Edwards, Brent Hayes. 2017. *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Reviewed by Jacob Reed

It might seem strange to claim that a book like Brent Hayes Edwards's *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination* has been overlooked. A major book by an eminent critic (Edwards is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia and leading figure of the "New Jazz Studies"),[1] *Epistrophies* received favorable reviews in the *Los Angeles Review of Books, The Nation,* and *PopMatters,* as well as the Virgil Thomson Award from the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers. And yet, three years after its publication, the book has received no reviews in any academic journal of literature or music. Recognition by the latter may have been impeded by the relatively limited role "the music itself" has to play in Edwards's discussion. On the other side, more literature-oriented reviewers (including Christopher Spaide in the *Cambridge Quarterly* and Colin Vanderburg in *the Los Angeles Review of Books*) have already complained that Edwards close-reads seemingly "non-literary" texts like Mary Lou Williams's expense notebooks and Duke Ellington's annotations of the Bible pamphlet *Forward Day by Day.* The book seems to have fallen between the cracks.

Of course, "the cracks" are exactly where a book like *Epistrophies* lives. Which is not to say that there are many books like it, especially in transdisciplinary breadth: this is a book about "the infinitely fertile interface between music and literature in African diasporic culture," where "the key point is that the interface can be crossed in either direction" (18, 22). (If, however, "the cracks" recalls "the break" as explored by Fred Moten, this is not a coincidence: I will return to this comparison later [Moten 2003].) This is not another "jazz reading" of Ralph Ellison or Toni Morrison, and it is certainly not just a book "about" the writings of jazz musicians—although such writings (and indeed "musical," if not necessarily "jazz" readings of poetry) play a central role in the text.[2] The polyvalence of the title word itself exemplifies the kind of trans-medial routes Edwards's arguments can take. An epistrophe is a rhetorical figure, the repeated use of a word to end consecutive phrases, e.g. "of the people, by the people, for the people." This, of course, was the inspiration for the jazz standard (by Thelonious Monk and Kenny Clarke), but Edwards then goes several steps

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further, showing how the "epistrophe" concept continued to be transformed, first into dance (by Monk during performances of the song), and then back into the realm of text (in poetry by Amiri Baraka). Edwards is too unassuming to point out that his book, each chapter of which passes through an array of authors and media in a similarly winding trajectory, itself carries the chain forward another step.

As wide-ranging as this may seem, to focus on the complex back-and-forth between art forms would be to miss the full scope of Edwards's project. As it turns out, the interface between jazz and text is fertile ground for nothing less than one of the most wide-ranging assessments of the relationship between music and language published to date. In particular, *Epistrophies* makes major contributions on both about the role of language (lyrics) in music and the possibilities for language (poetry) as a kind of music itself.

The first chapter shows the breadth of Edwards's vision in full force. Here, we are treated to suggestive remarks on the semantic possibilities of scat singing, a discussion of the music Louis Armstrong heard in his own digestive system's production of "scat" (yes, feces), and an analysis of the oral/musical practices conveyed by Armstrong's idiosyncratic typesetting. But even this path through music, words, nonsense, embodied sound, and sonic materialities of writing only hints at the sweeping insight of his culminating remarks, which deserve to be quoted in full:

> Scat aesthetics distends an expressive medium through the proliferation of index. This is a structural effect, and thus one that can be applied as readily to a linguistic medium as to one like music, which signifies as an expressive potentiality, articulating a syntax where in Billie Holiday's phrase the "meaning seems to change." Scat works the "accompaniments of the utterance" in a given medium: in song, the vocal play that liquefies words; in performance, the excessive, oblique physicality of mugging; in writing, the overgrowth of punctuation, self-interruptions, asides, that exceed the purposes of emphasis, intonation, and citation. *Inarticulacy is telling because the proliferation of index points at—structurally suggests—an expressive syntax that is unavailable but inferred through its "accompaniments."* Scat aesthetics thus involves an augmentation of expressive potential, rather than an evacuation or a reduction of signification. Words drop away from music so that "the unheard sounds [come] through." The syntax of scat points at something outside the sayable, something seen where it collapses. (56, italics mine)

Nonsense words like scat syllables both cause us to seek out meaning and syntax and point to the futility of such a search—meanings words can only hint at, and which require the collaboration of word-like sounds and their musical frame. While evading traditional semantics, scat therefore adds dimensions of meaning

impossible in music alone (or even in wordless vocalise). And, although its aesthetic possibilities are not embraced directly by all jazz artists (Billie Holiday, although cited by Edwards above, eschewed it), scat can also serve as an artistic model. Thus formulated, Edwards's notion of "scat aesthetics" is a valuable tool for anyone seeking to understand the production of meaning by words in and with song—and for the study of Black performance in general.

If the first chapter shows how language and music can converge at the level of the word or sentence, the second, on James Weldon Johnson's prefaces, explores interactions between the two at the level of an entire poem or sermon. Edwards frames Johnson's central task in terms of the eternally vexed question of transcription: how to notate the swing of a spiritual, or the sounds of Black speech. After noting that Johnson uses musical analogies to signal his own literary borrowings from vernacular sources, Edwards then shows how these analogies come to center around swing itself: "*Vernacular musical form is transcribed through a figure of the black body*" (74, italics original). But the argument is then carried a step further: the body of the poem itself (i.e. its visual appearance) turns the "blues lyric" into a kind of musical score as well as a transcription of a vernacular form. The very line structure of a blues poem on the page conjures a set of musical conventions and a mode of performance, almost spontaneously transforming into a song even in the absence of explicit notations for pitch or rhythm. Here we have a novel and highly valuable framework for thinking about how texts themselves can be heard and seen as kinds of music or musical performance; it may be especially useful for those thinking about times (most of history) and places (most of the world) in which songs have been transmitted in writing, but without "musical" notation. While much work has been done to recover the melodic formulas and text-setting patterns that enable improvised musical performance of poetry, Edwards perhaps prompts us to reconsider whether such poems were not, in fact, already a kind of music.[3]

The next chapter broadens in terms of literary scope from the individual poem to a musical/literary narrative. Seeking to at least qualify the cliché that jazz musically "tells the story" of Black Americans better than any literary text, Edwards notes that possibly the most explicit attempts in all of jazz to tell that story, Duke Ellington's "narrative" suites, relied heavily on literary models, narrations, written programs, and other forms of textual apparatus. The chapter surveys how spoken texts were integrated into these musical narratives, but it spends more time discussing how Ellington created musical "parallels" with literary texts. While these could be as overt as the use of sonnet-like formal

structures (14 phrases of 10 notes each) in the Shakespearean suite *Such Sweet Thunder,* more interesting is the suggestion that in fact *all* of Ellington's suites might have been constructed to parallel texts that he was reading, writing, or imagining. Music and language again work in tandem, now in the mind of a composer and performer of instrumental music. This is a familiar enough idea to listeners of program music (or seekers of "hidden programs" in the correspondence and diaries of composers), but its application to Ellington is original and in the context of the book provides a useful converse to the "language-into-music" directionality of the first two chapters.

Chapters 4 and 5 take a step back from this conceptually-oriented analysis of language in music (language as music) to take a pass at the question: What happens when the writings of a musician become a crucial means by which to understand their music? Edwards's discussion of Sun Ra's pamphlets and poems brings to the fore another theme from the book's introduction: jazz and mythology. As the opening anecdote—about Buddy Bolden's supposed publication of the gossipy tabloid *The Cricket*—illustrates, the history of jazz itself is very often built on oral literature, a kind of mythology or fiction. (Here, Edwards is building on the insights of Ralph Ellison in pieces like "The Golden Age, Time Past" [Ellison 2003].) And the next chapter, with its readings of Mary Lou Williams's scribblings on her gas station receipts, highlights yet another secondary theme: jazz writing as a kind of archive, with Williams's historical practice of "zoning" (mapping out areas and delimiting boundaries) performing the archivist's work. (The myth about *The Cricket* portrays Bolden as the original jazz archivist, but, as Edwards points out, Louis Armstrong's massive personal collections and records probably qualify him more securely for that title.) Edwards sees "zoning" as a fundamental principle underlying Williams's work, citing recordings that outlined the history of jazz, and performances (like a 1977 concert with Cecil Taylor) that emphasized the contrasts between jazz styles even as they brought them together. But "zoning" is as much about what leaks through boundaries as the boundaries themselves: the "exclamatory" and "poignant" marginalia of Williams' receipts and expense notebooks—the intrusion of personal tragedies and triumphs into household economics—show the impossibility of full compartmentalization (176, 178).

These chapters begin a movement in *Epistrophies* from texts in and around jazz toward text *about* jazz. Thus, the sixth chapter, in taking Henry Threadgill as the starting point for an exploration of song titles, opens up the question of what it means to write about music more generally: what can we say about what a piece represents? Can we trust the programs given to us by the composers? Or

their casual remarks in an interview long after the fact? Perhaps not, as Edwards suggests:

> One might say that the function of Threadgill's song titles is to obliterate any pretense that one could ever speak strictly musically (or, conversely, the pretense that one could ever deliver a proposition in words that would *not* be accompanied, and waylaid, by their music). (196)

If it is impossible to speak "strictly musically" about music, then perhaps Edwards feels it is more productive or interesting to return to the musicality of seemingly non-musical texts, only this time moving beyond the individual lyrics and narratives of the first few chapters. In this context, Edwards draws inspiration especially from Louis Zukofsky: no fewer than four times, he quotes the dictum from "A Statement for Poetry" that "poetry may be defined as an order of words that as movement and tone (rhythm and pitch) approaches in varying degrees the wordless art of music as a kind of mathematical limit" (Zukofsky 1981, 19).

This brings us to the final move of *Epistrophies,* whose closing chapters center on jazz-inspired serial poetry by Nathaniel Mackey and Ed Roberson, with relatively little discussion of music. In the chapter on Mackey, the most detailed discussion of music comes in some brief remarks on how the graphic forms of the poetry can evoke a musical reprise; in the sections on Roberson, it is limited to a refutation of Joseph Conte's claim that "serial poetry" is linked to "serial music" (the former being a *Rashomon*-like genre in which a story emerges from the collective reading of several poems, and thus having nothing to do with the particular combinatorial logic of a musical row). Only at the end, in an account of Steve Reich's *Come Out,* do we return to music and musicians, albeit not exactly jazz. And notwithstanding this section's discussion of how the sounds of speech can approach the sound of song through repetition, we have moved far away from the tight links between word and music of the earlier chapters.

Edwards justifies this trajectory in the afterword, remarking that the book has ended up by reassessing the writing of "jazz criticism itself":

> If a major element of what I have been tracking throughout this book is experimentation in pseudomorphosis—new possibilities found by hearing across media—then jazz criticism would have to hear across media, as well, and find itself transformed in the process. (253)

It is fair to ask, then, how well Edwards has accomplished this goal. Certainly, his virtuosic prose, coupled with an ability to provide structure for winding, complex arguments, lends plenty of credence to the reviewers who have

compared his work to a sort of jazz performance. On the other hand, it is hard to see how the actual *argument* of these last chapters supports this comparison. Such a collaboration between prose style and argument is better exemplified by Fred Moten's *In the Break,* which overtly enacts the artistic forms that it analyzes, claiming precisely that *all* Black performance embodies exactly the kind of improvisation it both discusses and manifests.

Nevertheless, even if Edwards's book may fall short of some of the claims of its afterword, the goals of the introduction—the project the book sets for itself—are more than adequately achieved. *Epistrophies* not only makes a major contribution to the scholarship on the influence of jazz in American literature and culture at large (alongside works like Gabbard 1995, O'Meally 1998, Anderson 2001, and Yaffe 2006) and the growing body of work on jazz musicians as writers and thinkers (e.g. Porter 2002), but it intricately weaves together these two strands and many others, focusing above all on the back-and-forth between different types of media.[4] A rich examination of jazz and literature (and jazz as literature), *Epistrophies* is an essential read for those interested in either or both sides of that "infinitely fertile interface."

Notes

[1] Indeed, Edwards co-edited *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies* (O'Meally, Edwards, and Griffin 2004).

[2] This is not to discount the value of these "jazz readings," e.g. Grandt 2004.

[3] For reconstructions of such improvised music used in poetic performance, the Italian Renaissance has been an especially fertile area: see especially Haar 1981, Pirotta 1984, and chapter 4 of Feldman 1995. For a tradition more based in linking new words to pre-existing tunes, see the survey of surviving musical sources for Chinese *ci* 詞 lyrics in Pian 1967. Among performers, see especially the work of Benjamin Bagby and Sequentia, e.g. the recordings *Boethius: Songs of Consolation* (2018, GCD 9225188) and *Edda* (1999, DHM 05472773812).

[4] In this particular aspect of his work, perhaps Edwards's closest precedent is Alexander Weheliye's analysis of the dialogic interaction between recorded sound and other Black artistic production (Weheliye 2005).

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