

**THE OTHER'S LANGUAGE: JACQUES DERRIDA  
INTERVIEWS ORNETTE COLEMAN, 23 JUNE 1997**

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Translator's note: The meeting between saxophonist/composer Ornette Coleman and philosopher Jacques Derrida documented here took place in late June and early July 1997, before and during Coleman's three concerts at La Villette, a museum and performing arts complex north of Paris that houses, among other things, the world-renowned Paris Conservatory. Here Derrida interviews Coleman about his views on composition, improvisation, language and racism. Perhaps the most interesting point of the exchange is the convergence of their respective ideas about "languages of origin" and their experiences of racial prejudice. This interview was originally conducted in English several days before Coleman's concerts, but since original transcripts could not be located, I have translated it back into English from the published French text.

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**Jacques Derrida:** This year in New York you are presenting a program entitled *Civilization*<sup>2</sup>—what relationship does it have with music?

**Ornette Coleman:** I'm trying to express a concept according to which you can translate one thing into another. I think that sound has a much more democratic relationship to information, because you don't need the alphabet to understand

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<sup>1</sup>This interview originally appeared in French in the magazine *Les Inrockuptibles* no.115 (20 août-2 septembre 1997): 37-40, 43. All notes have been added by the translator.

<sup>2</sup>"Ornette Coleman: Civilization" was a series of concerts Coleman gave in mid-July 1997 under the aegis of the Lincoln Center Festival '97. It included performances of his orchestral work *Skies of America*, trio performances with Charlie Haden and Billy Higgins, who were members of his original quartet, and a concluding performance by Prime Time, his electric group.

music. This year, in New York, I'm setting up a project with the New York Philharmonic and my first quartet—without Don Cherry—plus other groups. I'm trying to find the concept according to which sound is renewed every time it's expressed.

**JD:** But are you acting as a composer or as a musician?

**OC:** As a composer, people often say to me, "Are you going to play the pieces that you've already played, or new pieces?"

**JD:** You never answer those questions, do you?

**OC:** If you're playing music that you've already recorded, most musicians think that you're hiring them to keep that music alive. And most musicians don't have as much enthusiasm when they have to play the same things every time. So I prefer to write music that they've never played before.

**JD:** You want to surprise them.

**OC:** Yes, I want to stimulate them instead of asking them simply to accompany me in front of the public. But I find that it's very difficult to do, because the jazz musician is probably the only person for whom the composer is not a very interesting individual, in the sense that he prefers to destroy what the composer writes or says.

**JD:** When you say that sound is more "democratic," what do you make of that as a composer? You write music in a coded form all the same.

**OC:** In 1972 I wrote a symphony called *Skies of America* and that was a tragic event for me, because I didn't have such a good relationship with the music scene [*milieu de la musique*]: like when I was doing free jazz, most people thought that I just picked up my saxophone and played whatever was going through my head, without following any rule, but that wasn't true.

**JD:** You constantly protest against that accusation.

**OC:** Yes. People on the outside think that it's a form of extraordinary freedom, but I think that it's a limitation. So it's taken twenty years, but today I'm going to have a

piece played by New York's symphony orchestra and its conductor. The other day, as I was meeting with certain members of the Philharmonic, they told me, "You know, the person in charge of scores needs to see that." I was upset—it's like you wrote me a letter and someone had to read it to confirm that there was nothing in it that could irritate me. It was to be sure that the Philharmonic wouldn't be disturbed. Then they said, "The only thing we want to know is if there is a dot in that place, a word in another"; it had nothing to do with music or sound, just with symbols. In fact, the music that I've been writing for thirty years and that I call harmolodic is like we're manufacturing [*fabriquions*] our own words, with a precise idea of what we want these words to mean to people.

**JD:** But do all your partners share your conception of music?

**OC:** Normally I begin by composing something that I can have them analyze, I play it with them, then I give them the score. And at the next rehearsal [*répétition*] I ask them to show me what they've found and we can go on from there. I do this with my musicians and with my students. I truly believe that whoever tries to express himself in words, in poetry, in whatever form, can take my book of harmolodic and compose according to it, do it with the same passion and the same elements.

**JD:** In preparing these New York projects, you first write the music by yourself, and then ask the participants to read it, to agree, and even to transform the initial writing?

**OC:** For the Philharmonic I had to write out parts for each instrument, photocopy them, then go see the person in charge of scores. But with jazz groups, I compose and I give the parts to the musicians in rehearsal. What's really shocking in improvised music is that despite its name, most musicians use a "framework [*trame*]" as a basis for improvising. I've just recorded a CD with a European musician, Joachim Kühn, and the music I wrote to play with him, that we recorded in August 1996, has two characteristics: it's totally improvised, but at the same time it follows the laws and rules of European structure. And yet, when you hear it, it has a completely improvised feel [*air*]<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup>See Coleman and Kühn.

**JD:** First the musician reads the framework, then brings his own touch to it.

**OC:** Yes, the idea is that two or three people can have a conversation with sounds, without trying to dominate it or lead it. What I mean is that you have to be . . . intelligent, I suppose that's the word. In improvised music I think the musicians are trying to reassemble an emotional or intellectual puzzle, in any case a puzzle in which the instruments give the tone. It's primarily the piano that has served at all times as the framework in music, but it's no longer indispensable and, in fact, the commercial aspect of music is very uncertain. Commercial music is not necessarily more accessible, but it is limited.

**JD:** When you begin to rehearse, is everything ready, written, or do you leave space for the unforeseen?

**OC:** Let's suppose that we're in the process of playing and you hear something that you think could be improved; you could tell me, "You should try this." For me, music has no leader.

**JD:** What do you think of the relationship between the precise event that constitutes the concert and pre-written music or improvised music? Do you think that pre-written music prevents the event from taking place?

**OC:** No. I don't know if it's true for language, but in jazz you can take a very old piece and do another version of it. What's exciting is the memory that you bring to the present. What you're talking about, the form that metamorphoses into other forms, I think it's something healthy, but very rare.

**JD:** Perhaps you will agree with me on the fact that the very concept of improvisation verges upon reading, since what we often understand by improvisation is the creation of something new, yet something which doesn't exclude the pre-written framework that makes it possible.

**OC:** That's true.

**JD:** I am not an "Ornette Coleman expert," but if I translate what you are doing into a domain that I know better, that of written language, the unique event that is

produced only one time is nevertheless repeated in its very structure. Thus there is a repetition, in the work, that is intrinsic to the initial creation—that which compromises or complicates the concept of improvisation. Repetition is already in improvisation: thus when people want to trap you between improvisation and the pre-written, they are wrong.

**OC:** Repetition is as natural as the fact that the earth rotates.

**JD:** Do you think that your music and the way people act can or must change things, for example, on the political level or in the sexual relation? Can or should your role as an artist and composer have an effect on the state of things?

**OC:** No, I don't believe so, but I think that many people have already experienced that before me, and if I start complaining, they'll say to me, "Why are you complaining? We haven't changed for this person that we admire more than you, so why should we change for you?" So basically I really don't think so. I was in the South when minorities were oppressed, and I identified with them through music. I was in Texas, I started to play the saxophone and make a living for my family by playing on the radio. One day, I walked into a place that was full of gambling and prostitution, people arguing, and I saw a woman get stabbed—then I thought that I had to get out of there. I told my mother that I didn't want to play this music anymore because I thought that I was only adding to all that suffering. She replied, "What's got hold of you, you want somebody to pay you for your soul?" I hadn't thought of that, and when she told me that, it was like I had been re-baptized.

**JD:** Your mother was very clear-headed.

**OC:** Yes, she was an intelligent woman. Ever since that day I've tried to find a way to avoid feeling guilty for doing something that other people don't do.

**JD:** Have you succeeded?

**OC:** I don't know, but bebop had emerged and I saw it as a way out. It's an instrumental music that isn't connected to a certain scene, that can exist in a more normal setting. Wherever I was playing the blues, there were plenty of people without jobs who did nothing but gamble their money. Then I took up bebop, which was hap-

pening above all in New York, and I told myself that I had to go there. I was just about 17 years old, I left home and headed for the South.

**JD:** Before Los Angeles?

**OC:** Yes. I had long hair like the Beatles, this was at the beginning of the Fifties. So I headed for the South, and just like the police, black people beat me up on top of everything, they didn't like me, I had too bizarre a look for them. They punched me in the face and demolished my sax. That was hard. Plus, I was with a group that played what we called "minstrel pipe-music," and I tried to do bebop, I was making progress and I got myself hired. I was in New Orleans, I was going to see a very religious family and I started to play in a "sanctified" church—when I was little, I played in church all the time. Ever since my mother said those words to me, I was looking for a music that I could play without feeling guilty for doing something. To this day I haven't yet found it.

**JD:** When you arrived in New York as a very young man, did you already have a premonition of what you were going to discover musically, harmolodic, or did that happen much later?

**OC:** No, because when I arrived in New York, I was more or less treated like someone from the South who didn't know music, who couldn't read or write, but I never tried to protest that. Then I decided that I was going to try to develop my own conception, without anybody's help. I rented the Town Hall on 21 December 1962, that cost me \$600, I hired a rhythm and blues group, a classical group and a trio. The evening of the concert there was a snowstorm, a newspaper strike, a doctors' strike and a subway strike, and the only people who came were those who had to leave their hotel and come to the city hall. I had asked someone to record my concert and he committed suicide, but someone else recorded it, founded his record company with it, and I never saw him again.<sup>4</sup> All that made me understand once again that I had done that for the same reason that I had told my mother that I didn't want to play down there anymore. Obviously, the state of things from the technological,

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<sup>4</sup>See Coleman, *Town Hall* 1962.

financial, social and criminal point of view was much worse than when I was in the South. I was knocking on doors that stayed closed.

**JD:** What has your son's impact on your work been? Does it have to do with the use of new technologies in your music?

**OC:** Since Denardo has been my manager, I've understood how simple technology is, and I've understood its meaning.

**JD:** Have you felt that the introduction of technology was a violent transformation of your project, or has it been easy? On the other hand, does your New York project on civilizations have something to do with what they call globalization?

**OC:** I think that there's something true in both, it's because of this that you can ask yourself if there were "primitive white men": technology only seems to represent the word "white," not total equality.

**JD:** You mistrust this concept of globalization, and I believe you are right.

**OC:** When you take music, the composers who were inventors in western, European culture are maybe a half-dozen. As for technology, the inventors I have most heard talk about it are Indians from Calcutta and Bombay. There are many Indian and Chinese scientists. Their inventions are like inversions of the ideas of European or American inventors, but the word "inventor" has taken on a sense of racial domination that's more important than invention—which is sad, because it's the equivalent of a sort of propaganda.

**JD:** How can you unsettle this "monarchy"? By allying your own creation with Indian or Chinese music, for example, in this New York project?

**OC:** What I mean is that the differences between man and woman or between races have a relation to the education and intelligence of survival. Being black and a descendent of slaves, I have no idea what my language of origin was.

**JD:** If we were here to talk about me, which is not the case, I would tell you that, in a different but analogous manner, it's the same thing for me. I was born into a family

of Algerian Jews who spoke French, but that was not really their language of origin. I wrote a little book on this subject, and in a certain way I am always in the process of speaking what I call the “monolingualism of the other.”<sup>5</sup> I have no contact of any sort with my language of origin, or rather that of my supposed ancestors.

**OC:** Do you ever ask yourself if the language that you speak now interferes with your actual thoughts? Can a language of origin influence your thoughts?

**JD:** It is an enigma for me. I cannot know it. I know that something speaks through me, a language that I don’t understand, that I sometimes translate more or less easily into my “language.” I am of course a French intellectual, I teach in French-speaking schools, but I have the impression that something is forcing me to do something for the French language . . .

**OC:** But you know, in my case, in the United States, they call the English that blacks speak “ebonics”: they can use an expression that means something else than in current English. The black community has always used a signifying language. When I arrived in California, it was the first time that I was in a place [*milieu*] where a white man wasn’t telling me that I couldn’t sit somewhere. Someone began to ask me loads of questions, and I just didn’t follow, so then I decided to go see a psychiatrist to see if I understood him. And he gave me a prescription for valium. I took that valium and threw it in the toilet. I didn’t always know where I was, so I went to a library and I checked out all the books possible and imaginable on the human brain, I read them all. They said that the brain was only a conversation. They didn’t say what about, but this made me understand that the fact of thinking and knowing doesn’t only depend on the place of origin. I understand more and more that what we call the human brain, in the sense of knowing and being, is not the same thing as the human brain that makes us what we are.

**JD:** This is always a conviction: we know ourselves by what we believe. Of course in your case, it’s tragic, but it’s universal, we know or believe we know what we are through the stories that are told to us. The fact is that we are exactly the same age, we were born the same year. When I was young, during the war, I never went to France before the age of 19, I lived in Algeria in that era, and in 1940 I was expelled

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<sup>5</sup>See Derrida.



from school because I was a Jew, as a result of the racial laws, and I didn't even know what had happened. I only understood very much later, through stories that told me who I was, so to speak. And even regarding your mother, we know who she is and that she is a certain way only by means of narration. I've tried to guess in what era you were in New York and Los Angeles, it was before civil rights were granted to blacks. The first time I went to the United States, in 1956, there were "Reserved for Whites" signs everywhere, and I remember how brutal that was. You experienced all that?

**OC:** Yes. In any case, what I like about Paris is the fact that you can't be a snob and a racist at the same time here, because that won't do. Paris is the only city I know where racism never exists in your presence, it's something you hear spoken of.

**JD:** That doesn't mean there is no racism, but one is obliged to conceal it to the extent possible. What is the strategy of your musical choice for Paris?

**OC:** For me, being an innovator doesn't mean being more intelligent, more rich, it's not a word, it's an action. Since it hasn't been done, there's no use talking about it.

**JD:** I understand that you prefer doing [*faire*] to speaking. But what do you *do* with words? What is the relation between the music you *make* [*faites*] and your own words or those that people try to impose on what you make? The problem of choosing the title, for example, how do you envision that?

**OC:** I had a niece who died in February of this year and I went to her funeral, and when I saw her in her coffin, someone had put a pair of glasses on her. I had wanted to call one of my pieces *She was sleeping, dead, and wearing glasses in her coffin*. And then I changed the idea and called it "Blind Date."

**JD:** That title imposed itself on you?

**OC:** I was trying to understand that someone had put glasses on a dead woman. . . . I had a little idea of what that meant, but it's very difficult to understand the feminine side of life when it has nothing to do with the masculine side.

**JD:** Do you think that your musical writing has something fundamental to do with your relation to women?

**OC:** Before becoming known as a musician, when I worked in a big department store, one day, during my lunch break, I came across a gallery where someone had painted a very rich white woman who had absolutely everything that you could desire in life, and she had the most solitary expression in the world. I had never been confronted with such solitude, and when I got back home, I wrote a piece that I called "Lonely Woman."<sup>6</sup>

**JD:** So the choice of a title was not a choice of words but a reference to this experience? I'm posing you these questions on language, on words, because to prepare myself for our encounter, I listened to your music and read what the specialists have written about you. And last night I read an article that was in fact a conference presentation given by one of my friends, Rodolphe Burger, a musician whose group is called Kat Onoma. It was constructed around your statements. In order to analyze the way in which you formulate your music, he began from your statements, of which the first was this: "For reasons that I'm not sure of, I am convinced that before becoming music, music was only a word." Do you recall having said that?

**OC:** No.

**JD:** How do you understand or interpret your own verbal statements? Are they something important to you?

**OC:** It interests me more to have a human relationship with you than a musical relationship. I want to see if I can express myself in words, in sounds that have to do with a human relationship. At the same time, I would like to be able to speak of the relationship between two talents, between two doings. For me, the human relationship is much more beautiful, because it allows you to gain the freedom that you desire, for yourself and for the other.

*(Recorded by Thierry Jousse and Geneviève Pereygne.)*

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<sup>6</sup>On Coleman, *Shape*; also available in the box set *Beauty is a Rare Thing*.

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