation, universality and singularity. As it has been showed earlier, jazz standards are the indication of tradition. Yet every time they appear as new, different, transformed and unpredictable compositions. As Ramshaw says,

The singularity of improvisation must thus be understood as original repetition, as iterability, in which the instituting act only gains meaning through the repetition of an origin with which it cannot coincide, since it is of the very essence of the origin to be pure anteriority. The singular, creative event is accordingly marked by the lack of self-presence and it is repetition, as the law of the singular event, which makes the originality of improvisation possible in the first place[66].

Improvisation brings about a constant *play* of differences: each chord and rhythmic pattern, although performed according to a determinate configuration, always holds a range of possible additions, combinations and substitutions. There will be always "others" configuration hidden within the composition that will haunt the particular set of patterns chosen by the author. As in texts, also in jazz standards *play* is the "disruption of presence[67]". The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain[68]. According to Monson, "it is this transformative quality of jazz improvisation that Gates has in mind when he comments that 'there are so many examples of signifyin(g) in jazz that one could write a formal history of its development on this basis alone'[69]".

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[63] Monson, 1996, p. 89
[64] *Ibid*.
[65] *Ibid*.
[66] Ramshaw, 2006, p. 5
[67] Derrida, 1978, p. 365
[68] *Ibid.*, pp. 365-69
[69] Monson, 1996, p. 104

Henry Louise Gates Jr.'s seminal work *The Signifying Monkey. A theory of African-American Literary Criticism* functions as junction between deconstruction and jazz music. In fact, the title of this paper wants to acknowledge that. Gates has expressed the aporetic character of Derrida's signifying structure through the concept of "Signifyin(g)[70]", which captures repetition, revision and invention as fundamental elements of black artistic forms. By bracketing the letter "g", Gates opens the term to performativity and transformativity, as opposed to the traditional white concept of "signifying". Signifyin(g) is defined as "repetition with a signal of difference[71]" and Gates uses signifyin(g) to mean any transformation that employs African American modes of figurative expression, as opposed to the fixity expressed by the white signifying. While the white signifying assumes that meaning can be absolute, permanent and objectively specified, signifyin(g) respects contingency, improvisation, relativity and the social negotiation of meanings[72]. Signifyin(g) works through reference, gesture, and dialogue to suggest multiple meanings through association[73]. It focuses on agency and performativity.

We find Gates's concept of signifyin(g) largely used in the scholarly debate that involves jazz improvisation, signification and deconstruction. Gates himself draws the connection and similarities between his theory and Derrida's deconstruction[74]. Monson refers to Gates in her analysis of repetition and improvisation[75]. John Murphy draws about the agency and performative features of signifyin(g) to analyse the dialogue among jazz improvisers[76]. Samuel Floyd has used it in his analysis of rhythmic relationships and formal conventions in some of the most known jazz standards[77].

The processes of signification at work within signifyin(g) and the play of differences manifest the flexibility of jazz forms, such as melody, chords, and rhythms. Improvisation is defined by this flexibility and the consequent *play* between the presence of all the forms iterated during the doubling of commentary and the absence of what is to come through substitutions, inversions, anticipation, delay, pauses, and the decentering of structure, which improvisation generates.

Looking at rhythm, for instance, it is likely the most flexible among the jazz forms. A sudden pause, a delay, or anticipation, doubling or tripling of the time signature, or even the evolving into a completely different rhythmic style. Talking about rhythm, Berliner says that musicians "create constant motion in their parts by mentally supplying and pursuing a movable model of the beat, which they stretch or compress as they improvise[78]". Almost all

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[70] Gates, 1988, pp. 45-46

[71] *Ibid*., p. xxiv

[72] Walser, 1995, p. 168

[73] *Ibid*.

[74] Gates, 1988, p. 46

[75] Monson, 1996, p. 104

[76] Murphy, 1990

[77] Floyd, 1991

[78] Berliner, 1994, p. 158

solos display strong rhythmic momentum, rhythmic elasticity, bounce, and vitality[79], which are all essential aesthetic qualities produced by a combination of the "rhythmic elements that make up improvised figures, the manner in which the figures are articulated, their placement within the piece's metric scheme, and their relationship to the surrounding figures of the other band members[80]". It is not unusual to see how, over the span of a single phrase, musicians are able to produce shifts of accentuation between up-beats two and four, challenging the metric structure and generating rhythmic tension, and successively beats one and three, reinforcing the metric structure and resolving the rhythmic tension. Or they may throw different accents on the contour of a recurring gesture through rhythmic displacement; that is, by performing the gesture at different metric positions. Or they may play inside the time, yet doubling up or tripling up on the tempo, improvising patterns precisely twice or three times as fast as the beat. In this case, one would find superimposed metric frames, which create a sort of polymetric activity. Sometimes a standard can be played with virtually no changes but those of tempo and phrasing. An example of this can be found in Miles Davis's practice of speeding up or slowing down standards' melodies, as he does in "Surrey with the Fringe on Top" or "Bye Bye Blackbird", for instance.

As for chords, the number of chord alterations, substitutions, and inversions, that improvisers can perform during their solos demands an exceptional mastering of harmony. In this sense, jazz standards and their iterability are crucial during the training and learning process of musicians. Even the smallest change, such as an altered ninth or seventh added to a chord, might open improvisation to a completely different melodic path. As Berliner stresses, soloist can stimulate their melodic ideas by envisioning various chord insertions as they perform, and by calling for an immediate answer from the accompaniment section[81]. On the contrary, sometimes musicians can simplify the harmonic structure of standards. An example can be found in Miles Davis's erasure of most of the harmonic structure of Joe Zawinul's "In a Silent Way".

Looking at melody, instead, Lee Konitz explains how, in the context of a tune's delivery, players "radically alter portions of the melody or replace its segments with new creations bearing little, if any, relationship to the melody's shape[82]". What occurs stems from the extensive range of possibilities coming from the scales used in jazz. As Berliner says, "from one drill to the next, musicians strive to 'exhaust all the possibilities' through the 'law of permutations', affecting the use of scales[83]".

The jazz standard "My Funny Valentine", composed by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart in 1937, provides an example of how the flexibility of jazz forms and the play of differences work. There are innumerable versions that have been performed over the years. However, it was Miles Davis that produced the most striking versions of the tune, in terms of signifyin(g) and transforming it. Robert Walser gives a detailed account of Davis's signifyin(g)

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[79] *Ibid*.

[80] *Ibid*.

[81] *Ibid*., p. 161

[82] qtd in Berliner, 1994, p. 777

[83] *Ibid*., p. 164

process[84]. He looks at Davis's 1964 performance of the tune with the pianist Herbie Hancock. Davis is constantly inventing new melodic lines, always surprising the audience by descending into lower registers when he was expected to ascend according to the melodic lines of the original compositions. He deliberately pauses, delays notes, changes chords, stretches musical phrases, change rhythmic patterns. The audience is caught in a constant tension caused by their expectations, which remain anchored to the repetition of the original elements, and the unpredictability of Davis's invention, that displaces, questions, challenges and innovates by adding and substituting.

Monson, instead, gives us a detailed analysis of John Coltrane's versions of the jazz standard "My Favourite Things", as another example of repetition with a "signal difference[85]". The tune was composed by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein in 1959, and was part of the musical *The Sound of Music*. Coltrane's version in 1960 signifies on the original by displacing the very structure of the original composition. While the original structure follows a AAAB structure, whose sections are sixteen bars' duration, Coltrane's version focuses mainly on the A sections, adding new chords and transforming their duration. The B section is only heard at the end of the performance. He adds new chords and performs a highly syncopated version of the melody that responds to the dynamism of the rhythmic section, which is far from the simple and squared waltz time of the original composition. As Monson says

In "My Favourite Things", the rhythmic section of Elvin Jones on drums, Steve Davis on bass, and McCoy Tyner on piano provides a multi-leveled musical context against which Coltrane's transformation of the melody, harmony, and rhythm of the tune interacts. There is no doubt that in terms of the improvisational aesthetic standards of jazz, the Coltrane version is a vast improvement upon the original[86].

Original compositions have been supplemented and substituted by new ones. Innovation within tradition and tradition within innovation. This might be acknowledged as the paradox of jazz standards. The *play* of all the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic possibilities inscribed within a text/composition defines the unpredictability of jazz improvisation. As saxophonist Steve Lacy says improvisation sits "on the edge – in between the known and the unknown[87].

Inevitably this discourse leads to questions that still are at the centre of cultural debates and that concern black identity and traditional belonging of jazz as language and expression of a minority. At the same time, the dynamics that constitute jazz and keep transforming it over the years mimic the openness of its core element, which is to say improvisation, to the unknown and otherness coming from a constant rereading of tradition. As Walton M Muyumba says "at the core of African American identity – blackness – is a need to change and shift while remaining wedded to the foundational tenets of African cultural expression[88]". Gesturing towards the future by iterating tradition. That remains the paradox of jazz improvisation.

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[84] Walser, 1995, pp. 173-175
[85] Monson, 1996, pp. 106-121
[86] *Ibid*., p. 115
[87] qtd in Bailey, 1992, p. 54
[88] Muyumba, 2009, p. 145

This defines also the authentic politics of deconstruction, which invites to a constant rereading of a unique and irreplaceable tradition that exerts an almost inescapable influence over us. As Michael Naas points out

Anytime Derrida begins analyzing the notions of reception or legacy within a particular text in the tradition, he ends up, because of the very *necessity* of taking on the tradition, performing and interrupting these gestures in his own reading so as to make possible the coming of "another gesture", one that is neither simply his nor the tradition's.[89]

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[89] Naas, 2003, p. xix

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