Moving to a Higher Ground: How Jazz Can Change Your Life, and: Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original (review)

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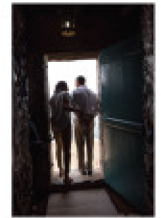

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But these pleasures can be short-lived amid conspiracies, mistaken identities, the intrusion of FBI agents, and members of hate groups. The mystery undergirding the narrative of "A Difficult Likeness," set in the winter months, moves briskly among these weighty elements before coming to an abrupt, revealing, and deadly resolution, leaving both readers and the sheriff's staff ample opportunity to question *their* assumptions.

The season has changed to summer as "My American Cousin" begins, but human evil has not melted with the snow. A young woman claiming to look for her cousin shows up in the sheriff's office, initiating an equally if not more dizzying round of misdirection, assumed identities, and dead bodies that takes fewer pages but more twists and turns to resolve. The protagonists in Everett's novels often claim not to care about people or situations—even though they wind up showing that they do care—but in this section of the novel Ogden develops what a Denver detective calls his "Messiah thing," as he struggles to save a prostitute who appears to have escaped death. "People scare me," Ogden tells his mother at section's end, a variation on the sentence "people are worse than anybody," which appears in several of Everett's other novels and which Everett himself has voiced to interviewers. In addition to wrapping up a second mystery, the author here asks us to seriously consider the physical and psychological wounds that humans are capable of inflicting on one another.

Even deeper dimensions of this evil are depicted in "The Shift," the book's third and final section, which is played out against the region's meth culture. A fish-and-game patrolman whom Ogden has befriended is shot to death near a trout hatchery, and the hunt for his murderer is on, leading law enforcement officials on a painful search for the killer.

Although *Assumption* utilizes conventions of the whodunit, it is no more Everett's entry into genre fiction than is *God's Country* (1994), his anti-Western Western. In *Assumption*, we see the author working both with and against the crime/mystery tradition as he interrogates assumptions we tend to hold about life's basic issues. More fundamentally, the book focuses attention on personality and process as it critiques elements within our society, ranging from members of hate groups to problematic members of governmental agencies, all of whom place too low a priority on human life and the life of the planet.

Percival Everett's *Assumption* is an engaging, tautly written book that is well worth reading—and thoughtfully considering. And those wanting more from the fertile imagination of this contemporary master shouldn't have too long to wait before the appearance of his next offering, the working title of which is "Percival Everett: A Novel by Virgil Russell." In what mysterious new direction this venture will take his fictional project is difficult to know, and impossible to assume.

Wynton Marsalis with Geoffrey C. Ward. *Moving to a Higher Ground: How Jazz Can Change Your Life*. New York: Random House, 2009. 208 pp. $16.00.

Robin D. G. Kelley. *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original*. New York: Free, 2009. 608 pp. $18.00.

Reviewed by Matt Sandler, University of Oregon

Wynton Marsalis has made a significant contribution to jazz literature with *Moving to a Higher Ground*. That this contribution arrives in the form of a self-help book presents some challenges to readers and critics accustomed to dismissing such material as uncomplicated fluff. Marsalis's formidable skills as a teacher, honed in symposia around the world and especially at Jazz at Lincoln Center, are very much

on display here. Technical discussions of jazz music theory, jazz terminology, and jazz biography mix with "bandstand etiquette," as he calls it, in a series of contrapuntal lessons on everyday life (30). Marsalis confronts diverse challenges, like getting a job, keeping a relationship together, or staying healthy, with principles and anecdotes learned from a lifetime in jazz. He extrapolates a way of life from the music's formal qualities, focusing on "the creative tension between self-expression and self-sacrifice . . . a tension that is at the heart of swinging, in music and in life" (xvi). Choreographer Twyla Tharp, in *The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It for Life*, and visual artist Julia Cameron, in *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*, have found sizable audiences by writing self-help books based around their aesthetic practices. Marsalis shares with these writers a willingness to repackage the techniques and symbolic range of his art in portable platitudes.

The notion of a jazz self-help book would have been laughable in the first half of the twentieth century. Many people then associated jazz with psychological turbulence, substance abuse, rootlessness, and social disease: hence Ishmael Reed's humorous re-telling, *Mumbo Jumbo*, of the Jazz Age as though the music were an epidemic. Kathy Ogren's study *The Jazz Revolution* recounts the early debates that framed the music as barbaric, primitive, and deranging. However, other sources within the early twentieth-century jazz tradition are more ambivalent. Critics customarily read Louis Armstrong's biography *Satchmo* as an ethnographic document of New Orleans lowlife history, but it is also a bootstrapping narrative in the tradition of Horatio Alger. Jazz has a significant history as a physical and cultural palliative, whether providing respite from the alienations of urbanization and industrialization, or imagining new forms of multicultural American nationalism. Marsalis syncopates these effects in his self-help philosophy. Turning the association between jazz and schizophrenic modernity on its head, he argues that jazz musicians have "a natural ease with those teetering on the edge of sanity," and "a way of admonishing but not alienating those who might have drug problems" (5). He uses the formal beauty of jazz to theorize a mode of socialization and a tool of social critique.

The most significant lesson of "bandstand etiquette" has to do with human interaction: "Jazz musicians have to listen *and* communicate" (22). A huge number of self-help books, assuming the basically anomic character of modern life, focus on problems in conversation, especially between genders. Marsalis claims that the nonverbal balance of musicians working together offers a good model for other kinds of human communication. He works this idea into his definition of "swing":

> Swing tests your inner resources; it can make you question who you are, make you reach deeper, make you respond more freely. When musicians swing, they are doing in music what we would like to do when we speak: say exactly what we feel so that our fellow conversationalists understand and accept it and are moved to reveal in response what *they* know and feel. (41; original emphasis)

Jazz presents this example to the world because, unlike other forms of musical performance, it requires improvisation as a structural element. Marsalis's emphasis on the communicative dynamic of improvising musicians—and its potential political and social implications—runs against romantic-racialist notions of inborn musical genius. Instead, he offers a vision of jazz as a refining expression of American individualism, fitted up to harmonize our everyday lives.

Perhaps unusually for a self-help author, Marsalis uses the historical contexts of jazz in formulating his principles. He is frequently taken to task for his academicism, and was labeled decades ago as a quotation-happy postmodernist in his playing, and retains that label even now as an institution-building cultural gatekeeper. The argument goes that Marsalis's curatorial posture stifles the vernacular spontaneity of African American music, especially in those forms that have appeared since the 1970s. Nothing that happens in *Moving to a Higher Ground* will change any minds on this issue, but Marsalis's justifications for his attitude will surprise some readers. In one place,

he sets himself against youth culture, calling the United States "the most age-segregated" country "on earth" (81). He suggests that jazz remedies this segregationist tendency because it "has a mythic power to remind us of who we once were, who we are now, and who we hope to be in the future" (81). Elsewhere Marsalis embraces Eckhart Tolle's New Age cliché: "jazz music is about the power of *now*" (8). Willfully improvisational in his historical orientation, Marsalis mixes politics, humanism, and pop psychology. The intellectual restlessness of the volume puts it in a class with Stephen Nachmanovitch's excellent *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*.

Marsalis also allies his project with the liberalism of Stanley Crouch and Albert Murray, both major intellectual influences here. Their imprint is felt all over the book, especially in the consistent argument for jazz as a form in which one learns to be an individual within a group. Murray's theory of improvisation as "equipment for living"—born out of his exchanges with Ralph Ellison about Kenneth Burke—provides the basic impetus. Following Murray and Crouch, the book also has a happily combative relation to stereotype. The "specialness" of the blues, for instance, "was based on its universality and the idea of reducing the blues aesthetic to race was impoverished" (58). A kind of Cold War existential humanism informs this view: "The blues says we are not always good. Or bad. We just *are*" (53). However, Marsalis turns this view towards a postracialism that is resolutely contemporary. He draws on the skills of white jazz musicians Bix Beiderbecke and Dave Brubeck as a foil to notions of innate racial ability, and asks:

> [I]s it the cultural conditioning that makes groups of people comfortable with . . . what they can and cannot do? . . . In the NBA, European players fare better than white Americans do. Is it because their skin is less white or because cultural acceptance of black players' innate superiority is not a part of their upbringing? (93)

These rhetorical questions are targeted in an extraordinarily canny way, at once designed to appeal to white audiences, to torque narratives of African American victimization, and to motivate.

Marsalis has written a truly curious jazz text. Its self-help impetus cuts against the image of jazz as a recalcitrant modernist form. Marsalis's skill with detail and anecdote make him an appealing teacher for a broad audience. Critics who have, for reasons of intellectual narcissism, avoided self-help texts like Marsalis's need to learn to engage "uplifting" and "inspirational" forms of culture if they are to remain relevant. *Moving to a Higher Ground* and Haki Madhubuti's *Black Men: Obsolete, Single, Dangerous?* (1991) blend black aesthetics with didactic social critique. The success of these works indicates a significant interest in writing that outlines the possible relations between art and life. Marsalis's insights into jazz are sometimes more gnomic even than the average New Age guide; after all, he spends a good portion of the book recounting conversations with musicians. In one of these, he gets a piece of advice that might apply to literary critics, and the books they read or ignore, as well as anyone else: "When I was nineteen or so, Wayne Shorter told me, 'Notes are like people. You have to go up and greet each one' " (43).

Robin Kelley spent fourteen years on his biography of Thelonious Monk, and his extraordinary commitment is visible on every page. Moreover, the measure of time does not nearly capture the book's exhaustiveness or the density of its intelligence. Kelley very nearly reinvents aspects of the scholarly ideal of rigor and he has managed, along this way, to produce an engrossing, nearly addictive read.

The book marks a special case in a number of respects. The Monk family entrusted Kelley with their personal archive of the jazz great's life, including tapes of practice sessions and conversations. These materials allow the reader to (sometimes blushingly) eavesdrop on Monk at home—for instance, during practice sessions in

which he played love songs to his wife Nellie. As a pianist himself, Kelley is able to translate the rich practical and theoretical aspects of the instrument. He reads every vicissitude of the composer's life—finding musical education, making a living, keeping a band together, scoring an improvisational music—with an insider's sensitivity. The book's richness depends significantly on the trust Kelley gained among Monk's family, friends, and acquaintances. His painstaking recreations of key scenes in Monk's career, like his engagements at Minton's Playhouse in the late 1940s (60-75) or the Five Spot in the late '50s and early '60s (225-39 *passim*), note tender and perhaps closely-guarded recollections of not only the pianist's family, friends, and bandmates, but also the audience members, owners, managers, and employees of the venues. Kelley also brings the acuity of his well-regarded works of African American history to Monk's life. His facility with every kind of source material (personal interviews, musicians' memoirs, jazz magazines, government censuses, union regulations, histories of cabaret law, and local newspaper reports) allows him to present the most oft-studied climaxes of Monk's career from new angles.

Kelley holds his usually considerable argumentative force at bay here. Two major issues drive the narrative of *Thelonious Monk*. The first concerns the myth of Monk, the critical and journalistic emphasis on his eccentricity. Few artistic biographers focus so consistently on reviews of their subject's work as Kelley does here. He laments that, "Monk became a novelty, marketed to the public for his strangeness—his name, his music, his bodily gestures, his famous non-verbal communication, his unpredictability" (132). Kelley weaves an incisive critique of primitivist attitudes towards jazz into the story of Monk's success. He takes a different view of the pianist's temperament, reading his "weirdness" through his late-life diagnosis of bipolar disorder. Monk's career coincided with the heyday of therapeutic culture in New York, and Kelley details Monk's treatment by, among others, Dr. Robert Freymann, also known as "Dr. Feelgood." He also shores up the credibility of Monk's mental illness by following the fate of the musician's father, who spent most of his life in the North Carolina State Hospital for the Colored Insane. Kelley writes frankly:

> The fact is, [Monk's] bipolar disorder often made it difficult to work, lost him jobs, and put undue stress on his family—especially Nellie. For someone so family-oriented who did not make a decent living until he was over forty, there is nothing romantic or desirable about playing the tortured artist. (215)

In the customarily myth-making genre of artistic biography, this assessment of Monk's illness is strikingly unconventional. Kelley takes seriously the familial difficulties of mental illness and the hardships of bohemian poverty as the stakes of modernist aesthetic innovation. His delicate balance as a biographer points out new directions in the historical treatment of trailblazing "madmen."

The other main thrust of the book aims at establishing Monk as a political artist, and thus cuts against some of the pianist's own declarations of neutrality. Often Kelley makes this point by simply reporting on developments in the struggle for civil rights and the crimes of Southern racists as Monk would have heard of them. These moments occasionally feel flat. Much more effective are the scenes from late in Monk's life when he opens up his touring schedule to benefit concerts associated with various organizations involved in the civil rights movement. For instance, Kelley quotes the reminiscences of activists from the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) with whom Monk went to dinner after a 1963 Friends of SNCC concert at Carnegie Hall. Freedom Singer Berenice Johnson (Reagon) said of the evening:

> I was sort of scared of him. And he said, "That stuff, it's not going to work. That stuff you all are talking about—it's not gonna [work]. I mean it's important and I'm here." And it was

> the non-violence, the "redeeming your enemy through love" kind of part. He was basically saying, "You all are gonna get yourselves killed walkin' out here in these streets in front of these crazy white people, your local crazy white people who've got guns." He just shook his head at that. (330)

Again, the reader is given an intimate view, this time as the cloistered mandarin of jazz art consults with young organizers in a relaxed setting. Monk had been a victim of police brutality during a 1958 incident on the road in Delaware, so he knew state-sanctioned violence intimately (253-56). The transformative redemptions engendered by his music could never erase its scars. But Monk felt sympathetic nonetheless. Kelley goes on to inform the reader that the pianist joined the Friends of SNCC despite his reservations.

Kelley manages to maintain total commitments to exhaustiveness, critical perspective, and to the Monk family throughout in what occasionally feels like a high-wire act. A lesser biographer might have been tempted to close the circle of Monk's politics and his self-presentation. Kelley could have suggested that Monk performed his madness in reaction to the extraordinary shifts in American culture and politics happening around him, or that American racism caused his madness. To do so, however, would have required sacrificing the sympathy this book shares with the artist's supportive family and friends—the thoroughness of their own commitment. Kelley points out that the biography is not "authorized," though it would be difficult to say how much more authorized a biography could be short of interviews with Monk himself. By giving his time over to Monk's people, Kelley points out suggestive new directions in African American biography. Perhaps the most audacious move in this direction comes very early in the book, when Kelley meticulously reconstructs Monk's genealogy going back to the purchase of his ancestors in North Carolina. This moment, rather like Monk himself, comes across as at once absolutely modern (insofar as it relies on highly developed historical and genealogical tools) and staunchly traditional (inasmuch as the preoccupation with genealogy resonates more with nineteenth-century biography). Whatever the stakes of this choice may be, it certainly fulfills the title's promised sense of Monk as an "American original."

One could argue that the more polemical aspects of Kelley's intervention on African American life-writing have become less urgent since the book's conception fourteen years ago. Scholarship in African American studies has certainly become more adept at dealing with historical figures whose politics fail to measure up to contemporary expectations. Kelley himself has contributed to this development elsewhere. In the public sphere beyond academia, postracialist punditry has not found much use for pernicious notions of black "native genius." In this sense, Kelley's dissection of these ideas among mid-twentieth-century jazz critics does not seem as urgent. However, when such stereotypes make their inevitable reappearance, Thelonious Monk and this copious, elegant book about him will come quickly to my mind.

David Savran. *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class.* Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2009. 326 pp. $24.95.

Reviewed by Adam Coombs, Indiana University

Much recent work in modernist studies centered on the United States and Europe has sought to understand the place of jazz as both a musical genre and a cultural phenomenon. European-based studies of jazz-inflected modernism have