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The Canonization of Jazz and Afro-American Literature

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The Canonization of Jazz and Afro-American Literature

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Institutionalized jazz is the route we have to take in order to reach the masses. How else can we get hundreds of thousands of people to understand what it is that we've mastered or garnered from the masters . . . ?

--Clark Terry, Jazz Master¹

The year 2000 marked the approximate centenary of jazz music. In its early years, jazz was, to some, the polar opposite of culture. Jazz was new, raucous, accessible, spontaneous, and American, while culture seemed to be traditional, harmonious, exclusive, complex, and European (Levine, "Jazz" 174). Today, jazz is considered by many to be America's most original and sophisticated artistic export. Some even call jazz America's classical art form. The clearest indication that jazz has "arrived," however, may be its institutionalization in the American academy and in elite institutions such as the Smithsonian Institution, Carnegie Hall, and Lincoln Center. The story of the transition in the status of jazz from folk to popular to fine art is a fascinating one and will receive some theoretical formulation in this essay. Yet, the main focus involves canonization, specifically the canonization of the art form jazz (mainly through the window of Jazz at Lincoln Center, here after referred to as JALC) in comparison to the canonization of Afro-American literature.

Canonization is the process by which a person, a work (or oeuvre), or a form is assessed by institutional elites and experts as of high value, value so high that the person, the work, or the form will be remembered and studied over long periods of time. Canons are yardsticks of value used especially in academia. As John Guillory puts it: "The problem of the canon is a problem of syllabus and curriculum, the institutional forms by which works are preserved as *great works*" (Guillory 240, *emphasis in original*). As sturdy and self-sufficient as a canon may seem at a particular moment in time, over time, it changes:

The canon changes constantly because historical circumstances and stimuli change and people therefore approach it in myriad ways, bringing different perspectives and needs to it, reading it in ways distinctive to the times in which they live, and emerging with different satisfactions and revelations. (Levine, *Opening* 93) **[End Page 288]**

Although canons change, the very process of delineating the fundamentals of a form, and the individuals and works that drive a form's development, solidifies for lay people, critics, scholars, and practitioners of the form, who's who and what's what.

Disagreements over who is who and what is what are part and parcel of the jostling, positioning, and power plays attendant to the canonization process. If the institutional elites have little or no competition, then their opinions may carry the day. For example, the Roman Catholic Church had no competition over canonic interpretation of Christianity and the Bible. Then came Martin Luther's Protestant challenge. University experts in English departments have, over the past, say, sixty years decided which fiction and poetry are among "the great works." These works and their authors become part of anthologies, which are assigned to undergraduate students. The imprimatur of the university (along with a body of criticism) has been a primary means through which certain writers and literary works have achieved canonical status. Yet the fate of such paradigm-defining movements as the New Criticism shows that counter-movements can displace or re-define the basis of a particular canon formation. The controversies over JALC during the 1990s may have, on the surface, revolved around racial considerations; underneath lay questions of who has the authority to define what jazz means as well as the identity of the foundational figures of the idiom.² Control of meaning is power. Culture is the terrain of this "struggle over meaning, in which subordinate groups attempt to resist the imposition of meanings which bear the interest of dominant groups" (Storey 3). Just as through the canonization process black literary theorists resist the notion that blacks have not produced a literary tradition...

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