Rituals of Creativity: Tradition, Modernity, and the “Acoustic Unconscious” in a U.S. Collegiate Jazz Music Program

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ABSTRACT In this article, I seek to complicate the distinction between imitation and creativity, which has played a dominant role in the modern imaginary and anthropological theory. I focus on a U.S. collegiate jazz music program, in which jazz educators use advanced sound technologies to reestablish immersive interaction with the sounds of past jazz masters against the backdrop of the disappearance of performance venues for jazz. I analyze a key pedagogical practice in the course of which students produce precise replications of the recorded improvisations of past jazz masters and then play them in synchrony with the recordings. Through such synchronous iconization, students inhabit and reenact the creativity epitomized by these recordings. I argue that such a practice, which I call a “ritual of creativity,” suggests a coconstitutive relationship between imitation and creativity, which has intensified under modernity because of the availability of new technologies of digital reproduction. [modernity, creativity, imitation, media technologies, intertextuality]

With the advent of modernity, the relationship between imitation and creativity has become increasingly laden with moral overtones because it reverberates with the question of the relationship between personal autonomy and tradition. It thus concerns core Enlightenment ideas such as freedom from tradition as directly linked to the progress of humankind. For instance, at one point in his Critique of the Power of Judgment, Emmanuel Kant argues that “the product of a genius (in respect of that in it which is to be ascribed to genius, not to possible learning or schooling) is an example, not for imitation (for then that which is genius in it and constitutes the spirit of the work would be lost), but for emulation by another genius, who is thereby awakened to the feeling of his own originality, to exercise freedom from coercion in his art” (Kant 2008:195–196). Thus, Kant understands the individual’s ability to exercise his or her creative faculties as a practice of freedom, a manifestation of enlightened agency, which imitation can only corrupt (see also Schiller 1982). This intellectual legacy has had a definitive impact on the ways in which modernity has been imagined. Creativity has come to index modernity whereas imitation has come to connote tradition (Agrama 2010; Hirschkind 2006:13–19; Mahmood 2001). At the end of the 18th century, the rise of Romantic ideas of radical interiority and individual creativity, which rejected imitation as a practice of inauthenticity, further institutionalized these binary oppositions in the modern imaginary (Taylor 1989; Trilling 1972).

These ideas have had a decisive impact on anthropological studies of cultural creativity. A number of foundational scholars located creativity—whether individual or cultural—on the margins of social reality: that is, away from society’s normative center. For example, Franz Boas, writing on the Native American art of the north Pacific Coast, argued that the emergence of pattern books signals the decadence of folk art (Boas 1955:157). Boas thus associated codified imitation with the demise of creative practice. Max Weber instituted a similar distinction between creative (charismatic) and rule-governed (instrumentally rational) social action, arguing at one point that “genuine charismatic education is the radical opposite of specialized professional training as it is espoused by bureaucracy” in that the latter retains hardly any of “the original irrational means of charismatic education” (Weber 1978:1144). Decades later, Victor Turner (1967) developed the notions of “communitas” and “liminality” to designate a state of “betwixt and between” in which society’s members have the capacity to step outside of and reflect on taken-for-granted social norms. Turner argued that this state, which he extended to leisure and other types of activities that are set apart from routine work, offers the individual a creative space invested in intense emotions and sensations. Similarly, in an edited volume dedicated
specifically to the anthropological study of creativity (Lavie et al. 1993:5), the editors begin by qualifying Turner’s view of creativity as located on the margins of social reality by arguing that creative practices are “integrated into the mundane arenas of everyday life.” However, they also add that “creativity (not unlike laughter) often erupts at unpredictable times and on unexpected occasions” (Lavie et al. 1993:5). They thus continue to relegate creativity to the realm of the unpredictable that is set apart from rule-governed or imitative behavior.

In this article, I take up the interrogation of the relationship between imitation and creativity and the conceptual challenge it poses to the opposition between tradition and modernity that has been at the center of modernization theories (Hirschkind 2001:624). I approach this question not from the side of “tradition”—an analytical strategy that, as Lara Deeb (2009:243) observes, has been privileged by most anthropologists who attempt to challenge these binary oppositions. Rather, I take this question from the side of a cultural context that has come to epitomize the ethos of Western modernistic creativity: namely, jazz music. Because of its improvisatory and emergent nature, a number of key figures in different branches of 20th-century artistic modernism such as abstract expressionism (e.g., Jackson Pollock), surrealism (e.g., Rene Magritte), and the new wave cinema (e.g., Jean-Luc Godard) as well as in the existential philosophical school (e.g., Jean-Paul Sartre) embraced jazz as a model of radical freedom and spontaneity (Belgrad 1998; Nettelbeck 2004:95–188). Although some of modernism’s borrowing from jazz was based in misunderstandings about the nature of improvisation (as if it were creation ex nihilo) and in various appropriations of blackness as a locus of authenticity (Gioia 1989), it suggests that jazz can serve as a potentially productive site at which to explore the relationship between imitation and creativity in the context of a purportedly modern creative practice.

More importantly, approaching this question from the side of “modernity” allows me to complicate the relationship between imitation and creativity by analyzing a modern creative practice that consists of a ritual performance not of past textual authority as well as to individual creativity in the present. I call this practice a “ritual of creativity” to capture this duality, which I argue complicates long-held institutionalized dichotomies between imitation and creativity, and tradition and modernity, as well as challenges the notion that creativity is a prototypical form of an inalienable possession. Although anthropologists have already established that the inalienability of the artwork depends on the artwork’s “intermittent forays into the commodity sphere, quickly followed by reentrances into the closed sphere of singular ‘art’” (Kopytoff 1986:83), as in art auctions that boost the singularity of an artwork by attaching to it an exorbitant price tag (Appadurai 1986:14; Myers 2002), my concern in this article is with the alienability of the creative faculty itself,

In doing so, I draw on fieldwork I conducted at a U.S. collegiate jazz music school, which I call “Commonwealth.” As I show, at the present moment jazz educators need to negotiate the challenge of maintaining cultural continuity against the background of significant social change. The disappearance of thriving extracurricular jazz scenes, the decline in commercial demand for jazz, and the concomitant institutionalization of jazz training in higher education are perceived to constitute a threat to long-held pedagogical and aesthetic sensibilities that are premised on the ideal of immersion in performance situations with experienced practitioners. In this context, teachers use advanced digital sound technologies to reestablish immersive interaction with the recorded music of past jazz masters. They instruct their students to produce precise replications of the recorded improvisations of past jazz masters and then play them in synchrony with the original recordings in the classroom. These digital sound technologies make it possible to slow down past legendary jazz masters’ recorded improvised solos with little distortion of pitch or timbre. They thus enhance students’ perceptual capacities vis-à-vis the recordings and reveal to them what I call the “acoustic unconscious,” following Walter Benjamin’s (1969a) notion of the “optical unconscious”: that is, students come to experience the acoustic reality beyond the limits of normal aural perception. Such enhancement allows students to probe deeper, as it were, into the masters’ solos and to gain a more thorough understanding of their nuances. It is by virtue of these features that students are able to produce more precise replications of the recorded improvisations of past jazz masters, which they can then play in synchrony with the original recordings in the classroom.

Crucially, through this practice, students fuse with the masters. This rule-governed practice blurs spatiotemporal boundaries and ritually bridges between students’ playing and the masters’ recorded playing, as well as between the present of the classroom and the values, social reality, and charismatic authority indexed by the recordings. This form of practice, which is made possible by music’s ability to “provide a powerful resource in attempting to suppress intertextual gaps” (Briggs and Bauman 1992:158; Eisenlohr 2010; Weidman 2003), thus mediates both an orientation to a past textual authority as well as to individual creativity in the present. I call this practice a “ritual of creativity” to capture this duality, which I argue complicates long-held institutionalized dichotomies between imitation and creativity, and tradition and modernity, as well as challenges the notion that creativity is a prototypical form of an inalienable possession.
not just its products. When a student inhabits a master’s improvisation, she inhabits the latter’s creative faculty as it unfolds in the spur of the moment, thus ritualistically replicating the creative act itself. It is precisely the duality of such a ritual of creativity—as a form of imitation of individual creativity that is experienced as such by the imitator—which accounts for the fact that some teachers do not consider it plagiarism when they require their students to play the masters’ solos in their final recitals without disclosing their provenance to the audience.

In the conclusion, I will argue that, as a result of the development of new technologies of digital reproduction, today more individuals than ever—both professionals and laypersons—perform rituals of creativity of various sorts. This development, in turn, requires us to rethink the idea that, under modernity, mimetically capacious technologies have replaced mimetically capacious individuals (Taussig 1993; Urban 2001)—an idea that is another version of the institutionalized distinction in anthropology between tradition and modernity, and imitation and creativity. Instead, I suggest that modernity’s production of mimetically capacious technologies has allowed more individuals to cultivate mimetic faculties that have hitherto been associated with “tradition” and that this development is part and parcel of “modernity” itself.

**THE ETHNOGRAPHIC SETTING**

Jazz was actively excluded from U.S. institutions of higher education throughout most of the 20th century because of its basis in African American communities and because of its presumed lack of artistic value (Ogren 1989). During this period, musicians learned to play jazz mostly through emulating at the sites where the music was performed (DeVeaux 1997), studying privately with classically trained music teachers (Chevann 2002), developing their own theoretical systems (Brubeck 2002; Prouty 2006), and listening to previously recorded music (Berliner 1994). The G.I. Bill, instituted after World War II to allow veterans to pursue degrees in higher education (McDaniel 1993), and the Civil Rights Movement, which increased the cultural legitimacy of black music (Lopes 2002), led more institutions of higher music education to integrate jazz into their curricula in one form or another.

At the same time, collegiate jazz education emerged as a reconfiguration of gradually disappearing extracurricular jazz scenes. Beginning in the late 1950s, and increasingly so in the following decades, jazz music has faced growing competition from other musical genres such as rhythm and blues, country, and especially rock music; this competition has led to a decline in jazz’s popularity (Laing 2002) even within urban African American communities that have traditionally been the source of innovation in jazz and the training ground for future musicians (Rosenthal 1992:170–173). Additionally, new jazz styles such as Bebop that were not geared toward dancing emerged; these were less accessible to the average audience. These changes in tastes and styles were accompanied by parallel changes in the actual spaces where jazz was performed. Because of increasing gentrification and the rising urban real estate costs of most jazz venues, these performance spaces became financially nonviable. Noise complaints began to be a pressing issue. Performance venues were scarcer, and those that survived maintained shorter playing hours (Chevigny 2005). Although in the past every major U.S. city had its own local jazz scene that consisted of a number of clubs and a dense network of musicians, these scenes were (and are) disappearing at an alarming rate. Against this backdrop, collegiate jazz programs have provided alternative sites of employment, performance, and socialization, offering professional training in the form of a rationalized curriculum that is implemented through newly devised teaching aids (Ake 2002; Lopes 2002:261). Since the 1980s, their number has expanded dramatically. It would be safe to say that jazz is performed today much more within the various modern organizational settings of jazz education than outside of them, at least in the United States (Chinen 2007).

Commonwealth School, established in 1945, is one of the oldest schools for jazz and contemporary music in the United States. It is a private four-year, degree-conferring college that is located in the Boston metropolitan area. With nearly 4,000 students enrolled annually—approximately 20 percent of whom are of non-U.S. nationalities—and nearly 500 faculty members, the school has trained over 30,000 musicians since its establishment. Almost all of its students who specialize in jazz, as well as its teachers are white and of middle- to upper-middle-class backgrounds. For most of its teachers, teaching is the main source of income. This is a result of the decline in the commercial demand for jazz (discussed later in this article). Many of these teachers are themselves Commonwealth’s graduates. The school has pioneered the introduction of sophisticated technology into its pedagogical strategy. Although the school initially focused mostly on jazz education, it has expanded its curriculum to include programs in film scoring, music education, music production and engineering, and music synthesis (computer programming for music production).

During my fieldwork at Commonwealth, I observed 24 different theoretical and performance-based classes—all jazz focused, taught by 18 different teachers and totaling nearly 500 hours. I have also attended concerts, clinics, and various workshops and master classes held at the school. The fact that I am an active jazz trumpet player has allowed me to form friendships with students that culminated in more than 100 hours of shared playing. In what follows, I do not argue that the pedagogies endorsed by Commonwealth are representative of the entire spectrum of pedagogies practiced in U.S. collegiate jazz education. Rather, my purpose is to highlight one specific pedagogical strategy as a way of teasing out a number of theoretical implications for the relationship between imitation and creativity and tradition and modernity.
“TODAY THERE’S NOT THE CHANCE TO PLAY”: ABSTRACTION

At its core, jazz is improvised music. It is a form of composition in the spur of the moment that weaves together preexisting building blocks in accordance with given harmonic progressions and the real-time contributions of other band members (Monson 1996). Hence, training in live performance situations with seasoned musicians has always been a normative ideal of jazz socialization (Berliner 1994). At the time of my fieldwork, however, many of the jazz educators I worked with argued that the disappearance of extracurricular performance venues threatened these long-held pedagogical sensibilities that emphasize immersion in live performance situations with experienced musicians. Pointing to the scarcity of extracurricular performance contexts, they also added that this phenomenon had been a defining feature of their own musical upbringing. One Commonwealth teacher, a musician in his late thirties who received his music training in a collegiate jazz program, expressed this point in the following manner:

The times were different. They [the jazz masters] were playing all the time. You know, from a young age they were sessioning every day, playing day and night. . . All they were doing was playing music. They got up playing music. They went to bed playing music. Today there’s not the chance to play. I mean those guys used to play five nights a week, three to five sets a day, you know. I have never done that as a player, personally. . . . When you’re a student you can do sessions and stuff, but you don’t have the mentoring that you had back then, when like Bird [saxophonist Charlie Parker] would take Miles [trumpeter Miles Davis] under his wing and literally hang with him and teach him, not just necessarily teaching him like I’m teaching students, but just by playing. [personal communication, April 6, 2007]

When some of the older teachers recalled to their students the vibrant jazz scenes of their youth and contrasted them with the difficulties faced by jazz musicians today, they frequently referenced the ample opportunities to gain firsthand performance experience that were available to them, as opposed to those that are offered to today’s students. For example, when a student’s cell phone rang in the middle of class, the teacher, a man in his early sixties, immediately asked, “Is it a gig?” and everyone burst into laughter. He then told us about his own experience as a college student in the 1960s:

I was busy working when I went to college. It was unbelievable, six nights a week, for ten years. Before college, during college, after college. And you could get a gig during the day. But you’ll find a way. I mean, you’re smart. You just need to find people that will give you money to do this [laugh]. Really, you have to make your own venues now. You got to make your own—do concerts, and you do this club, talk to this club owner. There are not so many gigs like they used to be. . . . I guess that’s why everyone is going to New York. There used to be a scene like that in every city. . . . I remember Detroit, once, where there were four bands playing in the same hotel. Count Basie’s band, Buddy Rich’s band, Duke Ellington’s band, and Glen Miller’s band, or someone else. [field notes, October 22, 2006] Students often reacted with amazement on hearing about the historically vibrant jazz scenes that existed in different U.S. cities. Their amazement was further compounded because the city where the school is located has only a few jazz clubs that are eclectic in their programming decisions. They too had to face the lack of gigs when they tried to find performance venues in the city in which they could play. Indeed, during my stay at Commonwealth, two students continuously joked that I, as a researcher, was the only one around who had managed to secure a stable “gig” from jazz.

I suggest that many students and teachers at Commonwealth share strong nostalgia for the jazz masters and the vibrant jazz scenes of the past that allowed close mentoring with these seasoned musicians and immersion in their music. This nostalgia is mostly for the years between the early 1940s and the late 1960s, a period that represents not only the popularity of jazz, as evidenced in its past ubiquity on the airwaves and the prevalence of performance venues for jazz, but also the production of some of its prototypical masterpieces by a number of jazz masters who are considered to be the exemplary practitioners of the music. For example, during a class at Commonwealth, a teacher in his mid-fifties addressed his students after playing saxophonist John Coltrane’s solo on the tune “Impressions” from the record Live in Stockholm 1961:

Imagine being on stage with someone like Coltrane, screaming like that. These guys, the band, were playing every other night, two week tours, ten cities, ten big concerts, and at night you’re standing on the stage and this cat is right there playing in that just unbelievable way that no one would play like that at that time, and there still hasn’t been anyone playing like that that really got there [like Coltrane]. . . . Can you imagine being in the presence of that? I’m not talking about the audience here, but I’m talking about the band, being on the stage, being Miles Davis, that kind of presence, being next to that, and experiencing that. That can change your life, it really can. Even being in the audience and hearing it live can change your life. [field notes, November 17, 2006]

The teacher describes both Coltrane’s musical superiority and the existence of a past jazz scene in which musicians could play almost every night with experienced jazz musicians. Teachers and students at Commonwealth look up to jazz masters not just because they presumably epitomize the laws of improvisation in their very playing. Rather, these masters also index an era that no longer exists, the creative apex of the music, the “passing of an age,” as the academic director of another jazz school put it, expressing an awareness that “it’s never quite going to be the same—those conditions of, particularly the shaping of this community and its social interaction, are not going to be replicated” (personal communication, September 4, 2007).

Against this backdrop, jazz educators use advanced media technologies that allow students to immerse themselves in the legendary masters’ recorded sounds. By means of rule-governed appropriation of such technologies, students manage not only to “be on stage” with a past jazz master such as Coltrane but also to fuse with him, as it were, if only for
brief moments, and thus to partake in his and other past jazz masters’ charismatic authority and individual creativity. The conditions of possibility for doing so lie in the medium of sound and the availability of these new technologies of sound mediation.

“DID YOU HEAR THAT? IT’S REALLY—”:
ENTERING THE ACOUSTIC UNCONSCIOUS

I was sitting among eight students in a course entitled “Jazz Transcription,” in which students learn how to transcribe jazz masters’ recorded solos as well as memorize the solos and perform them in class. The teacher, a man in his early forties, had just explained that each of the students would be choosing a past jazz master’s recorded improvisation to work on during the semester. He approached his laptop, which was connected to speakers, to play one master’s recorded solo. Before pressing play, he explained:

I am very into technology. I am very technology comfortable. One program that I use, which you probably already have on your computer, is The Amazing Slow Downer. Did you hear about it? [Some students nod in approval]. The Amazing Slow Downer [saying it slowly]. It’s amazing! Really, it is. We are going to play—first we will play [the recording] and then I will tell you why it’s amazing, o.k.? [field notes, September 11, 2006]

The teacher then played the recording of Miles Davis’s solo on the tune “Walkin’” from the 1954 album of the same name. He immediately began to sing the solo together with the recording. After a few measures, he stopped the recording and began to sing the solo again, this time without the recording. He then said:

Every note! Not like [singing a phrase from Davis’s solo inaccurately, rhythmically speaking; students laugh]. Right? Exactly what’s there. So that’s where I want you to spend your time. That’s the point, alright? To really nail every nuance of what’s going on. And The Amazing Slow Downer is so amazing! It’s certainly an option for that—look at this! [The teacher plays Davis’s recorded solo again with his laptop. The moment the solo begins, he slows it down from about 60 to 20 beats per minute. When Davis plays what in normal speed would be an almost unnoticeable embellishment, the teacher stops the slowed down recording and says:] Did you hear that? It’s really—[The teacher sings the embellishment]. The Amazing Slow Downer is amazing! It’s one thing you can do. The other thing you can do is—let’s say you’re practicing—[The teacher takes this specific embellishment and loops it so it repeats itself time and again. In the process, he alters its tempo, first speeding it up to 120 beats per minute and then slowing it down again to 20 beats per minute.] [The students laugh. One student exclaims:] Nice! [Teacher:] I have no problem with using the technology to slow it down. Why? Because it’s more important that you’ll hear it right!

To make sense of this vignette, I suggest that it would be productive to draw from one of the many lines of inquiry given impetus by the vast work of Walter Benjamin: that is, his exploration of the impact of modern media technologies on perception. Within this specific line of interrogation, the notion of the “optical unconscious” has been especially significant. In his “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproduction” (1969a), Benjamin argued that modern media technologies have empowered the subject by providing her with the critical distance needed to recognize the forces that impact her life, much in the same way that psychoanalysis has increased our awareness of how the unconscious structures everyday behavior. Benjamin focused on the technologies of film and photography. He took note of a number of film technology’s specific features that he believed contribute to its revolutionary potential such as “slow motion” and “closeup.” By enhancing the subject’s perceptual capacities, these features extend “our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives” (Benjamin 1969a:236). Although Benjamin acknowledged film’s revolutionary potential also in the realm of “acoustical” perception (Benjamin 1969a:236), he explored this potential exclusively in the realm of the visual. I argue that to account for students’ and teachers’ use of The Amazing Slow Downer, we need to develop the notion of the acoustic unconscious—that is, the dynamics of acoustic perceptual enhancement by means of advanced technology.

The Amazing Slow Downer’s features parallel in significant ways those features of film that Benjamin emphasized in his discussion. It is a software program that enables one to slow down or speed up digitized music with little distortion of pitch or timbre. To be sure, jazz musicians have always incorporated jazz masters’ recorded solos into their playing by meticulously manipulating them ever since the first commercial jazz recordings were made publicly available. Yet a description of musicians’ use of previous technologies of sound mediation reveals their limitations in comparison to The Amazing Slow Downer:

Early record players had controls enabling listeners to slow a record’s speed by gradations until they could catch a particularly fast passage, albeit at a lower pitch, transposing the retarded phrase into its original pitch immediately thereafter. Those lacking such equipment slowed the turntable by applying slight finger pressure to the record. Tape recorders with half-speed controls, which drop the pitch a complete octave, are an additional help, as are recent compact disc players, which allow for the repeated play of isolated passages. [Berliner 1994:96]

This description suggests that players already had to possess well-developed skills of transposition and pitch recognition as well as a deep familiarity with the idiom of jazz to benefit from such previously available technologies. In contrast, The Amazing Slow Downer and similar digital technologies democratize the access to these solos in that they allow players with lower skills to penetrate even deeper into the mechanics of the masters’ solos. In the past, musicians had to perform numerous times the masters’ solos, which they learned by means of such previously available technologies, to arrive, through increased familiarity with them, at an illusory transformation [in which] the solo seems to ensue more slowly, presenting, paradoxically, ever finer yet enlarged details . . . each pitch reveals its individual character, its own articulation, inflection, timbre, dynamics, and rhythmic feeling” (Berliner 1994:97). By contrast, today’s students begin from such a perceptual transformation with
the help of the Amazing Slow Downer and proceed from there into acquiring familiarity with even finer details of the solo’s acoustic features. Thus, the teacher’s question to his students “Did you hear that? It’s really—” the focus of which was a specific embellishment, was about an acoustic reality that was suddenly revealed by means of slowing down Miles Davis’s solo. Such an embellishment, which would usually go unnoticed when the solo is played in normal tempo, is a slip of the “improvising” tongue, as it were. And thanks to The Amazing Slow Downer, it can be the focus of analysis in the classroom.

A software program like The Amazing Slow Downer, then, increases exponentially the spectrum of nuances that are now available for educators and students to analyze. But in addition to these gains, it allows them to produce more precise replications of the masters’ recorded solos. Although anthropologists have noted the relationship between technologically enabled perceptual enhancement and the resurgence of the mimetic faculty under modernity (Downey 2006; Mauss 1973:17; Taussig 1993), the repercussions of the multiple possibilities such enhancement opens up for modern individuals to replicate emblematic texts of individual creativity have been undertheorized. Because the medium of replication in jazz is sound that allows synchronized iconization of the masters’ recordings, and because the subject of imitation is individual creativity, such a form of replication becomes a “ritual of creativity” in which, paradoxically, students inhabit and reenact another person’s individual creativity.

“YOU’RE LIKE BECOMING HIM”: RITUALLY INHABITING THE MASTERS’ CREATIVITY

I was sitting in a class at Commonwealth entitled “Harmonic Considerations 2.” That specific week, the students had to transcribe any of pianist McCoy Tyner’s solos of their choice and play it in synchrony with the original recording. Tyner’s style is characterized by the ample use of pentatonic and tetratonic scales and out-of-scale playing, often at neck-breaking tempos. These features render his solos difficult to transcribe and play in real time, especially if one plays them on an instrument that is not the piano. One after another, the students stood up and approached the teacher, handed him an iPod or a CD with the specific recording that they had chosen, and, after preparing themselves for playing and indicating to the teacher that they were ready for him to play the recording, waited for Tyner’s solos to begin. Once a Tyner solo began, each joined in, playing the same solo on his or her respective instruments in synchrony with Tyner. Such synchrony depended on the student’s levels of proficiency. At times, one could barely hear Tyner’s playing because a student had managed to perfectly laminate his or her own playing on top of Tyner’s. However, during particularly difficult passages, one could hear Tyner’s playing reemerging. The rest of the students remained in the seats, listening carefully. Frequently, when a student gave a particularly accurate performance of one of Tyner’s solos, as was the case when a violin player gave an impressive rendition of Tyner’s complicated solo on the tune “Passion Dance” from his 1967 album The Real McCoy, the students would burst into loud applause, clapping their hands and exclaiming “yeah!,” “alright,” “wow,” and “note-for-note!” (field notes, September 22, 2006).

Of the 24 classes that I observed at Commonwealth, 12 classes involved some form of this practice, in which students would learn a jazz master’s recorded solo and play it in class in synchrony with the original recording. It is thus a central pedagogical practice that deserves careful analysis. Jazz educators often explain to students that learning and playing the masters’ recorded solos in synchrony with them can help them incorporate into their playing prototypical stylistic features of jazz improvisation that the masters epitomize in their solos and that cannot be learned in class in an abstract fashion. However, teachers also emphasize the emotional experience this practice generates. My argument is that a technology like the Amazing Slow Downer allows students to produce more precise replications of the masters’ recorded solos. Consequently, when they play these replications in synchrony with the original recording, they engage in what I call a “ritual of creativity”—a practice that bridges between the present of the classroom and the past individual creativity epitomized by the recording. It is a form of a ritualized orientation to a past text of individual creativity that is experienced by those who orient themselves to it as their own, if only for brief moments.

For example, consider the way a Commonwealth teacher, a man in his mid-forties, described to his students during class the desired experience of playing on top of the masters’ original recorded solos:

It should sound like you’re double tracking the player. As a matter of fact, the experience that the class should have when they hear you playing should be you performing with the [recorded] rhythm section because you’re so tight with the soloist that he just melts away and it’s just you. That’s how it should be. And that happens, too. It’s kind of actually mystical when you’re doing it, too. You’re like performing and it’s like you’re doing exactly what he was doing and then you’re like “gee, what was that person thinking when he was doing this thing?” You’re like becoming him. [field notes, September 22, 2006]

Note that the teacher does not describe a state in which the player in the present “loses” himself, as it were, in the past recording. It is the master who “melts away” and then “it’s just you.” In other words, playing in synchrony with and on top of the master’s recording enhances the student’s sense of individual creativity in the present. The student ritually inhabits the master’s creativity to experience and to reenact it as his or her own creativity. In this process, the master’s presence is felt the most in its perceived acoustic absence: that is, when the student perfectly laminates his playing on top of that of the master’s. Such a fusion of student and master is a “mystical” experience. Another teacher described this experience of inhabiting and reenacting the master’s creativity by saying that in such moments of fusion with the master “you
can kind of imagine what that performer experienced at the time he was playing... the feeling that they might have had at that moment” (personal communication, November 16, 2006).

The powerful sensation of inhabiting the master’s creativity that students experience during these “rituals of creativity” emerges for a number of reasons. To begin, the source texts that students replicate are emblematic texts of individual creativity. They are improvisations created in the spur of the moment by legendary musicians. These improvisations have entered jazz’s canon. Any improvisation on the tune “Passion Dance,” for example, is indexically connected for those who are knowledgeable members of the jazz community to Tyner’s famous 1967 original improvisation on this tune. Hence, students do not produce tokens of just any semiotic type such as the English word “the.”7 In their case, the source texts are imbued with charismatic energy and carry the meaning of individual creativity that expresses itself in the spur of the moment.

Furthermore, when students and teachers engage in what I call “rituals of creativity,” they neither make their own playing and past masters’ playing commensurate by abstracting two qualitatively different entities into a quantitative common denominator (Espeland and Stevens 1998), nor do they translate from one arbitrarily and nonmotivated cultural code into another (Benjamin 1969b). Nor, for that matter, do they engage in dubbing, a practice in which “the moment of fusion is always deferred” (Boellstorff 2003:238). Rather, they engage in the synchronous iconization of a Picasso painting (Peirce 1998:272; Eisenlohr 2010:328–329): that is, sound. The source text of individual creativity that students replicate is available in the form of recorded sound, a fact that allows students to produce target texts that iconize the source text in synchrony with it and thus to experience a kind of fusion with the master, as it were, in those moments when the two texts are perfectly laminated on top of one another. These moments are indexed by the “disappearance” of the master’s recorded solo “in” the student’s playing. It is a ritual practice that is based on the production of a very precise “diagrammatic” or “figurational equivalence” (Silverstein 2004:626) between the two spatiotemporal planes of the classroom and the original “mythical” event in which the improvisation was created and recorded. This practice has profound experiential results for students who feel that in those moments they become the master, as it were, inhabiting the very moment in time in which the solo was created.8 It is for this reason that the teacher quoted above says that “you can kind of imagine what that performer experienced at the time he was playing... the feeling that they might have had at that moment”—because in those moments students and teachers feel they inhabit the creative decisions made by the master.7 To be sure, in such a practice, “the seams show,” too (Boellstorff 2003:236): that is, students do not always manage to iconize the masters’ solos in perfect synchrony with their recordings. Yet, from time to time, they do manage to do so, and this has profound experiential effects. The teacher I quoted above describes nicely what scholars of intertextuality have noticed in many contexts: namely, music’s “capacity for closely regulating pitch, timbre, tempo, volume, and other features” and thus its ability to “provide a powerful resource in attempting to suppress intertextual gaps” (Briggs and Bauman 1992:158; Eisenlohr 2010).

Note the peculiarity of music: the source text consists of sound that unfolds in time. This accounts for the fact that the recorded solo of a Charlie Parker allows its synchronous iconization in a way that a Picasso painting does not. One can replicate the Guernica, and one can even laminate the replication on top of the original, but one would not experience the real-time dimension of painting the Guernica in synchrony with Picasso’s act of painting the Guernica. Thus, the peculiarity of the practice I am concerned with here derives from the fact that it concerns not only the replication of the products of creativity but also the ritual inhabitance of the very act of creativity as it unfolds in time.

To sum, scholars of intertextuality have documented a correlation between the suppression of intertextual gaps and “highly conservative, traditionalizing modes of creating textual authority,” and between maximizing intertextual gaps and “building authority through claims of individual creativity and innovation (such as are common in 20th-century Western literature)” (Briggs and Bauman 1992:149; Handman 2010). In contrast, in the practice I discuss here, a radical form of minimizing intertextual gaps (i.e., imitation) enhances and complements the experience of individual creativity.

MODERN DISCOMFORT

I was standing next to Henry, a man in his fifties, the instructor of an ensemble class I attended throughout the semester. The students in this class were of medium-level proficiency. It was the day of the ensemble’s final recital, which was taking place at one of Commonwealth’s concert halls. Following the teacher’s instructions, each of the students prepared a solo of a different well-known jazz master. On this day, they were to play these solos on stage with the ensemble’s rhythm section without informing the audience about the solos’ provenance. After each student finished playing a master’s solo, he or she seamlessly continued with his or her own improvisation. The audience did not notice the transition. When the piano player played the late pianist Michel Petrucciani’s solo on the tune “Autumn Leaves,” Henry turned to me and said with excitement, “they [the audience] don’t know it’s a Petrucciani solo!” Moreover, when the student played an impressive passage in Petrucciani’s solo, the teacher joined members of the audience in applauding the pianist.

At the time, I was deeply puzzled. After all, if Henry’s purpose was merely for the students to learn the stylistic features of good improvisation, he did not have to require them to play the solos in public without disclosing the improvisations’ “real” authors. What was the rationale behind
this requirement, which, on the surface, undermines individual creativity and connotes the specter of plagiarism and the charge that jazz is a site of false individuality? In a conversation I had with him a few days after the concert, Henry explained his decision in the following manner:

For them to be able to do that in a kind of a concert situation, performance situation, not a classroom test situation, makes it that much more challenging. If they do it, they’re gonna feel, internalize it more strongly. … If one of them has never played a really good solo before on their own, and if they’ve never played before maybe even before . . . an audience, then all of a sudden to play a solo which got good phrasing, good lines, good time feel, all that stuff, and they play kind of true to the way it was recorded— they have accomplished something. They internalized good lines and good feeling in the moment when it is supposed to happen, you know, with a rhythm section. [personal communication, December 4, 2006]

Henry’s goal was to make his students experience as faithfully as possible the act of improvising a great solo in a real performance situation. Not disclosing the original authors of these improvisations was a means to this end, a way of precipitating this specific ritual transformation in which the student inhabits the master’s individual creativity so he can become an improviser in his own right. Furthermore, as Henry makes it clear, performing the masters’ solo with a live rhythm section whose members react in real time to the student’s reenactment of this solo further contributes to the student’s sensation of inhabiting the original moment of the solo’s creation. When Henry exclaimed to me that “they [the audience] don’t know it’s a Petrucciani solo,” his excitement was not about the success of an act of “deception.” Rather, he admired the degree to which the student inhabited the master’s solo and made it his own.

I take my initial discomfort provoked by Henry’s pedagogical strategy as an opportunity to examine some key modern assumptions about the relationship between imitation and creativity. Let me begin by turning to anthropological accounts of the reenactment of myths by “traditional” people. Consider the following description of a myth recitation by a Brazilian Indian:

Nil of the macuco . . . tells the origin myth. While doing so, he appears to grow distant, perhaps slipping into trance, yet not fully. He is here, but also elsewhere. Where? Inside the myth! Transposed back—in search of lost time—to some earlier world? Has he reinfused that world, grasped its generative core, produced the words as if they were his own creation? . . . Is it possible for him to produce—not copy—those old words, inhabiting them so thoroughly that the abstract culture (the spirit of the time) carried along with them passes through him and recreates them? He is not simply copying the words in a rote way, but rather extracting from them some secret they contain, their life and vitality, which he, in turn, employs to produce them, in an act of creation. [Urban 2001:91]

Anthropologists have recognized that performers of past “traditional” texts can inhabit these texts and experience them as the products of their own creation. What is it that makes it difficult for us to acknowledge that something similar can take place in the case of the recitation of emblematic texts of modern creativity? Why does it seem to us improbable that people can inhabit emblematic texts of modern individual creativity so thoroughly so as to produce—not copy—they “in an act of creation”? Should we not be even more pressed to acknowledge this possibility in light of the fact that jazz students have at their disposal technologies of sound mediation that precipitate the production of figurational equivalence between the original moment of the master’s improvisation and their own replication?

The answer, to a large extent, lies in the fact that we perceive individual creativity as a prototypical form of an inalienable possession (Weiner 1992). This meaning of creativity has its origins in the rise of possessive individualism as a modern normative ideal and the centrality of property rights as a defining feature of the modern autonomous individual (Leach 2007). This genealogy found expression, for example, in efforts made by bourgeois writers in the turn of the 18th century to secure the economic benefits that can be accrued from defining individual creativity as inalienable (Woodmansee 1996). Similarly, tropes of possessive individualism pervaded early Romantic notions of organic creativity. Thus, in an essay that had a tremendous impact on Romanticism, entitled “Conjectures on Original Composition,” Edward Young expressed his disdain for learning by arguing that “learning is borrowed knowledge; genius is knowledge innate, and quite our own” (Young 1759:36). For Young, creativity cannot be based on any form of debt (although, in the broader context of Romanticism, the external materiality of semiotic forms could be recruited to bring into fruition the potentiality of creative genius [Wilf 2011]).

The intricate connection between creativity and notions of inalienability that has structured modern capitalism continues to find expression at the present historical moment of new forms of virtual sociality (Boellstorff 2008:205–236). The presumed inalienability of the creative faculty, then, has a historically specific genealogy. Acknowledging this genealogy would require us to rethink Henry’s pedagogical strategy as something other than an intended act of deception.

Furthermore, in assessing students’ acts of replication, we need to take into account recent anthropological studies that have emphasized the creativity that imitation necessitates to be successful. For example, Hussein Ali Agrama (2010) has addressed the relationship between creativity, imitation, and temporality in his discussion of a possible anthropology of the fatwa. Agrama has called into question a number of assumptions about tradition, temporality, and creativity that underlie liberal philosophy’s critique of the fatwa and similar forms of authority rooted in tradition. He asks, “Might it not take great creativity just to do good imitation, as in the case of the comedian who mimics a president or famous political figure, or an actor, for whom it may take creative skill just to follow a script well, to surrender himself to it?” (Agrama 2010:8). Anthropologists who have
studied the phenomenology of imitation have answered in the affirmative:

Copying or imitation, we argue, is not the simple, mechanical process of replication that it is often taken to be, of running off duplicates from a template, but entails a complex and ongoing alignment of observation of the model with action in the world. In this alignment lies the work of improvisation. The formal resemblance between the copy and the model is an outcome of this process, not given in advance: It is a horizon of attainment. [Ingold and Hallam 2007:5]

Similarly, I argue that the task of producing a synchronous iconization of a master’s solo while its recording plays in the background is a deeply creative act. Students need to realign their playing with the recording time and again, make decisions in the spur of the moment about when to decelerate or accelerate their playing or, at times, stop playing altogether so as to “catch up” with the recording. In addition to matching pitch and rhythm, such synchronous iconization requires students to inhabit the timbre, volume, and indeed “feel” of the masters’ playing.

Once we overcome our initial modern discomfort, it also becomes easier to note the continuity with many creative practices, jazz included, that structures Henry’s pedagogical instructions. Replication, repetition, and quotation have been part of the cultural logic of jazz music from its very beginning. The aesthetic sensibilities expressed in repetitive and imitative musical structures such as riffs and call-and-response (Monson 1994; Smead 1981), as well as in the ironic replication of and thus commentary on previous musical structures and other players’ solos (Gates 1988; Monson 1999), have always informed notions of creativity in jazz. Although jazz musicians have tended to be ambivalent toward the replication of someone else’s entire solo in a live performance (although at times they have engaged in this practice [Berliner 1994:99]), they have never objected to “musicians borrowing discrete patterns or phrase fragments from other improvisers; . . . indeed, it is expected” (Berliner 1994:101) as a pedagogical strategy. Musicians have gone to great lengths to achieve this. Such discrete patterns, which improvisers weave together to form their solos, can be a few measures long. In that sense, improvisation involves imitation insofar as it is a recombination of previously available building blocks created by other improvisers (Nettl 1998; Solis and Nettl 2009). When a student replicates in public a past master’s solo and weaves it with his or her own contribution, he or she engages in a practice that is not that different from what jazz players have always practiced, albeit on a slightly different scale. All these are added reasons for which Henry and his students did not consider their performance as plagiarism. Beyond jazz, dialogism and various forms of borrowing have been the mode of operation of numerous domains of modern creativity (Boon 2010; Wilf 2011).

Jazz educators also adhere to modern ideas of individual creativity that emphasize uniqueness. Indeed, they often warn their students against the peril of both permanently sounding like someone else and displaying little internal stylistic variety in their solos (Wilf 2010). However, they also acknowledge and practice the possibility of inhabiting, experiencing, and reenacting another person’s individual creativity. They do so not only as homage to a revered ideal (cf. Vann 2006) but also as a pedagogy that has become increasingly essential against the backdrop of the changing social reality of jazz music and increasingly possible because of the availability of new technologies of sound reproduction.

CONCLUSION

The ethnographic material presented in this article suggests that jazz students ritually orient themselves to past texts of individual creativity and thereby inhabit this creativity. I have called this practice a “ritual of creativity” and described its various conditions of possibility. I have argued that this form of practice demonstrates the alienability of the creative faculty and the coconstitution of imitation and creativity. In doing so, I have tried to contribute to recent anthropological studies that have complicated institutionalized dichotomies between imitation and creativity as well as tradition and modernity.

Inasmuch as the availability of new sound technologies is crucial to the ritual of creativity I describe in this article, my discussion holds important lessons for the anthropology of modernity that is concerned with the relationship between technology and imitation under modernity. One key argument in this line of thought has been that, under modernity, mimetically capacious technologies have replaced mimetically capacious individuals. For example, one recurring trope in Michael Taussig’s fascinating thesis about the role of the mimetic faculty in the modern imaginary is the event of contact between the nonmoderns and the moderns. In such events, “the mimetically capacious person . . . meets the mimetic crippled blessed with the mimetically capacious machine (the movie camera)” (Taussig 1993:243), the two corresponding to the nonmodern and modern, respectively. Although Taussig argues that these technologies have resulted in the resurgence of the mimetic faculty under modernity, his notion of mimesis under modernity is more abstract (e.g., “corporeal understanding” that individuals acquire through exposure to visual advertisement [Taussig 1993:30]) when compared with his descriptions of the nonmodern individuals’ mimetic skills. More recently, Greg Urban (2001) has expanded our understanding of the relationship between various configurations of metaculture and the ways in which culture moves through the world. Key to Urban’s thesis is the suggestion that the metaculture of modernity is inherently tied to the uncoupling of dissemination from “primary replication,” which is made possible because of (although is not determined by) the development of mechanical reproduction. Under modernity, individuals do not have to replicate the cultural objects they desire to “own” because such objects are disseminated via mechanical reproduction rather than primary replication. Modern individuals, then, engage in “secondary replication,” a process in
which they extract bits and pieces from cultural objects. For both Taussig and Urban, then, modernity is associated with a certain decline or shift in individuals’ mimetic faculty and its replacement with mimetically capacious technologies.

I argue that these perspectives need to be qualified by the suggestion that the availability of new media technologies has allowed more individuals to cultivate their mimetic faculties and replication skills and that, indeed, today more individuals engage in such practices. Although jazz students might be considered an example of “those pockets of the population wherein the replication of disseminable items takes place” (Urban 2001:74), the immense popularity of interactive video games such as Guitar Hero, in which participants perform popular songs on an interactive guitar in synchrony with the original songs (Miller 2009), suggests that thorough replication is far from being restricted to a few pockets of the population under modernity. To account for the rapidly changing forms of sociality propelled by such new technologies, we need to develop adequate conceptual machinery.

I do not want to suggest that such practices always work in the same way for all individuals. Thus, in one course at another jazz school in which I conducted fieldwork, the teacher, an octogenarian African American piano player with the most impressive performance history among the teachers with whom I have had the chance to work, played for his students one of his own recordings made some 45 years ago, in which he performs with a number of well-known jazz masters. While the recording was playing, he suddenly approached the piano and hesitantly attempted to replicate his recorded solo in synchrony with the recording. Perhaps for this musician, inhabiting and replicating his own past individual creativity in synchrony with his recording created a bifurcation between creativity and imitation. Perhaps, rather than ritually bridging between the past and the present, his playing only accentuated for him the schism between the present of the classroom and the vibrant performance jazz scenes in which he had participated as a young man and indeed helped form. Perhaps it only invoked for him the disappearance of these scenes as loci of creativity, disappearance that has motivated jazz teachers to search for advanced sound technologies that will allow students to experience immersive interaction with these scenes’ echoes. It was uncanny to witness this incident because, at that moment, the teacher entered his own acoustic unconscious, as it were. This and similar phenomena suggest that the relationship between creativity and imitation, and modernity and tradition, as well as the role of new technologies of digital reproduction therein beg further anthropological research.

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NOTES

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1. This is a pseudonym. My larger ethnographic project was conducted in two U.S. collegiate jazz programs, Commonwealth and Midtown (also a pseudonym), and the jazz scene of New York City from July of 2006 to June of 2008.
2. The academization of jazz training has also contributed to changes in the ethnic and socioeconomic composition of jazz players. Jazz programs have trained increasing numbers of white, middle-class players and thus changed a jazz scene that was once predominated by and whose role models were predominantly black players of working-class background (Lopes 2002).
4. See Jeffri 2003 on the financial difficulties of contemporary jazz musicians, which render teaching as their primary source of income.
5. When a phone call was mentioned in a group, teachers and students would often jokingly invoke the trope of “the call”, that is, getting a call about a gig amid the paucity of gigging opportunities.
6. For further details, see http://www.ronimusic.com/, the home website of this program’s manufacturer.
7. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for encouraging me to clarify this point.
8. Indeed, it seems that those students who witnessed the violin player in class experienced a ritual transformation, too, in which they inhabited the original moment of Tyner’s improvisation as spectators. I do not have the space to pursue this point. I thank Robert Moore for this suggestion.
9. Of course, a master’s original performance and its replication by a student are differently regimented. See Sawyer 1996 for a semiotic analysis of different forms of performance in terms of regimentation, including ritual and free improvisation.
10. This can change with future technology. It is possible to imagine a technology that will record the gradual process of a painting being painted, brushstroke after brushstroke, by a great contemporary painter and then “play” this process on an interactive “pad” on which a novice painter would be able to laminate a synchronous iconization of the same process of painting with “paint.”

11. Indeed, Adorno’s (1982) problematic criticism of the very form of jazz revolved around this argument. See Wilf 2010:579 n. 16.

12. To date, more than 25 million units of Guitar Hero have been sold worldwide.

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