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African-American Poetry, Music, and Politics

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Honors Thesis

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Introduction: African-American Poetry, Music, and Politics

In 2016 songwriter and musician Bob Dylan won the Nobel Prize in Literature and plunged the academic community into heated debate. For some, Dylan was a natural choice. Poet Bernard O'Donoghue claims, "the writers of song lyrics have always been central among the great poets from Shakespeare to Burns, and there is no doubt that Bob Dylan has been prominent among them since his emergence in the 1960s" (Doyle). However, others, like poet Vona Groarke, disagree with the decision: "We've waited so long for a winner from the US, and with all the possible winners out there (Marilynne Robinson, Don DeLillo?), they've only gone and wasted it on Bob Dylan. Not that I've anything against Bob Dylan, but he writes songs, not literature; let's face it, they're just not the same thing" (Doyle). The decision to award Bob Dylan the Nobel Prize in Literature sparked a worldwide debate on the relationship between music and poetry and raised many questions about music's place in literary canon. However, this debate is nothing new. Questions about the relationship between music and poetry have long been debated.

Some scholars believe the two disciplines should be studied separately, while others prefer to consider the connections between the two. My project begins with a question: if Dylan's songs can be considered poetry, what other forms of music might also be considered poetry? Rap implements many poetic techniques such as rhyme, meter, anaphora, and many more. Some rap verses, such as Eminem's "Lose Yourself," are even written in iambic pentameter, and mirror many examples of performance

poetry delivery. Why, then, is Bob Dylan's music considered literary when rap is so often not? Just what *is* music's relationship to poetry? How is music folded into the poetic tradition? Who uses music in their poetry? What work does music exactly do? And of course, how do these traditions intersect?

History proves that poetry and music have long gone hand in hand. After all, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were meant to be sung, or at the very least recited. At what point did this musical tradition in poetry (or perhaps poetic tradition in music?) begin to give way to poems relying solely on the words? When did music in poetry turn into an afterthought or a simple footnote when studying poetry? Instead of simply reading the *Odyssey*, why do all academics not fully embrace the fact that it was meant to be recited and sung? I argue that we *should* fully embrace the musical tradition in poetry and use it as another tool for learning in our scholarly arsenal. I am not saying we should ignore the written words of musical poetry or try to sing poetry that simply was not meant to be musical. But I do suggest that we are missing out if we choose to ignore music in poetry which was first written or composed with music and/or orality in mind music or orality in mind.

While this idea is debated, many scholars seem to hold similar ideas to my own. Meta DuEwa Jones muses on the significance of voice in Phillis Wheatley and Lucy Terry poetry, two of the earliest African-American poets. Jones asks, "Is it significant that Terry and Wheatley wrote poems that initiated the emergence of the African-American literary canon and that their verses were both cited and recited...What lost information might... Lucy Terry's actual voice restore? What emotional qualities

would we have detected in the countless people who memorized and recited Terry's lines?" (Jones 2). Jones's questions are significant. Information is lost when we can not hear the pain or joy in the poet's voice, especially when that element was meant to be part of the poetry. And, nowhere is the oral tradition in literature stronger in American literature than in African-American poetry.

Darwin Turner claims that "despite African contributions to the written tradition....it was the oral tradition that Africans brought to America in slave ships during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries" (Turner 8). Turner goes on to say that enslaved people depended on their oral tradition to preserve culture. Most enslaved people could not read or write due to customs and laws in the United States at the time (Turner 8). Even if enslaved people could read and write, most would never be able to afford paper or pen. Therefore, enslaved people needed to rely on spoken word to communicate, pray, entertain, and warn (Turner 8). Because of this common history rooted in slavery, African-Americans were forced to adopt the oral tradition of storytelling. As Janice Hamlet suggests, "In African-American culture, the oral tradition has served as a fundamental vehicle for cultural expression and survival. This oral tradition also preserved the cultural heritage and reflected the collective spirit of the race" (Hamlet 74). Once the African-American community moved largely into literacy, the oral tradition became less of a necessity and more of a point of cultural pride. Instead of resenting the fact that they were forced into illiteracy by slavers and thus forced to adopt a strong oral tradition, the African-American community embraced that tradition and continues it today. One simply has to look at the history of the Blues,

gospel music, and hip-hop to understand the truth behind this statement. Many African-American poets such as Russell Atkins, Stephen Jonas, Langston Hughes, Jayne Cortez, Tupac Shakur, and Kendrick Lamar have capitalized on their people's oral tradition and have incorporated music and orality into their poetry. The oral tradition is not just important, but foundational in African-American art.

Before we go any further, we must first look at certain key definitions that will inform the rest of this paper. First of all, I will define how I am using the word progression. I am defining progression as a movement and not necessarily an improvement. This is a key idea to understanding the argument of this paper. I am not arguing that Kendrick Lamar is a "better" poet than Jayne Cortez or Langston Hughes, for example, and I am not arguing the opposite either. In fact, I make no value judgment on any of the poets I am studying.

The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines a poem as:

A composition, often in Lines, that draws on some or all of the following common features: rhythm, meter, figuration (rhetorical schemes and tropes), and artifice (diction and syntax). Poems of different times and places do not necessarily resemble one another so much as they share a recognition from their respective cultures that they embody poeticity or what the Rus. linguist Roman Jakobson called the poetic function: 'Poeticity is present when the word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and inner form acquire a weight and value of their own instead of referring

indifferently to reality.' The poem comes into existence when an actual set of elements such as those named above is attached to the relevant cultural category (Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics).

Of the three poets I am studying, Langston Hughes, Jayne Cortez, and Kendrick Lamar, there is no debate as to whether Hughes and Cortez's work constitutes poetry.

However, the argument can be (and has been) made that rap and thus the body of Lamar's work—does not fall under the definition of poetry and therefore can not be poetry. Alexs Plate writes that "when the general public turns to discuss rap, it is almost never about the surprising skill and power of these poets. It is usually about the profane idea or action that is described in one of the poems. And predictably, from a literary standpoint, the typical offering pieces almost never merit the attention they receive" (Plate xvii). In other words, there is a disconnect between public opinion of rap and what rap actually is. Plate argues that most of the general public believe rap is violent, vulgar, and rude. However, by looking closely at Lamar's work, I will argue that his rap very much follows the traditions of poetry, after all, he writes in lines, metaphors, rhymes, and more. Nowhere in the definition of poetry is there a stipulation which states that words can not have a musical accompaniment or an oral component.

Music, too, must be defined. Thomas Clifton defines music as "the actualization of the possibility of any sound whatever to present to some human being a meaning which he experiences with his body—that is to say, with his mind, his feelings, his senses, his will, and his metabolism" (Clifton 10). I would like to highlight "any sound" taken from Clifton's definition. Certainly poetry falls into the category of "any sound."

After all, rhythm, rhyme, and meter are all based on sound. While I am not arguing that all poetry is music and all music is poetry, here, I am highlighting the traditional similarities between the two forms that allows us to connect poetry and music in the ways I will be doing throughout this study.

A final important consideration is that I will be analyzing music in written form throughout this study. I will analyze Lamar's rap as written poetry even though his rap is meant to be heard. An underlying assumption I am making throughout this study is that poetry exists on a spectrum. On one end of the spectrum is traditional, structured, poetry (think Shakespeare's sonnets). On the other end is Lamar's rap. Everything else falls somewhere within that spectrum. In this study, I analyze the sounds and audio effects that Lamar and also Jayne Cortez use whenever necessary, but I focus particularly on their words. However, I suggest that the reader of this paper listen to the Cortez and Lamar poems I talk about to get a more comprehensive idea as to what I am writing about.

The following three chapters of this paper will chart the relationship between African-American poetry, music, and politics. I will begin with Langston Hughes and argue that the poet's use of the Blues allow his comments on the political climate of the time to reach a larger African-American audience. I will also highlight the ways in which Hughes is interested in an expansive version of the African-American experience. He is interested in observing the African-American community and reflecting what it is like to be black in America with his specifically his African-American audience. In my second chapter I will suggest that Jayne Cortez does similar work and appeals to an

African-American audience through Jazz instead of the Blues. I will argue that unlike Hughes, Cortez zooms in on specific contemporary issues plaguing the African-American community, such as economic exploitation, while simultaneously praising other black artists. Additionally, Cortez both publishes and records her poetry, a different method from Hughes and Lamar, and I will explore the implications of this. My final chapter considers the rapper Kendrick Lamar and uncovers how his use of hip-hop allows him to reach a much broader and more diverse audience. I will explore the implications of this difference in audience as well as the implications of recording music as opposed to publishing poems.

The common thread between all three chapters is the relationship between music, poetry, audience, and the ways these three poets pay homage to a collective past. The fact Hughes, Cortez, and Lamar are able to connect with their audience through music and a collective past determines their success as well as their ability to address political issues. Each of these poets are concerned with the political and are interested in giving a strong voice to African-Americans who may not have a strong social platform to stand on and speak. I argue that these poets are particularly successful in promoting their political messages *because* of their connection to music. Music allows politically charged African-American poetry to be both accessible and engaging to their audiences. Without music, these authors would have, I fear, drastically different impacts on the world today. By calling on a collective past and promoting a collective message through music, Hughes, Cortez, and Lamar are able to leave a

lasting impact on the black community in the United States and the larger global community as well.

Chapter 1: Langston Hughes and the Blues

Langston Hughes pioneered the use of music in poetry in the twentieth century and paved the way for many other poets to do the same. Hughes was interested in throwing out traditional rules of poetry to give rise to a new breed of work that blended Blues rhythms, sounds, and themes with political meaning, cultural relevance, and social commentary all aimed at an African-American audience. Hughes borrowed rhyme scheme, meter, vernacular, and “rhythmic texturing” from the Blues in order to underscore and bolster the words he was writing (Tracy 67). While Hughes didn’t directly incorporate performed music into his poetry, he did set the precedent for blending music and poetry and allowed for future poets, such as Cortez and Lamar, to push the envelope further and further. The blending of the Blues with poetry allowed Hughes to underscore politically-charged themes, ideas, and words about the African-American experience in the United States. In addition, the blend of poetry and Blues made poetry more accessible to the African-American community by making it more familiar; this familiarity ultimately increased Hughes’s reading audience and thus attention to his political messages. Finally, Hughes was able to pay homage to his African-American roots by honoring the distinct musical tradition in African-American culture. By founding much of his poetry in music, Hughes connected and resonated with a much larger, yet very specific, African-American audience in order to promote and share his political views.

In his young life, Langston Hughes was influenced by poets Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg. Hughes even wrote an article in the *Chicago Tribune* titled “Calls Whitman Negroes' First Great Poetic Friend, Lincoln of Letters.” In the article, Hughes praised Whitman for being the “greatest of American poets,” one who “Negroes should read and remember” (Klamer 2). Whitman, famous for focusing on the “beauty and dignity of the common man” (although here Whitman is focusing on the common *white* man) was in stark opposition to the traditional canon of the day (Tracy).

Poets of the Chicago Renaissance such as Carl Sandburg also had a profound effect on Hughes. In his autobiography *The Big Sea*, Hughes wrote:

And about Carl Sandburg, my guiding star I wrote:

Carl Sandburg's poems

Fall on the white pages of his books

Like blood-clots of song

From the wounds of humanity.

I know a lover of life sings

When Carl Sandburg sings.

I know a lover of all the living

Sings then (Hughes 29).

Carl Sandburg, like Whitman, was a poet famous for writing colloquially and energetically, and for being a poet of the people (Tracy 142). Hughes even “began to try to write like Carl Sandburg” (Hughes 29). It is no surprise that later in his life, Hughes

would emulate the colloquial style of Sandburg, adding typical colloquialisms and patterns of speech to connect with his audience. Tracy claims that “the success of poets like Sandburg... must have at least encouraged Hughes to follow his instincts in using folk material such as the Blues in his poetry, and in emphasizing oral communication and unaffected language that would take poetry out of polite parlors” (Tracy 143).

The idea that Hughes was a poet of his people is clearly summed up in his poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.”

I’ve known rivers:

I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I’ve known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers

My soul has grown deep like the rivers. (Hughes 1-13).

Hughes's first line sets a precedent for the rest of the poem. If “the Negro” speaks rivers, Hughes does as well, saying that he is proudly part of the larger, global, black community. Tactically, Hughes places himself directly in the center of the African-American community by affirming his common spoken language, which also includes a common heritage, history, and culture. In writing “I’ve known rivers ancient as the world,” Hughes makes connections across time and history. Hughes is again affirming that he understands the common history of African-Americans and wants to honor that history. He evokes the names of rivers like the Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile, and the Mississippi to remind his audience of their common African ancestry as well as their common history in the United States. Additionally, Hughes writes about the Pyramids in Egypt and huts in the Congo to remind his audience both of the great things their collective bloodline has done as well as its roots and importance in early human history. Hughes finishes his poem by saying that through this collective past and common heritage, he has grown to who he is today. Hughes uses anaphora to solidify this claim, writing “I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep/ I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it/ I heard the singing of the Mississippi” as if to say that this is all part of who he has become as a person. He is able to make great poetry, just as his figurative ancestors in Egypt were able to make the Great Pyramids, because of this common bloodline. The African-American community should be proud because it is deep, powerful, thoughtful, and lively as rivers. Hughes creates a community of all people of African descent in the United States and places himself firmly within that community.

All of these past influences brought Hughes to the forefront of the Harlem Renaissance and catapulted him to legendary status amongst poets. Hughes embodied the Harlem Renaissance and all it stood for, and was a driving force behind many of its themes and ideas. The Harlem Renaissance was a movement interested in revitalizing African-American arts through experimental and innovative means. As a prominent figure in the movement, Hughes was in contact with many people interested in reinventing African-American arts such as James Weldon Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, and many more. Paying tribute to the African-American past in order to “foster a racial self-awareness and pride” was an important concern of Harlem Renaissance writers and artists (Tracy 3). Tracy explains, “Hughes's attitude toward the folk tradition was a natural extension of the attitudes of his forerunners.... And a part of the Harlem Renaissance movement... Forming his own ideas about what the Blues are and do, he sought to employ their structures, rhythms, themes, and words in his Blues poems” (Tracy 9). Just as Sandberg and Whitman used colloquialisms and folk references from their own “people” Hughes began to do the same with his community. Hughes learned from his idols about humanizing poetry, that is, making poetry more approachable through the use of colloquial words and learned from his contemporaries about using African-American folk tradition to celebrate black history and foster the growth of a black culture, and used his love for the Blues as the main source of folk tradition in his work. Tracy claims that, “given Langston Hughes's extensive exposure to African-American folk music, it is not surprising that he decided to make use of the Blues tradition in his secular poetry” (Tracy 141).

The incorporation of Bluesy melodies helped connect his audience and their shared past. A common past often forges strong bonds for the future. Hughes was clued in to this idea and understood that in order to create a unified culture he had to appeal to his people's past. Tracy writes that Hughes "knew of the influence of work songs and field hollers on the Blues" (Tracy 71); Hughes wrote that "a hundred years ago there were croons, work songs, and field hollers—a kind of musical cry—whose melodies had a Blues sound. To these tunes, road workers or cotton pickers put whatever words came into their minds. They sang out of their personal thoughts or sorrows" (Tracy 71). Hughes's choice to structure his poems around music holds weight in and of itself. Hughes knew the importance of music in his community and the power it possessed. Instead of creating rifts between music and poetry, two great African-American traditions, Hughes sought to close the gap and thus strengthen bonds between the black community as a whole. Franklin Rosemont notes that the Blues are a "way of life" for African-Americans (Tracy 59). Tracy expands on Rosemont's point, suggesting that "a particular misery and sadness, a particular Blues, unites African-Americans whose common heritage—in Africa, slavery, and a theoretical freedom—often provides a bond which is difficult for middle class blacks to break" (Tracy 59). In other words, Blues provides a way to express common difficulties in the African-American experience. This adds familiarity to Hughes's poetry for his African-American audience. Instead of mirroring the traditional white poetic canon, which often alienates or mutes people of color, Hughes chooses to write in a more accessible vernacular and style.

As a leader in the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes was interested in, as Tracy states, “foster[ing] a racial self awareness and pride” for African-Americans, (Tracy 3). In order to succeed in this goal, Tracy suggests that Hughes had “to use fresher, more original language and to humanize poetry... Renewal for Hughes... meant looking into an African and a slave past, not into European history of ‘classic’ Western Literature, and the musical phrase was from African-American folk music, not from the classical music...” (Tracy 141). Hughes’s famous essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” is an example of Hughes’s philosophy when it comes to his African-American community. He writes, “The road for the serious black artist, then, who would produce a racial art is most certainly rocky and the mountain is high. Until recently he received almost no encouragement for his work from either white or colored people” (Hughes 1). Hughes has decided to take the “rocky” road and has pledged to be a “serious black artist” by incorporating distinctly black forms into his poetry. Hughes, in fact, writes about black music: “Jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile” (Hughes 1). Hughes quite literally equates music to the heartbeat of the black soul. In other words, Hughes's aim in incorporating the Blues in his poetry was to appeal to a very specific audience: the African-American community.

Glenn Jordan notes that Hughes “was a people’s artist, whose work was known by millions of Black Americans: they regularly read his work in African-American weekly

newspapers; they thronged to Black colleges, schools and other venues to listen to him speak; and they bought his books” (Jordan 860). Hughes is able to appeal to so many African-Americans because he is able to put his poems in a common language (by using everyday vernacular) with a familiar feel (by using a Blues rhythm) that African-Americans could connect with. Jordan suggests that “Hughes's poetry was (and is) popular because it directly addresses African-American subjects in a language that they understand” (Jordan 864). Hughes's ability to steer away from the traditional poetic canon while still providing culturally relevant and provoking poetry in a vernacular that was comfortable for his audience was a revolution. However, to take Jordan's ideas a step further, Hughes also appealed to his audience through form. Gone were the traditional iambic pentameter and other rigid forms that alienated many readers. Instead, Hughes adopted Bluesy rhythms and a musical form in order to welcome more readers into his poetry. The key for Hughes was that he was able to make his poetry look, feel, and sound familiar while addressing issues that his audience struggled with on a daily basis. That way, Hughes, like other African-American poets, could create a distinct and unifying black culture.

Now that we have a basic understanding of Hughes's background and how his music works to target a specific audience, we can move forward with the actual study of his poems. Again, before we begin to understand *why* the incorporation of music to poetry was so important in the evolution of African-American poetry and politics, we must first dissect and analyze just how this blend makes meaning in Hughes's poems. In my close reading of Hughes's “The Weary Blues” and “The Cat and The Saxophone,”

I will give concrete examples of the ways in which Blues influences create meaning in Hughes's poetry through rhyme and direct musical references. I will also discuss how, on another level, blending Blues melodies and sounds adds familiarity to Hughes's work by incorporating African-American history and culture. This familiarity takes poetry out of elite universities and into the hands of the everyday African-American.

Hughes famously mixes Blues with poetry in *The Weary Blues*, written in 1925. In this collection of poems, Hughes weaves together Blues and verse seamlessly to comment on the state of African-American lives in the United States during the 1920s. To begin, we will look at the poem which gives the collection its name, "The Weary Blues." This poem models the Blues in many ways, including its rhyme scheme. According to Tracy "the AAB stanza... seems to have established that pattern as the dominant one" in Blues (Tracy 77). Richard Smallwood confirms Tracy's claim, suggesting that "traditional Blues is usually a song form in the familiar twelve measure AAB pattern" (Smallwood 1). "The Weary Blues" follows that same rhyme pattern. "The Weary Blues" also features a first person speaker and eight and twelve bar Blues pattern (which I will explore over the following pages) which gives "The Weary Blues" a "sophisticated structure not unlike some vaudeville Blues songs" (Tracy 220). In other words, the very meter of this poem follows the traditional eight and twelve bar meter of most Blues songs, but also breaks from it in places, just as many sophisticated Blues songs tend to do.

"The Weary Blues" begins:

“Droning a drowsy syncopated tune, A
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon, A
I heard a Negro play. B
Down on Lenox Avenue the other night C
By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light C
He did a lazy sway . . . D
He did a lazy sway . . . D
To the tune o’ those Weary Blues. A
With his ebony hands on each ivory key E
He made that poor piano moan with melody. E
O Blues” A (Hughes 1-12).

The opening stanza of “The Weary Blues” sets up the scene, situated firmly on “Lenox Avenue” in New York City during the Harlem Renaissance (Hughes 2). The first eleven lines of “The Weary Blues” closely follows the AAB rhyme scheme popular in nearly all Blues songs. However, there are a few inconsistencies to this rhyme scheme. The poem flows neatly in an AAB AAB rhyme scheme until line six is repeated and line eight follows. Following line six and seven, lines eight through eleven move back into the AAB rhyme scheme. I argue that by shifting away from the AAB rhyme scheme and then coming back to it, Hughes calls attention to lines six and seven. This is important because these lines set the tone for the poem. The repetition of “He did a Lazy sway...” forces us to pay attention to what Hughes is saying and even invited us to sway along

with the music. The word “Lazy” cues us into what tempo the poem should be read at. “Lazy” and the repetition of “He did a lazy sway...” does the job that music usually does in Blues songs. It forces us to slow down much like the slow beat from a drum or soft pluck from a bass would cause a listener to slow down. In addition, this sudden shift in rhyme scheme is consistent with Blues form. The Blues are about experimenting, riffing, and calling certain themes to attention through sudden, unpredicted changes. Tracy argues that, “the words of a Blues song can be as loose within their own structure as the music is within its own confines as well” (Tracy 76).

Hughes's rhyme scheme also calls attention to the B lines of each three line triplet. Janheinz Jahn writes that “Blues logic in which the response line either expands, illuminates, justifies, explains or gives grounds for the statement line, or presents the antithesis of it” (Tracy 76). In this way, Hughes is using the principles of Blues to draw attention to important ideas in his poetry. By applying this principle to the first three lines of “The Weary Blues” we see that Hughes wants to draw attention to “I heard a Negro play” (Hughes 3). This line highlights right from the beginning that this poem will be about the black experience in the 1920s. The fact that Hughes uses the term “negro” also highlights the norms of the time and the climate that he is writing in. To further highlight this political climate, Hughes writes “ebony hands on each ivory key” (Hughes 8). The contrast between black and white is apparent and suggests that this poem is about this racial divide. However, it is important to note that here, on Lenox Avenue, playing the Blues, the “ebony hands” are manipulating the “ivory key,” as if to say that while playing music in Harlem an African-American person has power in a world where

they usually do not (Hughes 8). The audience of the poem, therefore, is incorporated into the poem. By calling attention to the line “I heard a Negro play,” Hughes is saying that he is *listening* to African-Americans who are telling their own stories. Hughes plays with similar ideas in his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” Hughes notes in the opening to his essay that:

One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, ‘I want to be a poet--not a Negro poet,’ meaning, I believe, ‘I want to write like a white poet’; meaning subconsciously, ‘I would like to be a white poet’; meaning behind that, ‘I would like to be white.’ And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself (Hughes 1).

Hughes is essentially saying that a poet should write what he or she knows. If a poet is black, he or she should be proud of that blackness and not try to be anything other than black. Additionally, Hughes is saying that if one tries to write about an experience that he or she does not know, then that poet will not be successful. For Hughes, being oneself was the key to being a successful poet. And Hughes is uncompromisingly himself in his poetry. He does not attempt to write like a white poet, or any poet other than himself for that matter. He is not interested in writing for white folks. If white folks enjoy his poetry, excellent. If not, the poem wasn’t meant for them. Hughes develops this idea in “The Weary Blues.” It he he shows other African-Americans that he is writing for them.

“The Weary Blues” incorporates music in both its form and its content. The poem continues:

Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.
Sweet Blues!
Coming from a black man’s soul.
O Blues!
In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—
 ‘Ain’t got nobody in all this world,
 Ain’t got nobody but ma self
 I’s gwine to quit ma frownin’
 And put ma troubles on the shelf’ (13- 23)

In line twelve, “Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool,” the poem suggests that the Blues singer is not a rich man. Hughes paints an image of a poor downtrodden musician singing just to get by. This musician stands in for other African Americans. As a group, African-Americans have been enslaved, disenfranchised, and discriminated against. Yet despite having to survive in a world set against them—figured in the poems by a rickety stool—they are still singing. However, Hughes clues us in that not all is well. The musician, as Hughes puts it, “played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool” (Hughes

12). To begin, the musician is a “fool” (Hughes 12). Hughes recognizes that being Black does not necessarily mean all is well. This musician, as is evident by his run down, old, “rickety stool” is not successful. But, “Sweet Blues! It is impossible for this musician to stop doing what he loves, because the blues are an escape from the everyday oppression he feels. The blues are both a challenge and an address to that oppression (Hughes 13). Hughes then writes, “I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan” (Hughes 14). Hughes puts the man singing and the piano moaning right next to each other so that we associate the piano with the man. In other words, Hughes personifies the piano, as if to say, music and the “negro” are one in the same.

We go on to read the haunting song that the musician is singing:

‘Ain’t got nobody in all this world,

Ain’t got nobody but ma self.

I’s gwine to quit ma frownin’

And put ma troubles on the shelf’ (Hughes 24-27)

The musician is singing the Blues about how the entire world is against him and how he “Ain’t got nobody” in the world on his side. In these lines, Hughes is not writing for just anyone. He is addressing African-Americans and trying to give them a voice and let them know that he is not only listening to them, but that they are not alone. Significantly, Hughes is also writing in a very colloquial way, solidifying himself as a poet of the people. As in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” Hughes is affirming that he understands

the African-American experience and he wants to celebrate that experience. But the next lines of the song, “I’s gwine to quit ma frownin’ and put ma troubles on the shelf,” is particularly troubling. With no one on his side, these lines take on very serious, possibly suicidal, undertones. Again, this fortifies the fact that things can seem hopeless to African-Americans at the time.

Moving forward in the poem to the next lines the singer sings, these undertones strengthen:

I got the Weary Blues
And I can’t be satisfied.
Got the Weary Blues
And can’t be satisfied—
I ain’t happy no mo’
And I wish that I had died. (Hughes 28-33)

The singer is beaten. However, again, Hughes chooses to express the singer’s feelings by saying he has the Blues, a distinctly African-American music form. Again, this is Hughes showing that he is writing for his people and no one else. The last four lines of the song “Got the Weary Blues And can’t be satisfied— I ain’t happy no mo’, And I wish that I had died” remind us of the stakes of this poem (Hughes 27-30). Life and death are on the line.

The last five lines of the poem resolve these feelings.

And far into the night he crooned that tune.
The stars went out and so did the moon.
The singer stopped playing and went to bed
While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.
He slept like a rock or a man that's dead. Hughes 34- 38).

Despite the undertones of suicide and death, the singer goes home and falls asleep. This is Hughes pleading to his reader that things will be alright. The singer croons far into the night, until even the stars and moon stopped shining, as if to say that the singer keeps singing through his darkest moments. Only in the absolute darkness does the singer go home. Yet, the Blues continue inside of him and he sleeps soundly, saying that the Blues are what keep the African-American community together and quite literally able to sleep at night, despite the undertones of darkness alluded to with the mentioning of death. Through a new type of art and culture that is uniquely theirs, African Americans can African-American express these sentiments and at least let their bottled-up emotions out. This is a key theme in African-American poetry and music. For Hughes, music is a form of release from a troubling and racist world.

Hughes does not just incorporate certain aspects of song into his writing, he also writes poems as if they *are* songs. This is never more clear than in the poem "The Cat and The Saxophone." This poem sets a scene and a mood by incorporating lyrics to a standard Jazz song, "Everybody Loves My Baby," by Spencer Williams and Jack Palmer within its body text. "Everybody Loves My Baby" is an important Jazz song

performed by the likes of Louis Armstrong. “The Cat and The Saxophone” describes an interaction between a couple in a Jazz Club, likely in New York City. Instead of trying to describe the mood in the club, Hughes writes down the fragments of conversation and music that one would hear in a Jazz club. In the small pauses between speaking to one another, the couple hears the loud words to “Everybody Loves My Baby.”

EVERYBODY

Half-pint,—

Gin?

No, make it

LOVES MY BABY”

corn. You like

liquor,

don't you, honey?

BUT MY BABY

Sure. Kiss me,

DON'T LOVE NOBODY (Hughes 1-11)

Right off the bat, music is up front and direct. Hughes paints a busy, loud, scene. In addition the proximity of “EVERYBODY” and “Half-pint,- Gin” sets up an excited and energetic atmosphere. By incorporating a song into his poem, Hughes sets the mood much more effectively than he might have through metaphor or description. Form

literally follows function in this case. What better way to set the mood of a loud, entertaining, party than to “play” music in the background?

Through incorporating song lyrics into his poem, Hughes creates a polyvocal piece in which we hear multiple points of view. The lyrics of the song, “EVERYBODY... LOVES MY BABY... BUT MY BABY... DON’T LOVE NOBODY...BUT ME” plays up the love between the couple that the dialogue between them can’t do. It is important to note that just the inclusion of lyrics in a poem does not necessarily mean that a poem is founded in music. However, because Hughes choose a famous Jazz standard that many people of his time were likely to know, the lyrics take on another meaning. As we read the poem we are forced to hear the same melody and voices that appear either live or on a recording.

Through “The Cat and the Saxophone,” Hughes did not just represent love and sexuality in the 1920s; he also commented on it. People were drinking alcohol illegally under prohibition, dancing to new music, and meeting people who enjoyed doing both of these things. Perhaps Hughes is commenting that because of the fast paced scene that were common in speakeasies, true love has taken a backseat to passion. As Shane Vogel notes in his book the “movement back and forth between capital and lowercase letters produces an almost drunken unfocusing as the reader works to maintain the sense of two different conversations simultaneously” (Vogel 122). he duality of voices and the incorporation of music allows for multiple interpretive possibilities. The stark difference between the singer and the couple’s conversation yet the subtle similarities are what gives this poem it’s unsettling feeling. There is a connection between the two

voices yet we struggle to find these similarities it because of the disorienting way in which Hughes blends music into his poem, much like how music can be distracting in real life. Again, form follows function. Hughes incorporates music into his poetry so that his written words act exactly like blaring music. Again, by founding the poem around lyrics, and not just any lyrics, but lyrics to an extremely popular Jazz standard, Hughes is able to comment his landscape, placing us in the scene rather than outside the scene looking in.

It is important to note the dichotomy between the voice of the couple and the voice of the music. Importantly, the music is literally saying more than the couple. The lines of the music are at the forefront of the poem because of their textual size and their length. In fact, there are 26 words in bold in the poem compared to the 30 not in bold. Nearly half and half. It is difficult, then, to nail down which voice is supposed to be the dominant one. This can be seen as a very intentional social commentary. The band literally has to SHOUT in order to be heard, the couple can merely speak and be heard. In addition, the band is singing about devoted love and the couple are just flirting with each other. Hughes plays on this trope by bolding the voice of the singers. The singers have to do something more, something extra, to have their voices heard. In addition, it is important that the singers are, well, singing. Hughes suggests that music is one of the few ways for a black voice to be heard in modern society.

For Hughes, representing the Blues and Jazz in poetry was a way of creating a bridge with an African-American collectivity. He connected with his readers by appealing both to their common memory and present experiences. Hughes's use of the Blues was

his way of doing this. The Blues are unique because they are tightly connected to the African-American past yet rooted in the future. They are a distinctly African-American form of music and expression that pays tribute to a united past and celebrates black culture while giving artists a new outlet for expression that will ultimately, for some, lead to a brighter future. The unique quality that Hughes's poems poses to connect to the past, present, and future is one of the main reasons for Hughes's success and is largely thanks to his Bluesy melodies. Hughes himself sums it up far better than I ever could when he writes in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain:

Let the blare of Negro Jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing the Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand...We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs... We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves" (Hughes 1).

However, Hughes was only a starting point in the evolution of African-American Poetry and its relationship to Jazz. For his time, Hughes's ideas were innovative and pioneering but he still lacked actual musical sounds. The next poet that we will look at, Jayne Cortez, took Hughes's ideas to the next level. Instead of mimicking music in

silent, written word, Cortez incorporated musical performance into her poetry. However, Hughes's importance to this field cannot be overstated. Without his work, the poetic canon of today would look vastly different than it does

Chapter 2: Jayne Cortez and Jazz

Following the evolution of African-American poetry and its relationship to music brings us to the 1960s and 1970s and to Jayne Cortez. Like Hughes, Cortez was interested in music and understood its power to dissect and present political ideas to the public. Cortez is an important figure in this field because Cortez published poetry as well as recorded herself performing those very same poems with a band behind her. Her band, the Firespitters, focused on an important type of African-American music, Jazz. Philippe Carles and Jean- Louis Cornolli comment on the importance of Jazz to African-Americans: "the new music was not only produced and played according to aesthetic norms and cultural codes different from ours; it did not only transgress most of the rules then held to be specific to Jazz- it also purported to testify to the oppression of black Americans, to express their revolt, and even to play a role in their revolutionary struggle. In short, it was mixing the unmixable: music and politics" (Philippe Cornolli 1).

From the beginning of her life, Cortez was surrounded by music. D.H. Melhem notes that "Cortez enjoyed her parents' extensive record collection, so that music figured importantly in her childhood. She heard the singing of Ella Fitzgerald and of Billie Holiday and Lena Home, both of whom inspired her; she heard the music of Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Jimmy Lunceford. She "fell in love" with the music of Charlie Parker and Theloniou" (Melhem 72). Cortez herself says, "I've been influenced by traditional African art and inspired by African artists and musicians." Following the tradition of improvisation found in Jazz, Cortez's songs often (if not always) feature

some sort of deviation or improvisation from the written version of her poems. The consequences of Cortez's incorporation of Jazz in her poetry are profound. According to Philippe Carles and Jean-Louis Comolli, Jazz is about "giving back to black people their own music, because though created and illustrated by blacks, Jazz has long been offered to the musical influences, commercial interests, cultural pillaging, and aesthetic values of white America, and Western civilization at large" (Carles Comolli 2). Perhaps this is why Cortez never thought to separate music and poetry. To separate music from poetry was to compromise her black culture and past by conforming to white Western ideas of canon and tradition.

Cortez also separated from poetic tradition in her use of non-standard meter and rhyme scheme. Instead of writing in, for example, iambic pentameter, Cortez bases her poetry in music both through actual performance and through Jazz tropes including a swinging beat, syncopation, and improvisation. Additionally, it is significant that Cortez's voice is heard in her poetry and music. We, as listeners and readers, may be able to uncover a certain, perhaps more full, content by listening to a performance and hearing inflections and emotions in Cortez's voice. It is not until we put everything together that the full scope of meaning is realized. When thinking about this idea of voice, Meta DuEwa Jones asks, "What lost information might... actual voice restore? What emotional qualities would we have detected in the countless people who memorized and recited Terry's lines," referring to Lucy Terry, an enslaved poet of Rhode Island in the 1800s (DuEwa 2). Cortez's intentional use of music and voice allow her to recapture

meaning often lost in poetry and connects readers (and, importantly, now a listening audience too) to her political ideas.

Cortez's poetry relies on her music just as her music relies on her poetry. A key part of Jazz is what Ornette Coleman calls "Harmolodics." According to Coleman, harmolodics are "the use of the physical and the mental of one's own logic made into an expression of sound to bring about the musical sensation of unison executed by a single person or with a group" (Spellman 123-124). In other words, "harmony, melody, speed, rhythm, time and phrases all have equal position in the results that come from the placing and spacing of ideas" (Coleman 43). Coleman's theory of Jazz is important as we think about the relationship between Cortez's written and performed work. Like Coleman's "equal positions" of free Jazz, Cortez's poetry and performance are also equally weighted. When asked whether she prefers working alone, simply writing poetry, or performing her poetry with a band, Cortez responded: "I enjoy working alone and with musicians" (Melhem 77). To Cortez, it seems, both written and performed poetry are equally as important. She seems to not distinguish between written and performed poetry, stating instead that she enjoys both forms. For Cortez, there is no reason to limit herself to a single form. Why not have both forms work together for a common goal? By adopting performance, Cortez appeals to a much larger audience than she might have by only publishing poetry. And of course, when promoting political ideas, having a large audience is everything.

Cortez carried forward many of Hughes's ideals in her work. She understood the importance of writing poetry for African Americans. However, Cortez differs from

Hughes in that she was not interested in creating a culture for the African-American community like Hughes and other Harlem Renaissance figures. Instead, she was interested in strengthening that already existing culture. To do this, Cortez turned to Jazz, a distinctly African-American art form. Thomas Hennessey explains that “Jazz began out of the complex black musical life of the late 1880s to 1914... [and that it was] rooted in the oral folk music tradition of the black community” (Hennessey 15). Jazz developed in New Orleans in the late 1800s to early 1900s and was “largely nourished in the African-American community” (NPS). Jazz, being distinctly African-American, spoke directly to Cortez’s African-American audience in the 1970s much like the Blues spoke to the African-American community of the 1920s in Hughes's work. Cortez tapped into the fact that Jazz was rooted in the oral tradition of the black community. Cortez, perhaps in an effort to get back to the roots of what it means to be black, blended her own words with Jazz.

That being said, many members of the black community (both today and in Cortez’s time) think that what Jazz has become is a bastardization of their tradition. Some believe that Jazz has been westernized and turned “white.” Certain groups think that Jazz was stolen from the black community by whites and turned for a profit (Hunter 187). This is important to keep in mind when looking at Cortez’s work. The coupling of Cortez’s words and Jazz is a reclamation of the genre. In “There It Is,” a poem we will take a closer look at shortly, Cortez talks about the white West stealing from those oppressed for profit. By calling these issues to our attention and in a style that some view as stolen, Cortez reclaims Jazz for her community.

Cortez was a creator of of the Black Arts Movement. Much like the artists of the Harlem Renaissance, the artists of the Black Arts Movement were concerned with appealing directly to the Black community without a desire to appeal to others. As Larry Neal comments:

The Black Arts Movement eschews 'protest' literature. It speaks directly to Black people. Implicit in the concept of "protest" literature, as Brother Knight has made clear, is an appeal to white morality: 'Now any Black man who masters the technique of his particular art form, who adheres to the white aesthetic, and who directs his work toward a white audience is, in one sense, protesting. And implicit in the act of protest is the belief that a change will be forthcoming once the masters are aware of the protesters "grievance" (the very word connotes begging, supplications to the gods). Only when that belief has faded and protestings end, will Black art begin.' (Neal 30).

The ideals of the Black Arts Movement mirror many of the ideals of the Harlem Renaissance, including those expressed by Hughes in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." A pressing issue according to both the Black Arts Movement and the Harlem Renaissance, is that a black artist is always tempted to become "more white" and conform to traditional white canon. In doing so, the artist will lose his or her background and soul which leads to the destruction of a specifically black culture. Cortez, as a

leader in the Black Arts Movement, was undeniably in tune with this sentiment.

Etheridge Knight claims that:

Unless the Black artist establishes a 'Black aesthetic' he will have no future at all. To accept the white aesthetic is to accept and validate a society that will not allow him to live. The Black artist must create new forms and new values, sing new songs (or purify old ones); and along with other Black authorities, he must create a new history, new symbols, myths and legends (and purify old ones by fire). And the Black artist, in creating his own aesthetic, must be accountable for it only to the Black people. Further, he must hasten his own dissolution as an individual (in the Western sense)-painful though the process may be, having been breast-fed the poison of 'individual experience.' (Neal 2).

Etheridge Knight's comments reflect Hughes's sentiments that there "is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America--this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible" (Hughes 1). In other words, members of the Black Arts Movement, much like members of the Harlem Renaissance, were interested in forwarding the unique African-American culture by creating new forms of art made specifically for the African-American community. Knight's use of "breast- fed" is particularly interesting because it conjures images of infancy, dependence, and growth, as if to say that African-Americans have been

brought up on these lies and are even perhaps dependent on them until they are able to break their dependence on the white Western world. They are infants, unable to fend for themselves, consuming the very same lies that are in place to control them. Cortez's interest in creating black art is twofold; her break from traditional poetic rules is a clear indicator of her desire to distance herself from white poetic canon, while her incorporation of Jazz, a distinctively black American tradition, solidifies her commitment to writing poetry for a black audience.

Now that we have a basic idea as to *why* Cortez may have performed her poetry with Jazz, we must look at her poetry itself and see how it works towards Cortez's and the Black Arts Movement's goals. The first poem we will look at is "There It Is." Cortez performed "There It Is" with her band the Firespitters on an album titled *There It Is* released in 1982. At the very same time, Cortez released "There it Is" in her book *Firespitter*. This dual publication suggests that Cortez always viewed her poetry as critically tied to her music.

The first stanza of the poem reads:

My friend
they don't care
if you're an individualist
a leftist a rightist
a shithead or a snake
They will try to exploit you

absorb you confine you
disconnect you isolate you
or kill you (Cortez 1-9).

The immediacy of the music in the recording of “There It Is” hits the listener from the beginning. As Aldon Lynn Nielsen writes in his book *Integral Music*, “the Music is already there. By the time the ear falls prey to the groove, the music is already multiplying” (Nielsen 174). In other words, the music is in full swing when the listener comes in, as if he or she walked into a concert mid song and is surrounded immediately by music. Because the music starts so immediately in the recording of the poem and without a build up, the listener gets the sense that the topic of the poem—in this case racism and exploitation—must also already be in full swing. However, this sense only occurs in the recording because, after all, there is no music in the poem. This is why simply reading “There It Is” is not enough; in the printed version, we miss the *immediacy* that the music brings. This harkens back to DuEwa’s question, “what emotional qualities would we have detected in the countless people who memorized and recited Terry’s lines?” (DuEwa 2). In other words, what do we miss when we can not *hear* poetry? In the case of “There It Is,” we may miss a lot.

The poem’s first line—“My friend”—instantly lets us know who the audience of the poem is (much like Hughes’s use of “I heard a Negro play”). Cortez is speaking directly to the African-American community and addressing them as friends. Not only that, Cortez is *intimately* addressing her community. Just as “My Friend” tells us who the

audience is, the next line tells us who the audience is not. The “they” in “they don’t care” sets up an us versus them dichotomy that we must assume is the white Western world. Moreso, the next lines “if you’re an individualist / a leftist a rightist / a shithead or a snake” show the values of “them” and the deep seated racism in the United States (Cortez 3-5). “They” do not care what your political affiliations are, if you are good or bad, or who you are. They will, as the next lines say “exploit you.” And not only will they “exploit you” they will “absorb you confine you / disconnect you isolate you / or kill you.” The violence and physical harm are real. The music that accompanies these lines is as jarring as the words themselves. When Cortez says “They don’t care...” the music loses its rhythmic beat and distorts, mirroring the effects this line has on the listener. The same continues in the lines “they will try to exploit you / absorb you confine you / disconnect you isolate you” as if to say “they” will either take your blackness away, throw you in prison, take you away from your community, or, if all else fails, kill you. What this is saying is that there is an all out war taking place between “us” and “them.” And the stakes include black culture, community, and life.

In the next lines, we learn more about the divisive nature of “them”:

And you will disappear into your own rage
into your own insanity
into your own poverty
into a word a phrase a slogan a cartoon
and then ashes (Cortez 10-14)

The oppression of the white Western world is so heavy that it forces the black community to turn to rage in their hopelessness. This rage only bolsters “their” control over the black community. Deeper and deeper the black community slips into “insanity,” “poverty,” a joke, and then “ashes.” Again, the music in this section supports what Cortez is saying, The music in the background of this stanza falls back into a rhythmic, standard beat, and by reading the poem and music alongside each other, we understand that racism too is a standard, steady, and familiar force in the United States. This supports Cortez’s previous claims that this fight is rooted in the preservation of the black culture and that failure in fighting back means a death to “blackness.” Cortez’s writing itself fortifies this claim as well. The anaphora that Cortez uses when she repeats “into” at the beginning of lines 11, 12, and 13 mimics the repetitive beat of the music and solidifies the idea that racism in the United States is standard and steady. Cortez finishes her stanza saying that the end result of disappearing into “your own rage... insanity... poverty...” is death (Cortez 10-12). As if the victim will disintegrate, unable to hold him or herself together anymore, and turned to ash.

Cortez solidifies this idea in the following lengthy stanza:

The ruling class will tell you that
there is no ruling class
as they organize their liberal supporters into
white supremacist lynch mobs

organize their children into
ku klux klan gangs
organize their police into
killer cops
organize their propaganda into
a device to ossify us with angel dust
preoccupy us with western symbols in
african hair styles
inoculate us with hate
institutionalize us with ignorance
hypnotize us with a monotonous sound designed
to make us evade reality and stomp our lives away
And we are programmed to self-destruct
to fragment
to get buried under covert intelligence operations of
unintelligent committees impulses toward death
And there it is (Cortez 15- 35)

Cortez argues that the "ruling class," or wealthy whites, will deny their role in attacking black culture. However, they are perpetuating, either directly or indirectly, the popularity of violent "white supremacist" groups like the "Ku Klux Klan" and "killer cops." Like stanza above, this stanza starts out with very regular (as in, on a regular beat) music.

As if to say that “Ku Klux Klan gangs” and “killer cops” are normal in American society. And again, Cortez also uses repetition in lines 19, 21, 23, and 25 with the word “organize.” Again, the repetition, music, and even the word “organize” point towards this very organized and systematic racism and emphasizes the action, or the intentionality, of the organization against the black community.. As Cortez and the Firespitters continue, the music intensifies and crescendos at “and stomp our lives away.” This use of crescendo magnifies the intensity of the words Cortez is speaking in this passage and highlights the severity of what she is saying. However, the music softens on the line “And we are programmed to self-destruct,” perhaps commenting on Cortez’s views that something needs to change in order for the black community to fight back effectively. Cortez describes the ways in which “they” attack black culture until her last line where she writes “And there it is.” This line is so simple yet so important. It is a statement of fact: racism exists and it is right there! “There It Is” makes us pause and consider the real world and perhaps how obvious the things Cortez is writing about are. “There it is” suggests that, despite how obvious the attack on the black community are, racism goes unnoticed. This idea is reinforced when Cortez repeats the line (unwritten in the published version of the poem). Again, this is a blending of music and poetry. Her improvisations, a hallmark of Jazz,, highlight the line “And there it is” even more. This idea that the black community goes unnoticed to some needs even more underscoring and so Cortez says it again. Cortez continues:

The enemies polishing their penises between

oil wells at the pentagon
the bulldozers leaping into demolition dances
the old folks dying of starvation
the informers wearing out shoes looking for crumbs
the life blood of the earth almost dead in
the greedy mouth of imperialism
And my friend
they don't care
if you're an individualist
a leftist a rightist
a shithead or a snake (Cortez 36- 47)

Here, Cortez brings her poem to a more macro level. She now brings in controversial political issues about oil and food crises. This takes the “they” and gives them more specific enemies and victims. Cortez argues that this isn’t purely a black versus white issue but a strong versus weak, rich versus poor, battle. However, by giving “them” more enemies, Cortez also gives her community more friends. Cortez aligns the voices of the victims of white oppression. This stanza is particularly important because of the way Cortez says her lines. For example, when Cortez says “the life blood of the earth almost dead” she nearly yells almost, underscoring the urgency of the line. *Almost*, but not quite, unless we don’t stop it. This urgency juxtaposed with the almost pleading tone of her voice in the next lines “and my friend” (followed by a repeated “my friend” in the

recording) begs the listener to pay attention to her warnings and act. The poem continues:

They will spray you with
a virus of legionnaire's disease
fill your nostrils with
the swine flu of their arrogance
stuff your body into a tampon of
toxic shock syndrome
try to pump all the resources of the world
into their own veins
and fly off into the wild blue yonder to
pollute another planet (Cortez 48- 57)

Cortez furthers the “us” versus “them” dichotomy by saying that “they” will “try to pump all the resources of the world / into their own veins / and fly off into the wild blue yonder / to pollute another planet.” These few lines again show the urgency of Cortez’s poem. “They” are exploiting the weak and when “They” have extracted everything from the weak that they can, “They” will move on. It is also significant that Cortez references the body so much in this stanza. Cortez notes that the bodies of the poor will continue to become sick and ill while the bodies of those in power can “pump all the resources of the world into their own veins,” or in other words, afford all the world has to offer to keep

them healthy and powerful as they destroy the world. Cortez comments that the byproduct of “their” treatment of the planet not only results in “their” wealth, but also “their” power over others. In her last stanza, Cortez offers a warning to her audience:

And if we don't fight
if we don't resist
if we don't organize and unify and
get the power to control our own lives
Then we will wear
the exaggerated look of captivity
the stylized look of submission
the bizarre look of suicide
the *dehumanized* look of fear
and the decomposed look of *repression*
forever and ever and ever
And there it is (Cortez 58- 69)

Cortez comments that if the African-American community do not band together and “unify” to “control [their] own lives,” than African Americans are essentially digging their own graves. Cortez finishes her poem with “And there it is” again. This time, however, “there it is” does not hold the same meaning it did earlier in the poem. Instead of working to point out the obviousness of the repression, “there it is” points towards the

ease in which “they” can destroy “us.” As if to say, and that is that. If the black community does not work together to fight back against the western Whites, according to Cortez, they will be eliminated, “and there it is.”

Cortez’s other work in the Black Arts Movement solidifies her desire to make art for African-Americans and celebrate others doing just that. Cortez has written many poems praising other black artists, including “Blues Lady” in praise of Ella Fitzgerald, “I see Chano Pozo” in praise of the black Cuban Jazz artist. Cortez finds the best in African-American culture and celebrates it. She also writes about serious issues that African Americans face. She takes on racism in poems such as “The Oppressionists,” she builds positivity around African Culture in poems such as “African Night Suite.” She celebrates African-Americans in works like “Blues Lady,,” and she does all of this in a Jazzy style. In other words, Cortez is an African-American poet who, like Hughes and Lamar, writes and performs for the African-American community first and foremost. After all, “There It Is” is addressed to other black Americans, warning about the oppression of the white West.

Cortez takes the lessons and precedents that Langston Hughes set forth—such as modeling poetic form after musical forms—to the next level. Instead of making her printed words feel like music, Cortez based her poetry on music in performance, and relies on the interplay of written and performed poetry to make meaning. Instead of emulating musical tropes in her poetry like Hughes did, Cortez decided to experiment with including live music as part of her writing. In doing so, Cortez was able to found her poetry in political ideas about blackness.

Chapter 3: Kendrick Lamar and Hip-Hop

It would be impossible to talk about the relationship between African-American poetry and music without discussing rap and one its greatest artists, Kendrick Lamar. Rap is a form of modern African-American music that relies heavily on the interplay between music and spoken word that quite literally bridges the gap between poetry and music. Lamar uses rap as a unique platform to project his poetry and does not seem to distinguish between his music and poetry. Rather, Lamar generously mixes the two. As he puts it in his song "Poetic Justice": "I mean I write poems in these songs" (Lamar 14).

Kendrick Lamar was born in Compton California in 1987. Compton is to African-American rap what Harlem was to African-American Blues, Jazz, and poetry. The list of influential rappers from Compton includes all of the members of the revolutionary N.W.A group: Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, Eazy- E, MC Ren and DJ Yella, to name a few. These rappers, like Hughes and Cortez, were also interested in celebrating black culture. N.W.A's "Straight Outta Compton" is a perfect example of its members' desire to celebrate their black roots. "Straight Outta Compton" celebrates being from a poor black community instead of hiding from it. While the hypermasculinity and bravado of "Straight Outta Compton" is an issue in the song (think lines like "Boy, you can't fuck with me, So when I'm in your neighborhood, you better duck, 'Cause Ice Cube is crazy as fuck") the idea that the members of N.W.A were proud of their heritage still rings true (NWA 25- 27). Lamar, like many young rappers, looked up to N.W.A. because of their legendary status in the rap game. In fact, Lamar has collaborated with Dr. Dre on

various songs and is even signed at Dr. Dre's record label *Aftermath Entertainment*.

Lamar was influenced by the social and political climate in Compton during his childhood. *Rolling Stone* comments on Lamar's relationship to his race and community in his album *To Pimp a Butterfly*, commenting:

But of all the album's colors, the most prominent is black. There are allusions to the entire sweep of African-American history, from the diaspora to the cotton fields to the Harlem renaissance to Obama. 'Mortal Man' (inspired in part by a 2014 trip to South Africa) name-checks leaders from Mandela to MLK all the way back to Moses. On 'King Kunta,' a stomping blast of James Brown funk, he imagines himself as the titular slave from *Roots*, shouting the punchline 'Everybody wanna cut the legs off him! / Black man taking no losses!' (Eells 1).

As a black man in Compton, Lamar has been defined by the the history of racial tension and African-American gang activity in the city. Lamar, claims that he is done "taking losses" from those who wish him harm, and that is going to turn himself from the slave Kunta into the king, King Kunta.

To further understand Lamar, we must first understand more about rap. Rap is an art form that has deep roots in African-American tradition. Rap has the power to take issues like poverty, race, and racism and bring them to the forefront of pop culture. In other words, rap is an outlet for certain communities to share their experience and *actually* be listened to. Because of the popularity of rap in the United States, issues that

may normally be ignored by white America, such as racial injustice or education inequality based on race, can be catapulted into the public eye. Derrick Alridge and James Stewart expand on this thought:

Over the past three decades, Hip Hop has developed as a cultural and artistic phenomenon affecting youth culture around the world. For many youth, Hip Hop reflects the social, economic, political, and cultural realities and conditions of their lives, speaking to them in a language and manner they understand. As a result of both its longevity and its cogent message for many youth worldwide, Hip Hop cannot be dismissed as merely a passing fad or as a youth movement that will soon run its course. Instead, Hip Hop must be taken seriously as a cultural, political, economic, and intellectual phenomenon deserving of scholarly study, similar to previous African-American artistic and cultural movements such as the Blues, Jazz, the New Negro Renaissance, and the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Black Arts Movements. (Alridge Stewart 190)

Despite the very serious work that rap does in progressing the African-American narrative and African-American art, rap still lacks cultural capital compared to poetry. Alridge and Stewart comment on this issue: “much Hip Hop, like earlier African-American art and cultural forms and those of many other ethnic minority groups, has been commodified by what Frankfurt School theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno called ‘the culture industry,’ which has distributed Hip Hop to the

masses in ways that reinforce historical stereotypes about African-Americans by highlighting sexist, misogynistic, and nihilistic lyrics and images... however... Hip Hop... often defy and challenge the negative images promulgated by mainstream commercial media” (Alridge Stewart 193). In other words, much like Jazz with Cortez, certain rap has been Westernized and white-washed. Instead of doing serious work that comments on issues such as racism, some of today’s rap is commodified in order to sell the misogynistic, and violent content that some people have mistakenly associated with rap. Lamar is a welcomed break from this white commodification of rap and hip-hop. However, there are other forms of rap which are much more authentic and in keeping with African-American and black traditions.

The idea that rap does not have much cultural capital may have something to do with the fact that poetic canon is somewhat rigid and, more importantly, slow to change. To put it in perspective, Langston Hughes published his first critically acclaimed work, “The Negro Speaks Rivers” in 1921 in *Crisis Magazine*. It wasn’t until 1961 that Hughes was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters and was solidified in American canon. It took the poetic canon 40 years to include Hughes's work in standard American anthologies. Perhaps Hip-Hop has not existed long enough to gain the necessary social capital to be studied seriously? Perhaps racial prejudices and lack of social capital have forced Lamar and his artform out of modern canon? Or perhaps some combination of the two? It is an undeniable fact that rap is not given the same scholarly attention that poetry receives. To counter this neglect, this chapter will read rap as poetry with ties to music and suggest that Lamar is firmly rooted within the canon

of American poetry, as he should be, alongside the likes of Hughes and Cortez. All three artists appeal to black history and tradition in both their written words and their choice of music. Hughes pays homage to his black roots in poems such as “The Negro Speaks in Rivers” and appeals to his contemporary black community through popular black music, the Blues. Cortez pays homage to her black roots in poems like “I see Chano Pozo” and appeals to her contemporary black community through popular black music, Jazz. And Lamar pays homage to his black roots in songs like “DNA” through lines such as “I got loyalty got royalty inside my DNA” and appeals to his current black community through popular black music, rap (Lamar 2). The parallels between the three artists are undeniable.

However, what separates Lamar from Hughes and Cortez is the fact that, while Lamar makes music that reflects the black experience in the United States and that is catered towards the black community, because of the popularity of Hip Hop, Lamar’s audience also includes many non-black folks. The same is true for Hughes and Cortez, however, the scale is much larger for Lamar; his audience consists of millions of people. This gives his music even more power. Lamar is able to make his audience *feel* the pain and joy and complication he is going through just as Hughes and Cortez are able to do, but on a larger scale. The popularity of his music allows Lamar to express his personal trials to people from all backgrounds in a hope that his words can strike a nerve and create a dialogue that was missing before. This is the importance of studying Kendrick Lamar. Lamar has transformed black poetry and has done exactly what Hughes and

Cortez strived to do; he has made poetry accessible to almost everyone. Through music, Lamar delivers his poetry and message to an audience of millions.

Before I begin a close reading of Lamar's work, let us first discuss the differences between Lamar and other rappers, and just why Lamar's rap may be considered poetry. It is important to understand that, just like poetry, there are many variations of rap.

There is rap that eloquently, cleverly, and succinctly addresses serious social issues just like there is poetry that does the same. Additionally, the form itself is pushing the boundaries of what is possible with regards to meter and rhyme. The sophistication of rhyme scheme in modern rap rivals and often surpasses those in the traditional canon.

Additionally, it is important to point out that Lamar does not use ghostwriters. A ghostwriter is a person who writes songs for other artists and who do not perform the songs themselves. This is a typical practice in rap and music today. The fact that Lamar writes his own words and rhymes is a testament to his poetic skill. Lamar writes "I called myself the best rapper. I cannot call myself the best rapper if I have a ghostwriter. If you're saying you're a different type of artist and you don't really care about the art form of being the best rapper, then so be it. Make great music." (Lamar 1). Lamar is proud of the fact that his work comes from his mind only and not from a committee. Additionally, Lamar boasts some of the most complex rhymes, extended vocabulary, and structurally complex raps in the world. One simply has to look at Lamar's verse in ScHoolboy Q's "THat Part" remix. Below are Lamar's lines highlighted in different colors to show the complexity of his rhyme scheme.

"Society kept my IQ vexed

Deny me from an Ivy school

Applyin' me to the street I slept
 I quietly had to hold this tool
 Reminding me of the block I repped
 The turf I stepped, the church and the earth I blessed
 The first I guessed the alert was the murk I chef
 That hearse the flirt with perks of a kill confessed
 Dispersed the worst, the first 48 addressed
 The search and laws and verse of the birth I nest
 The—uh, the awe, the curse of a pose in zest
 The good, the flaws, the pain to reverse what's left, aw" (Genius).

The sheer density and complexity of the rhyme scheme rivals (if not surpasses) most modern poets and is enough to show Lamar's talent. What is even more impressive about Lamar's verse is that he is able to talk about serious societal problems like access to education and the negative impacts a lack of educational access can have on a young person. Lamar packs his verse so densely to show how ingrained these issues are in society. The verse literally locks together through the rhymes much like the injustice that Lamar is talking about is locked in to how society functions. Additionally, Lamar flexes his creative muscles to show that he and his community are in fact worthy of education. He has tremendous talent, intelligence, and potential, yet is still barred from receiving an education. Many others in his community, who are less fortunate, are unable to polish their skills through education and are not enjoying the same success

Lamar was able to earn. Now, Lamar is attempting to use his talent to shed light on the education inequality in the United States through his rap.

Moving forward, I will begin to analyze Lamar's work by closely reading his song "The Blacker The Berry." Before we analyze Lamar's poetry, we must define a few terms. To begin, when I refer to Lamar's lyrics, I will often say that Lamar is "rapping." I will define rap as "rhyme, rhythmic speech, and street vernacular" (Keyes 1). Lamar is certainly not singing, but in the same regard, he is not quite speaking either. He is adding a bit of musical tone to his voice that is unique to rap. "The Blacker The Berry" starts off with Lamar rapping:

Everything black, I don't want black
I want everything black, I ain't need black
Some white some black, I ain't mean black
I want everything black
Everything black, I don't want black
I want everything black, I ain't need black
Some white some black, I ain't mean black
I want everything black (Lamar 1-8)

This part of the song is nearly muted and has an eerie quality to it. We can hardly hear what Lamar is saying. This puts us firmly in Lamar's head. The complicated, contradicting lines represent Lamar's inner struggle about what it means to be black in

the United States today. Lamar is clearly struggling with his identity. Again, this uncertainty about identity and blackness echoes Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" and DuBois "The Souls of Black Folks" in that he may be experiencing a "double-consciousness" of his own. In addition, the background music is a recording of a woman singing during this section of the song has lyrics of its own that should not be ignored. "They want us to bow / Down to our knees / And pray to a God / That we don't believe" (Lamar 1-4). This specific choice in background music is a quick reference to religion and whiteness, a topic that Lamar will explore later in his rap.

Lamar continues:

Six in the morning, fire in the street
Burn baby burn, that's all I wanna see
And sometimes I get off watching you die in vain
It's such a shame they may call me crazy
They may say I suffer from schizophrenia or something but homie you made me
Black don't crack my ni**" (Lamar 9-14)

Lamar sets the scene for the rest of his song with the line "Six in the morning, fire in the street" (Lamar 9). This line clues the listener in to the fact that Lamar will likely be rapping about a protest, and we find out later on that, in fact, the rap is about the Ferguson protests. Lamar again references his personality conflicts when he writes "They may say I suffer from schizophrenia or something but homie you made me." This

line again is in conversation with Hughes and DuBois and their theories on duality of consciousness in black folks. DuBois, who originally outlined and coined double-consciousness, writes:

One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The History of the American Negro is the history of this strive-this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (DuBois 3)

Double- Consciousness is an important theme that “The Blacker The Berry” explores. Throughout the song we will see Lamar wrestling with his personal thoughts on police brutality, violence, and killings while trying to justify his own part in that violence. In other words, Lamar sees the white authority being violent in his community, yet he also understands that that same authority views him and his peers as the perpetrators of that violence. Lamar needs to sort out what he believes and sees versus what he and the rest of the world are told, and this is struggling internally. This idea is evident when Lamar enters at full volume (signifying that we are out of the singers head and he is talking to us) and raps, “I'm the biggest hypocrite of 2015 / Once I finish this, witnesses

will convey just what I mean” (Lamar 15). Lamar is struggling with the idea of double consciousness and anger that he can’t quite place. Just by calling himself a hypocrite, Lamar is showing he listeners and readers that he is struggling with double consciousness. He believes he is part of the problem because that is how he (as a rapper and an affiliate [not member] of a gang) is defined by the white West and does not seem to accept that he and his community were forced into these situations because of a racist system. Perhaps he has found why he is angered because he alludes to the fact that the listener will understand what he means by the end of his rap. Being a “hypocrite” perhaps ties to this idea of being defined by whiteness.

“The Blacker The Berry” continues:

Been feeling this way since I was 16, came to my senses

You never liked us anyway, fuck your friendship, I meant it

I'm African-American, I'm African

I'm black as the moon, heritage of a small village

Pardon my residence

Came from the bottom of mankind

My hair is nappy, my dick is big, my nose is round and wide

You hate me don't you? (Lamar 10-17)

Lamar comments that his feelings of confusion and anger have been brewing within him since he was a young man. His tone suddenly shifts and begins to attack. “You never

liked us anyway, fuck your friendship, I meant it" (Lamar 17). The "you" Lamar is referring to is meant to be white America. He is using much of the same rhetoric strategies as Cortez in "There It Is." Lamar sets up an "Us / Them" dichotomy by juxtaposing "I" and "you." However, as we have already noted above, the dichotomy is much more complex than the simple "Us / Them" because of issues of double consciousness. Lamar continues with "I'm African-American" but quickly retracts his statement and comments "I'm African,," suggesting that he does not have any American in him (Lamar 18). Lamar identifies with African Americans' collective relationship to Africa. He states that he is African, but nothing more, as if to say that that common bond is enough for him to find camaraderie with others in his community. Lamar is quoted as saying "We never dream of Africa. Like, 'Damn, this is the motherland.' You feel it as soon as you touch down. That moment changed my whole perspective on how to convey my art" (Chappelle). Lamar's verse gets especially pointed when he raps, "Pardon my residence" as in, excuse me for being black and in America (Lamar 20). Lamar's next three lines reference stereotypical African physical traits and ends with Lamar asking directly if "you" (white America) hates him. However, instead of asking "do you hate me?" Lamar raps, matter of factly, "you hate me don't you?" as if to say he knows the answer (Lamar 23). Lamar continues:

You hate my people, your plan is to terminate my culture

You're fuckin' evil I want you to recognize that I'm a proud monkey

You vandalize my perception but can't take style from me

And this is more than confession

I mean I might press the button just so you know my discretion

I'm guardin' my feelins, I know that you feel it

You sabotage my community, makin' a killin'

You made me a killer, emancipation of a real ni**a (Lamar 24-31)

Again, Lamar's "Blacker Than Berry" is in conversation with Cortez's "There It Is" about the fear that black culture will be destroyed by white America. Lamar writes that "you" are "fuckin' evil" and despite the fact that "you" are trying to destroy his way of life by turning him white, he is "a proud monkey" (Lamar 25). Lamar uses the term "monkey," a racist term for black folks, and reclaims it as his own, saying that he is proud of his heritage. This is reminiscent of Henry Louis Gates' idea of "Signifyin(g)" in his works *Blackness of Blackness: A Critique on the Sign and the Signifying Monkey* and *The Signifying Monkey*. Gates describes the signifying monkey, a trope in African-American folklore, who uses trickery to mediate between the Gods and man (*The Blackness* 988). Gates argues that, like the tricky Monkey, African-American literature is slyly connected through careful wordplay. In other words, many important pieces of African-American literature connect to one another using different tropes, themes, names, or repetition. By using the trope of the monkey, Lamar inserts himself into an important lineage of African-American writers.

Gates argues that African-American literature is based in tricky wordplay and connectedness. Why then, should rap, a form that is literally based in wordplay and

constantly references other rappers and rap songs, not be included in the canon? For one answer, we can turn to Lamar's verse. Lamar writes: "you vandalize my perception but can't take style from me" meaning that "you" are trying to appropriate his culture, yet can not make it your own style (Lamar 26). Lamar ends his verse with the lines "You sabotage my community, makin' a killin'/ You made me a killer, emancipation of a real ni**a" (Lamar 30-31). Again, Lamar points out his anger towards "you" by saying that white America purposefully attacked African Americans and forced them to turn on each other while white America prospered off of that violence. However, as reflected in his last five words, Lamar now knows what "you" are doing. He uses the word "emancipated" ironically because of its relationship to freedom and slavery, yet he does not feel free even though he now knows the truth. In fact, Lamar brings up the question of if he even is free.

Taking a step back and looking at form, we see anaphora in this verse. In line 29 Lamar repeats similar sounds in feeling, and feel it, as well as "makin' a killin'" and "made me a killer" to name a few instances of anaphora and chiasmus. In this particular example, the chiasmus does not draw the words together but rather separates them. For Lamar, he becomes a killer, a (obviously) negative thing for society while "you" make a killing. Lamar's form is just another example of how he sets up an us / them dichotomy within his song. Lamar then goes into a pre-hook verse,

The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice

The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice

The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice

The blacker the berry, the bigger I shoot (Lamar 32-35)

On the surface, “The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice” is a celebration of being black and loving oneself for that (Lamar 32). However, those familiar with African-American studies or the Harlem Renaissance will look at these lines and immediately recall Wallace Thurman’s novel *The Blacker The Berry: A Novel of Negro Life*. Thurman’s book is about a young black woman who experiences racism from white people and colorism from black people, and eventually accepts her skin color and is proud of her roots. However, Lamar turns this narrative around with line 35, “The blacker the berry, the bigger I shoot” (Lamar 35). Lamar is commenting on the current climate in the United States and saying that the darker skinned a person is, the more likely they are to be involved with some sort of violence, at least that is how they can be portrayed by the media in the United States. Lamar leaves us to interpret whether he is talking about gang violence or police violence; he is likely referring to both, as alluded to in Lamar’s use of anaphora in this line. The repeating intro in these lines imply multiplicity and multiple meanings. Just as the sounds are connected, so too are the themes and undertones. Lamar’s song continues into the hook:

said they treat me like a slave, cah' me black

Woi, we feel a whole heap of pain, cah' we black

And man a say they put me in a chain, cah' we black

Imagine now, big gold chain full of rocks
How you no see the whip, left scars pon' me back
But now we have a big whip, parked pon' the block
All them say we doomed from the start, cah' we black
Remember this, every race start from the block, just remember that (Lamar
36-43).

Jamaican rapper Assassin sings this part of Lamar's song. Importantly, Assassin speaks in a heavy Jamaican accent. Lamar and Assassin want to show that black people should not be lumped into one category and that there is great diversity amongst this racial group. This point is juxtaposed with what Assassin is saying in his verse. Assassin raps about experiences that he sees as almost universal amongst all black people. He writes "said they treat me like a slave, cah' me black / Woi, we feel a whole heap of pain, cah' we black" (Lamar 36-37). Despite being from a completely different place than Lamar, having different values, a different way of life, and even a completely different vernacular and voice, both Assassin feels the same sort of discrimination as Lamar. In other words, Assassin and Lamar agree that racism is borderless and being black can erase other differences in the minds of the white west. The connection between Lamar and Assassin, two people separated by nationality and geography yet connected by race, speaks to the collective experience of black folks across the globe. The references to slavery in Assassin's verse highlight this point. This collective experience is just what Hughes and Cortez have been writing about in their own poetry,

and again it shows up here with Lamar. After Assassin's hook, Lamar comes back in for his second verse:

I'm the biggest hypocrite in 2015

Once I finish this, witnesses will convey just what I mean

I mean it's evident I'm irrelevant to society

That's what you're telling me, penitentiary would only hire me

Curse me till I'm dead

Church me with your fake prophesizing that I'mma be another slave in my head

Institutionalize manipulation and lies

Reciprocation of freedom only live in your eyes (Lamar 44-51).

Lamar starts his second verse with the familiar "I'm the biggest hypocrite in 2015,," again reminding us that he himself is equally at fault for perpetuating violence as white America. This is an important point to consider. As a rapper, Lamar is part of a group that sometimes glorifies murder, womanizing, violence, and drugs. Lamar often stays away from these stereotypical rap tropes, but is still a part of a community of rappers. These lines echo the sentiments in the Assassin hook from above. Lamar continues to say "I mean it's evident I'm irrelevant to society / That's what you're telling me, penitentiary would only hire me" (Lamar 46- 47). Again, Lamar laments that he is not a productive member in society despite his powerful and successful rap career. Lamar also comments on the disproportionate number of incarcerated African Americans that

we see today, saying that jail is perhaps the only “career path” for a black man in the United States. Lamar rhymes evident with irrelevant, supporting his claim that he and his community are viewed as irrelevant in the Western white world. Lamar continues to argue that white people give just enough hope to black folks to keep them complacent yet still work to control and exploit them with no real desire to change anything. Lamar’s verse continues:

You hate me don't you?

I know you hate me just as much as you hate yourself

Jealous of my wisdom and cards I dealt

Watchin' me as I pull up, fill up my tank then peel out

Muscle cars like pull ups, show you what these big wheels bout

I'm black and successful, this black man meant to be special

Katzkins on my radar bitch, how can I help you?

How can I tell you that I'm making a killin'?

You made me a killer, emancipation of a real ni**a (Lamar 52-60)

Lamar again asks if “you hate me” and affirms that he knows “you” do (Lamar 52). However, this time, Lamar continues to say that “you” (white America) hate him because of jealousy. “You” hate Lamar because he has beaten the odds and has become “black and successful” (Lamar 57). Lamar has taken the negativity and oppression surrounding his culture and has flipped it to become successful, which he

defines in this song as wealthy, wise, and in control of one's own destiny. Lamar raps about social issues and the difficulties with being black in today's society. Instead of looking at his skin color as a negative, Lamar takes pride in who he is. In this respect, Lamar has "dealt his own cards" in life, so to speak. He has taken what could be seen as negative, reversed it, and has become successful through it. This sentiment is fortified in his last line, "emancipation of a real ni**a" (Lamar 60). Lamar's word choice here is as important as the line itself. He uses emancipation, a term loaded with racial undertones remnant of the Civil War and slavery, to comment on the fact that perhaps he does not feel free or "emancipated" in today's society. Lamar then brings his pre-hook and hook back in, again doing the same work they did above. He then begins his last verse of the song:

I'm the biggest hypocrite in 2015
When I finish this if you listenin' I'm sure you will agree
This plot is bigger than me, it's generational hatred
It's genocism, it's grimy, little justification
I'm African-American, I'm African
I'm black as the heart of a fuckin' Aryan
I'm black as the name of Tyrone and Dareous
Excuse my French but fuck you, no fuck ya'll
That's as blunt as it gets" (Lamar 73-81)

Lamar starts this third verse the same way he starts his other two, again calling attention to the fact that he is part of the problem as well, but the listener doesn't yet know in what way exactly. Lamar delays telling the listener why he is a hypocrite because he is ashamed of what he has done. Lamar raps: "this plot is bigger than me, it's generational hatred / It's genocism, it's grimy, little justification" (Lamar 75-76). Lamar suggests that racism dates back generations, and calls racism and violence a genocide. The violence against his people has lasted for a long time and many have died because, from Lamar's point of view, white America has tried to "terminate [their] culture" (Lamar 24). Again, Lamar writes "I'm African-American" and quickly retracts his statement by saying he is African, implying he has no white American in him (Lamar 78-79). Interestingly, Lamar defines all Americans as white by default to show the ubiquitousness of white power in America. Later in the verse Lamar goes on to say, "Excuse my French but fuck you, no fuck y'all / That's as blunt as it gets,," commenting on the fact that the public narrative surrounding race and racism in the United States is not as blunt as he wants it to be and that he is willing to make a change to push the narrative to a new, more frank, level. In addition, this line fortifies the thought that the "you" Lamar is talking to is actually a "y'all," white America.

Lamar finishes his song with the lines,

it's funny how Zulu and Xhosa might go to war

Two tribal armies that want to build and destroy

Remind me of these Compton crip gangs that live next door

Beefin' with Piru's, only death settle the score
So don't matter how much I say I like to preach with the Panthers
Or tell Georgia State "Marcus Garvey got all the answers"
Or try to celebrate February like it's my B-Day
Or eat watermelon, chicken and Kool-Aid on weekdays
Or jump high enough to get Michael Jordan endorsements
Or watch BET cause urban support is important
So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street?
When gang banging make me kill a ni**a blacker than me?
Hypocrite! (Lamar 87-99)

Lamar references Zulu and Xhosa, two South African tribes that have been historically rivals and relates them to the gangs the Crips and the Bloods. These lines mark a change in Lamar's rap. Instead of expressing outrage at white America, Lamar looks inward at himself and wonders why there is so much fighting within his community. He goes on to write "So don't matter how much I say I like to preach with the Panthers / Or tell Georgia State "Marcus Garvey got all the answers" (Lamar 91-92). In other words, even if he calls himself a champion of black rights and culture which he supports by the following 4 lines of listing stereotypical "black" things to do like celebrate Black History Month), he is still part of the problem. This sentiment is driven home when he writes "So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street? / When gang banging make me kill a ni**a blacker than me? / Hypocrite!" (Lamar 97-99). Lamar wonders why he cries

after atrocities like Trayvon Martin's murder when he or his friends have been responsible for killing or hurting other people in his community. We finally find out why Lamar considers himself a hypocrite with these last lines; he is complicit in violence himself.

That being said, here is a massive difference between state-sanctioned violence and gang-related violence. State sanctioned violence perpetuates systematic racism while gang-related violence is a product of systemic racism. One simply has to look at the United States penitentiaries to see that there are far more prisoners in jail for gang-related violence compared to police officers in jail for brutality. There are an average of 2,758 gang member incarcerations annually as of May 2017 (Statistic Brain). Conversely, there were 26 police brutality convictions since 2005 (CNN). Lamar still seems to believe that he is as culpable in violence against his community as violent police despite these facts. In an interview with MTV, Lamar remarked that "what happened to [Michael Brown] should've never happened. Never. But when we don't have respect for ourselves, how do we expect them to respect us? It starts from within. Don't start with just a rally, don't start from looting — it starts from within... I've been through a lot and I seen a lot. Where I come from -- I did a lot to tear down my own community" (MTV). Lamar's quote gives us an inside view into what he might have meant with his last line in "The Blacker The Berry." Lamar recognizes that he and his community need to have faith in themselves in order to progress and beat the systemic racism in the United States. Lamar admits to hurting his own community's faith in itself and "tearing" it down.

Lamar has seen the effects of white supremacy and systemic racism first hand in his own community. Looking closely at the end of “The Blacker the Berry,” we finally find Lamar in the middle of this controversy. Lamar is having trouble deciding if he is part of the problem or not. He is experiencing a moment of double consciousness in that he understands that he and his community are being portrayed as the problem yet he is witnessing something completely different. The white Western world would like him to think that he and his community are the problem, that he and other African Americans are inherently violent. In this way, it is telling that Lamar believes that he is culpable in these killings. Lamar represents an ambivalent sentiment among his people and exemplifies a double consciousness and lack of agency over oneself. If he *thinks* that he is culpable, then the white Western world has control over the way he sees himself. If he does not, he has agency over his own self-image. Much like Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, Lamar is fighting with who and what to believe. This confusion and inner conflict manifests itself in Lamar’s anger; after all, he yells “Hypocrite” in his last line.

Concluding a close reading of a Lamar “The Blacker The Berry” brings us back to a question I proposed above. Can Lamar’s rap stand alone as poetry? The answer is undeniably yes. Lamar’s rhyme scheme, engagement with other current and past texts/ songs, and larger questions and commentary on race prove that this song that is thought provoking and engaging in a form consistent with the poetic cannon. For Lamar, rap is an effective means of packaging poetry for the African American community. In particular, Lamar wants to connect his own feelings and experiences to

others. In an interview, he claims that “But for me to actually feel an idea, it has to come from me. And a lot of times, I have to block out different needs and wants just for my own selfish reasons. But at the end of the day, it comes out where, whether you like it or not, you know it comes from a real place. It's gonna feel unapologetic, uncompromising, and it's gonna feel me” (GQ 1). To put it simply, Lamar is interested in affecting others through sharing his personal experience. To do this, he needs to talk about things that happened to him and affect him in a style that is uncompromisingly his own. This mindset is very similar to the mindset prevalent during the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement: Black art for the black community. Lamar and his community are familiar with rap. It is a medium that they have grown up listening to. Because of this connection that he and his community share, Lamar has chosen rap as his medium to package his poetry in the same way that Lear chose limericks and Matsuo chose haikus. Lamar uses his personal experiences and landscapes to talk about his black experience in America. In an interview with *GQ Magazine*, Lamar talks about his inspirations:

Oh, man. First off would have to be how I was raised. The environment. My father being a complete realist, just in the streets. And my mother being a dreamer. It starts there first, before I even heard any type of melody or lyric. That's just DNA. It's always the yin and the yang, the good versus the evil. And that pushed me toward the music that I love to listen to. You know, Tupac, Biggie, Jay. Your usual suspects. These were the people that was played in my household.... So I was being exposed to all these ideas, from Big Daddy Kane to

Eazy-E to the Bay Area—Too Short, E-40—you know, back to Marvin Gaye and the Isley Brothers. This field of music just broadened my ideas to come. We never would've thought in a million years that I'd be doing it. (GQ 1).

It comes as no surprise then, that rap, like Blues and Jazz for Hughes and Cortez, would be the medium Lamar chooses to share his poetry. Reading his poetry versus listening to it is a completely different experience; we are profoundly struck with the level of skill he possesses. Quite literally, we are excited by the “beautiful,” “imaginative,” and “elevated thoughts” that Lamar gives to us. Nowhere in the definition of poetry is there a line that says music cannot be involved. After all, poetry is an art form that can be as rigid or loose as the author wants. We need to expand our horizons and begin to realize that rap of the same caliber as Lamar’s *is* poetry. It may not look like the traditional canon that we have become accustomed to, but it is poetry nonetheless and should be respected as such.

Lamar has become an activist and spokesperson for his community much in the way Hughes and Cortez were for theirs. Lamar advocates on the behalf of African-Americans in songs like “The Blacker The Berry” and “Alright.” Lamar has become one of this generation’s African-American poets of the people. He is concerned with advancing his community through his poetry. He has taken it upon himself to address white America and begin to call out and explore systemic racism that is plaguing our society. Lamar pushes the boundaries of poetry itself through non-traditional forms, complex rhyme schemes, and vernacular language, as well as

through his content. He pushes society to examine and critique itself through pointed and intentional criticism and analysis.

Conclusion: Broadening Our Canon

The link between African-American poetry and music is undeniably strong. Over the course of America's history, field hollers and slave songs have blurred the line between poetry and song. The same tradition holds true today with African-American poetry. The poems of Langston Hughes sway with the tom-tom of the Blues. The music-poem hybrid verses of Jayne Cortez swing with mood of Jazz. The bars of Kendrick Lamar provoke thought with the complexity of poetry. The cross-pollination of ideas and disciplines is so strong within these three figures that I can not justify qualifying one as poet and another as musician. Each figure is a hybrid of the two, a manifestation of a rich, complex, and enduring African-American tradition. They represent their communities and their heritage, making works for their own people while simultaneously spreading their political messages to the masses.

Thinking about the conclusion of this project, I am continuously nagged with the thought that music is not respected as much as traditional poetry is in the traditional literary canon. While I understand that this sentiment is changing and music is gaining more and more respect daily, I am still disturbed by the slow-moving nature of literature. Just because something is a poem does not mean it can not also be a great song or visa versa. We are too singular in our categories. The definition of poetry is this, "A composition, often in Lines, that draws on some or all of the following common features: rhythm, meter, figuration" (*Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*). The definition is distinctly open. Poetry is meant to be experimental, pushing boundaries and testing new waters. Music, despite its long tradition in the poetic canon, has fallen out of

favor in modern times. However, it is up to us as scholars to value this history and remember it. Poetry is a discipline that continuously looks forward while remembering the past.

Looking at these poets through an interdisciplinary lens is important and necessary to understand how they and their work functions. One can never understand the true magnitude and importance of these artists works without focusing on both poetry and music. Written word and music are intertwined into the very DNA of Hughes, Cortez, and Lamar. We, as an academic community, owe it to these artists to to study all facets of their work, not just bits and pieces.

We as academics also owe it to artists to be open minded about their work. Where would the English literature community be if we chose to ignore Hughes's, Cortez's, and, perhaps mostly so, Lamar's work simply because it was intertwined with music? And where would the American music community be if it chose to ignore these artists as well? We have so much to learn from each other that it is pointless to make barriers based on differences. Instead, we should build bridges and work together to learn for the sake of improving. Together, with an open and inclusive mind, is where great academic progress is made.

The lessons I learned through reading across disciplines y are not unique to the study of these three poets. Throughout the academic world, interdisciplinary study is breaking into the unknown and challenging many scholarly norms. My hope is that this project has inspired others to think about the importance of interdisciplinary work and the fruits it can bear. The world is full of overlapping categories and classifications.

Finding these overlaps and studying them with open minds is the key to progressing the academic world.

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