

Université de Montréal

**In the Circle: Jazz Griots and the Mapping of African
American Cultural Memory in Poetry**

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Résumé

Ma thèse de doctorat, *In the Circle: Jazz Griots and the Mapping of African American Cultural History in Poetry*, étudie la façon dont les poètes afro-américains des années 1960 et 1970, Langston Hughes, David Henderson, Sonia Sanchez, et Amiri Baraka, emploient le jazz afin d'ancrer leur poésie dans la tradition de performance. Ce faisant, chacun de ces poètes démontre comment la culture noire, en conceptualisant à travers la performance des modes de résistance, fût utilisée par les peuples de descendance africaine pour contrer le racisme institutionnalisé et les discours discriminatoires. Donc, pour les fins de cette thèse, je me concentre sur quatre poètes engagés dans des dialogues poétiques avec la musicologie, l'esthétique, et la politique afro-américaines des années 1960 et 1970. Ces poètes affirment la centralité de la performativité littéraire noire afin d'assurer la survie et la continuité de la mémoire culturelle collective des afro-américains. De plus, mon argument est que la théorisation de l'art afro-américain comme engagement politique devient un élément central à l'élaboration d'une esthétique noire basée sur la performance. Ma thèse de doctorat propose donc une analyse originale des ces quatre poètes qui infusent leur poèmes avec des références au jazz et à la politique dans le but de rééduquer les générations des années 2000 en ce qui concerne leur mémoire collective.

Mots-clés : poésie, afro-américaine, performance, jazz, politique, Langston Hughes, David Henderson, Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, mémoire culturelle, esthétique noire

Abstract

My doctoral dissertation, *In the Circle: Jazz Griots and the Mapping of African American Cultural History in Poetry* studies the ways in which African American poets of the 1960s and 1970s, Langston Hughes, David Henderson, Sonia Sanchez, and Amiri Baraka employ jazz in order to ground their poetry in the tradition of performance. In so doing, each poet illustrates how black expressive culture, by conceptualizing through performance modes of resistance, has historically been used by people of African descent to challenge institutionalized racism and discriminatory discourses. Therefore, for the purpose of this dissertation, I focus on four poets who engage in dialogues with and about black musicology, aesthetics, and politics of the 1960s and 1970s; they assert the centrality of literary rendition for the survival and continuance of the collective cultural memory of Black Americans. In turn, I suggest that their theorization of artistry as political engagement becomes a central element in the construction of a Black Aesthetic based on performance. *In the Circle: Jazz Griots and the Mapping of African American Cultural History in Poetry* thus proposes an original analysis of how the four poets infused jazz and political references in their poetics in order to re-educate later generations about a collective black memory.

Keywords : poetry, African American, performance, jazz, politics, Langston Hughes, David Henderson, Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, cultural memory, Black Aesthetic

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*For H. Nigel Thomas and Langston Hughes,
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Introduction

In the wake of serious reconsiderations of the problems underlying hip-hop culture, and the gradual inclusion of hip-hop culture in the curriculum, it seems fundamental to reassess the cultural roots of the movement in the African American poetic productions from Langston Hughes to the poets of the Umbra and Black Arts movement of the 1960s and 1970s in order to re-center the subject. The main problems affecting the relevance of today's hip-hop lies in the de-centralization of the cultural project at its foundation and fundamentally, in the gradual erosion of the historical consciousness in hip-hop poetry. What this means is that the epistemological importance of hip-hop lies in its ability to actualize the ethos of the African American experience in an urban setting. However, the nationalism and historical consciousness that permeated black cultural productions from the 1960s and 1970s seem to have been replaced by a mercantile enterprise that yields little in the way of cultural identification to previous ontological models. On the contrary, the well-documented problems of hip-hop –mainly misogyny, homophobia, materialism, gangster culture and gender issues –deflect the attention from rap's origins in blues and jazz cultures, both of which comprised the basis for the conceptualization of a black aesthetic.

What I am suggesting in this project is not a romanticized portrait of the sixties or the Black Arts Movement, for some of the fundamental gender problems in hip-hop culture were also present during 1960s and 1970s black expressive culture and, as such, they will be discussed in the chapter on Sonia Sanchez. The primary concern of this dissertation lies in the idea of a developing black aesthetic that aims to represent black ontology within a nationalist cultural context. And it is at this critical juncture that hip-hop culture –the

freshest expression of black urban life –often strays from the nationalist project that has been, in latent (in Hughes) or proactive (Baraka, Sanchez) form, central to Black American cultural expression.

The failure of mainstream hip-hop to sustain these cultural dynamics necessitates a reassessment of the historical (and aesthetic) moment when black expressive culture and politics reached their pinnacle. Therefore, I want to argue that Langston Hughes, Umbra and the Black Arts Movement, should be re-investigated from the perspective of their potential to redress the cultural schism that currently affects today's African American culture. Critics, historians and musicologists agree that the 1960s and 1970s were decades when black artists doubled their roles; the function of black expressive culture, in turn, became interlinked with the political activism of civil rights and Black Power movements. Central to my argument is the fact that, in the midst of the cultural and historical fragmentation that plagues today's "hip-hop generation," the New Black poetry of the 1960s and 1970s needs to be considered as a crucial historical moment capable of reinvigorating the nationalist ethos and assure cultural continuity. Langston Hughes, David Henderson, Sonia Sanchez, and Amiri Baraka are all concerned with historical reclamation; their poetries claim the history of Africans in the New World and they infuse their poems with this historical consciousness. Consequently, I suggest that these poets' theorization of artistry as political engagement becomes a central element in the construction of a black aesthetic based on performance. Thus, the African American poetry of the 1960s and 1970s

represents the apex of black cultural politics despite its dismissal by key Black literary theorists such as Henry Louis Gates.

Historically, black art, in all its configurations, has been used to correlate the political battles Black Americans waged against a system that sought to deny their humanity. Also, it is fundamental to highlight the fact that African Americans employed performance as a political means of transcending the limitations imposed upon them, from slavery to freedom. For instance, slave narratives were verbal and literal testimonies that preserved the humanity and history of enslaved Blacks in the same way that field hollers, work songs, the spirituals and the blues not only allowed slaves to communicate among themselves, but also to transcend, momentarily, the burden of enslavement. The very act of “performing the word” –an expression I borrow from Fahamisha Patricia Brown –in text or in song represents strategic modes of resistance against institutionalized racism and discriminatory discourses that debase black humanity. Significantly, Black poets often include songs, allusions to songs or even song structures in their poems to evoke the ways in which music has historically provided Blacks with emotional outlets to exorcise the demons of a system that robbed them of their essential rights. This theorization of artistry and performance as political engagement provides the Black poets studied in this thesis with the opportunity to trace the trajectory of the African American Liberation project –a project metonymically represented by cathartic rituals of song and performance.

In that sense, Black poets who infuse musical, historical and political references in their poetics in order to educate later generations about a collective memory should be

regarded as the African American continuation of the African griot, the poet/historian. The four poets chosen in this project, Langston Hughes, David Henderson, Sonia Sanchez and, Amiri Baraka write from the perspective of the black collective consciousness; that is, they draw from cultural traditions grounded in the Diaspora as a way to revise the ontological meanings inherent in black music. To achieve this, these four poets use jazz as trope for their poetic project. Jazz is by convention revisionist. It revises the poetics of blues and Du Bosian sorrow songs through improvisation and innovation and thus builds on a musical tradition that has its foundation in slavery. Much like blues was the musical reservoir into which poured the streams of work songs, field hollers and spirituals, jazz is archiving, revising and “signifyin(g).” As jazz branches out into bebop, hard bop, free jazz, funk, and ultimately, rap, it remains the vernacular core of post-Northern migration Black America. Moreover, the coded rebellion always in tension within jazz aesthetics –most vibrantly in bebop and free jazz –represents the ideal dialectical vehicle for the social commentary underlying most of Black poetry, which makes jazz poetics exclusively African American. In fact, jazz *is* liberation and equates what Stephen Henderson, Larry Neal and Richard Wright understand to be the liberating function of Black literature.

Most of the key critics of black cultural expression consider jazz in such terms. For instance, Lawrence Levine explains the potentiality of jazz as music “free of its repressions” (293). In his definition of jazz, Onwuchekwa Jemie highlights its rebellious spirit: “[it] is process-music, a dynamic force developing, moving, [jazz’s] impulse is recalcitrant, rebellious, revolutionary” (22). These two definitions evoke Hughes’s seminal

essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” in which he understands jazz to be “[o]ne 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” (35).¹ Hughes’s contention that jazz can function as a political statement against the hegemony of power structures is significant. It prefigures the poetic canonization of jazz musicians such as Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, and Ornette Coleman who, because of their rejection of white co-option of black music, become emblematic figures of liberation in the poetry of the 1960s and 1970s. At the same time, Hughes’s jazz politics look back to Africa and the ring shout ritual (“tom-tom”) within which Africans discussed, in coded songs and dances, social organization. This form of poetic call-and-response is as essential to this project as it is to black musicology, for it allows the possibility of intergenerational dialogues between poets and musicians as well as dialogical potential between song and politics, between Africa and Black America, within the poems. More importantly, these jazz dialogisms underline the construction of the Black Aesthetic as conceptualized by Langston Hughes, Umbra’s David Henderson, and Black Arts poets Sonia Sanchez and Amiri Baraka.

Moreover, the jazz dialogisms inherent in these poets’ poetics allow for conversation between poets themselves. Which is why this project begins with an analysis of Langston Hughes’s *Ask Your Mama*, that serves as inspiration for Henderson, Sanchez, and Baraka in terms of how jazz can map cultural history. In fact, Henderson, Sanchez, and

¹ In African folklore, the tom-tom is not only a musical instrument, but also a communication device that transmits messages through encoded rhythmic structures.

Baraka all respond to the jazz poetics deployed in *Ask Your Mama*. Hughes's ability to weld together cultural, political, musical histories of the Diaspora in one poetic sequence employing jazz motifs provides the canvas upon which Umbra and Black Arts poets will conceive their consciousness-raising poetry. More importantly, the tapestry of cultural heroes in *Ask Your Mama* revivifies the necessity to know black history and black culture in order to construct new nationalist paradigms. In the same grain, it is possible to contend that Hughes's polyphonic work postulates workable versions of cultural nationalism *and* of the Black Aesthetic, which Umbra and Black Arts poets will expand, politicize and radicalize in the tradition of call and response.

For instance, in "Some Reflections on the Black Aesthetic," Larry Neal, one of the primary articulators of the Black Aesthetic, provides a critical point of anchorage for later theories of the Black Aesthetic. He affirms that, for Black Arts cultural workers, "The Black Nation" functions "as poem." In turn, he regards the collective history of Black Americans as the "unitary myth." What this presupposes is that any cultural production under this aesthetic banner should represent "the integral unity of culture, politics, and art."² In "And Shine Swam On," Neal concludes that "[t]he artist and the political activist are one. They are both shapers of the future reality. Both understand and manipulate the collective myths of the race" (in Napier 79). Similarly, according to Addison Gayle, "[t]he serious black artist of today is at war with American society" (xvii). Echoing Neal and

² Neal's "list" is presented as an interlude in Gayle's *The Black Aesthetic* and, as such, is not assigned a page number.

Gayle, Ron Karenga affirms, “Black art, like everything else in the black community, must respond positively to the reality of revolution” (31). The idea of revolution obviously underscores the literary production of the Black Arts Movement, and finds its crystallization in Neal’s statement that “Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America” (“The Black Arts Movement,” 29). Therefore, it is correct to affirm that at the intersection of culture, politics and art, one finds the tenets of black cultural nationalism. The “commitment” to revolution (Karenga 35-36) not only refers to black poetics but also affects the theorization of Africa as locus of cultural heritage.

In fact, for theorists of the Black Aesthetic, Africa provides the model from which music should be conceptualized. Don L. Lee recognizes that black music is “a creative extension of [their] African selves” (225). Around the same time on the black musical scene, John Coltrane turns his back on bop because of its co-option by whites and returns to Afrocentric “free” jazz compositions. Frank Kofsky understands Coltrane’s shift as a political statement symbolizing Black Art nationalism (155-172). What I want to highlight here is that the Black Aesthetician’s reclaiming of Africa represents a rejection of White America as well as a call to action for Blacks of the Diaspora to affirm their Blackness within a sociological, political, and artistic framework defined in “black” terms. The responses to this call comprise the cultural reservoir from which Black Art is created.

Thesis Statement

This doctoral dissertation analyzes the ways in which the Black American poets Langston Hughes, David Henderson, Sonia Sanchez, and Amiri Baraka engage in poetic dialogues with black music and musicians in the poetry they produced during the effervescent period from 1960 to 1980. This historical framework is important because it represents the culminating point at which music, politics, and poetry were interlinked and deployed to serve the cause of Black cultural nationalism. My thesis, therefore, demonstrates how these poets ground their poetry in the tradition of performance in order to map the cultural and historical consciousnesses of African Americans. Each in their own ways, Langston Hughes, David Henderson, Sonia Sanchez, and Amiri Baraka, responds to the call for black self-definition and self-determination by writing poems that not only revise the historical consciousness of Black Americans, but that also use jazz music as theme and idiom. In so doing, these four poets adapt and adopt the characteristics of the griot by (re-)membering and reclaiming Black cultural history. In this antiphonal framework, Hughes acts as the poetic forefather to the younger Henderson, Sanchez, and Baraka. Thus, as mentioned earlier, *Ask Your Mama* functions as the work Henderson, Sanchez, and Baraka will respond to and use for the elaboration of their cultural nationalist poetics and politics, as well as for the regenerative commitment to raise the historical consciousness of the black masses.

To this end, I argue that each of the four poets conceptualizes black cultural history

through the configurational tropology of jazz –thus following Gates’s model of tropological revisionism –in order to redefine the Black Aesthetic. For instance, Hughes, Henderson, Sanchez, and Baraka all use jazz improvisation and syncopation as thematic and idiomatic structures, thereby revising the preexisting poetics of African American literature and also contributing to the emergence of an Afrocentric poetics. Through the analysis of this form of troping, I therefore suggest that jazz symbolizes African American cultural memory. As such, the hermeneutics of jazz will be discussed against the backdrop of the socio-political battles fought by Black Americans that led to the ideology of Black Nationalism. Hence, in analyzing the ethnopoetic transposition of jazz into the poems, I show that the jazz poetry of the 1960s and 1970s is the most vibrant conduit through which African Americans can achieve liberation. To support this theory, I briefly outline the history of black music in terms of its ability to ritualize performance in a way that provides catharsis and transcendence from the daily burden of institutionalized racism and oppression. I study jazz poetry as a continuation of blues prosody as well as within the larger continuum of black expressive culture evoked in the form of African antiphony –the primary signifier enacting the call-and-response structure of African American literature. Ultimately, this doctoral dissertation discusses the poetics of the four aforementioned poets in terms of their potential to reflect a reinvigorating reservoir of poetic energy that can challenge the Hip-Hop Generation to address its own ahistorical stance and reclaim its place within the nationalist continuum of black art.

Theoretical Framework

To reassert my thesis statement: my doctoral thesis studies the ways in which the African American poets Langston Hughes, David Henderson, Sonia Sanchez, and Amiri Baraka adopt the guise of griots and employ black music, especially jazz, in order to ground their poetry in the tradition of performance. I focus on these poets because they all engage in dialogues with and about black musicology, aesthetics, and politics of the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, the poetries of the four chosen poets not only outline the intersections between music and politics, but also map the history of the African American experience and cultural history, thus performing the characteristics of the African griot, the poet/historian. Finally, these four griots/poets play vital roles in the reassessment of the cultural nationalism in the 1920s with Marcus Garvey, and then deployed in the 1960s and 1970s.

To bridge the critical gap between “poetry as text and [the] awareness of it as performance” (Benston 165), I use the hermeneutical model of jazz –especially for its improvisational and revisionist potentialities –as textual gestalt. Undoubtedly, jazz poets’ abilities to “riff” on preexistent texts and improvise with Black poetics in turn create a dynamic dialogue between cultural tradition and an emergent black aesthetic. Therefore, jazz, in the way it actualizes and modernizes African American expressive culture, represents the ideal portal for a thorough discussion of African American “performance

poetry.” Drawing on Kimberly Benston’s contention that the “vernacular...constitutes an important element of the poetic” (183), and Stephen Henderson’s statement that the “jazz poem [is] the basic conceptual model of contemporary Black poetry” (61), I configure the jazz poetry of the 1960s and 1970s as a theoretical gestalt –a vernacular “whole,” shaped by the African American experience, that looks back at its ancestry in Africa and in blues praxes and, at the same time, gestures towards a performance-based hip-hop future.³ In-between, or within the dynamic flux regimenting the creative spaces, are contained the ever-evolving poetic revisions that critics, like Gates, Baker and Benston, argue are foundational to Black American expressive culture. This dynamic flux is a complex pattern of literary, musical, and sociological moments in constant dialogue with one another.

Such cultural interlinkings not only comprise the central ethos of Black Cultural Nationalism, but also essentially provide the basis of the gestalt. In this jazz gestalt, I thus include the “intercultural and intertextual cross-fertilizations” (Gilroy 190) between music, poetry and social movements at play in the turbulent decades that reaffirmed cultural nationalism. This jazz gestalt is not only at the intersection of vernacular poetry, musicology, and sociology, it also claims the cultural history of Black Americans in Africa and, as such, it enacts, in the poets who draw from the gestalt for their poems, the characteristics of the griot, the African poet-historian. By mapping the cultural history of

³ Interestingly, Black Arts Movement writers such as Etheridge Knight rejected blues because of its static protest deemed not revolutionary. Knight, for instance, repudiates blues on the basis of it being the music of “an era of accommodation” (979). See Charles Rowell’s interview with Knight in *Callaloo* 19.4 (1996): 967-980.

African Americans in their poems, the four studied poets reconstruct a black aesthetic that introduces the jazz gestalt at the center of the cultural project. These jazz griots propose the possibility of transposing ethnopoetically the anthropological data of diasporic black culture. They establish the relationships between black archetypal memory and collective consciousness, as well as the dialogisms of intersecting paradigms in African American history, politics and cultural expression.

The figuration of the jazz gestalt also evokes the Americanized form of the African ring shout, in which antiphonal improvisation and commentary are sustained by ring members (see Floyd, Abrahams). Sterling Stuckey, in *Slave Culture*, even argues that the use of the ring “gave form and meaning...to black art” in America (11). The jazz gestalt thus has its aesthetic roots in Africa, repeating the continually interdependent pattern of call-and-response (Caponi 11). As such, I recognize the intextuality and internal dialectics within the jazz gestalt to be dialogically linked to the African concept of life force in which “all things on earth were connected...[and which] tied people to people and people to things” (Hill et al. 10). Therefore, critical attention will be given to the ways in which Hughes, Henderson, Sanchez, and Baraka conceptualize and translate the African heritage in their poetics. Incorporating stylized elements of the basic African aesthetics including (1)rhythmic and metric complexity or syncopation, (2)individual improvisation and stylization, (3) dialogic interaction or antiphony, (4)active engagement of the whole person and the whole community, (5) social commentary or competition through indirection and satire, (6) development of a group consciousness or sensibility (Caponi 9), these four poets

assert the centrality of literary rendition for the survival and continuance of the collective cultural memory of Black Americans.

Because the four poets studied in this dissertation historicize jazz as means to revise African American historiography and as means to investigate a collective cultural memory grounded in Africanisms, I consider them as griots. Griots, in the historical African context, are conveyors of their peoples' history, and they employ storytelling and the oral tradition in order to sensitize their audiences to the necessity of claiming one's ancestry. For those reasons, griots are poet-historians and genealogists. The function of the griot is not reduced to these roles; the griot can also be an adviser, a counselor, a spokesperson, a diplomat, an interpreter, a translator, a musician, a composer, a teacher and educator, an exhorter, a warrior, a witness, a praise-singer (often the function most closely associated with the griot) and a ceremony participant (Hale 18-58). These activities "contribute to a portrait of an extremely dynamic profession that enables [African] societies to cohere" (19). For the purpose of my argument, I focus of the roles of the griot as historian, poet, and genealogist for, in its U.S. application, griotism is often perceived as the agency toward historical reclamation as well as toward the restoration of the link –historical and ontological – between African Americans and an "African heritage nearly erased by the slave trade" (1). In the U.S. African Americans perceive griots in terms of cultural identification; that is, griots enable the transmission of stories that continues to construct Black American History through authenticating performances of blackness.

These “American” applications of griotism are particularly noted in the nationalist framework of the Black Arts movement whose main tenets involved historical and cultural reclamation and re-identification to blackness. The means to do so were provided by the elders, the griots of the oral traditions who maintained the stories alive despite threats of historical erasure. At the same time, griots revitalized a cultural literacy that Black Arts poets found best exemplified by jazz performativity. What is also fundamental to understand is that griotism, although largely gendered in both Africa and African America, could be configured in woman-centered terms. Griottes in Africa are often considered “cultural bearers,” a term that has made its way in the African American feminist and womanist discourses. As such, I plan to consider the gender component attached to griotism in the U.S. as a way to delineate how these issues undergird the black nationalist sentiment in 1960s Black America.

Obviously, if Langston Hughes, David Henderson, Sonia Sanchez, and Amiri Baraka are to be considered as Griots, they must be discussed as anthropologists of Blackness, as conveyers of black ontology. This approach borrows from Houston A. Baker’s concept of “the anthropology of art.” The phrase expresses for Baker the notion that “art must be studied with an attention to the methods and findings of disciplines which enable one to address such concerns as the status of the artistic object, the relationship of art to other cultural systems, and the nature and function of artistic creation and perception in a given society” (*Journey Back*, xvi). Moreover, “[B]oth the literary and cultural investigator must, in their own way, strive to *interpret* the manifestations of a culture in

accordance with the unique, richly symbolic, and meaningful contexts within which such manifestations achieve their effects” (xiv). To study Black poetry as conceptualized through the model of jazz poetics is, really, to navigate the musicologist’s theorization of jazz within the tradition of African American expressive culture. In addition, the poets’ poetics, ongoing revisions of the “historical consciousness” of Black Americans, signal a writing performance similar to that of jazz composition, in which improvisation usually follows a recurrent theme.

If one accepts that the recurrent theme of African American vernacular poetry is the Black experience –and the relentless pursuit of Freedom –then each poem, a poeticized individual “solo,” is a revision and an addition to a tradition of written performance begun with Phyllis Wheatley. Just as each improvised solo is a political act encoded within technical innovation, the jazz poem reflects a “tropological revision” of the African American ur-theme of Liberation. Therefore, each of the four jazz griots discussed in this dissertation finds his or her individuality by acknowledging such tradition of poetic performance, thereby finding his or her place among his ancestors. This movement to enter the tradition and, thus, to claim the poet’s identity parallels, I argue, how Ralph Ellison defines jazz. In “The Charlie Christian Story” he states that “[E]ach true jazz moment...each solo flight, or improvisation represents...a definition of identity, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition” (234).

Finally, the methodological approach for this thesis requires the close reading of poems as well as an in-depth study of the socio-historical and political contexts in which

both music and poetry emerged. As stated earlier, no study has ever been produced that provides a thorough gloss of the poems as framed within the ideological and poetic gestalt of the 1960s and 1970s New Black Poetry. At the same time, it is fundamental to assess the importance of jazz in its many forms during these defining decades. To adopt the guise of the ethnomusicologist becomes essential as the study of jazz poetry is sustained by the various revisions of jazz ethos found, for instance, in written blues verses or in the sermonic tradition. It is also necessary to analyze how these poets perceive black music as theory –to refer to Barbara Christian’s model –for components of the black cultural aesthetic like the call-and-response and improvisation become dominant traits of their poetics. Therefore, this project necessitates thorough textual analyses of the transposition of the black aesthetic into the literary format.

Outline of the Chapters

The first chapter of the project focuses on Hughes’s *Ask Your Mama* (1961) which represents the culmination of the poetic tensions that have been at play in Hughes’s poetry from *The Weary Blues* to *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. In fact, Hughes’s navigation of blues and bebop poetics shows his thorough understanding and profound appreciation of music as Black America’s “long black song.” His negotiation of poetics begins during the often-problematic Harlem Renaissance and ends at the onset of the Black Arts Movement.

More importantly, my argument highlights how Hughes recognizes the crucial role African American expressive culture plays in the Liberation project of Black America. As such, *Ask Your Mama* is Hughes's grand jazz epic, which summarizes, in griotic fashion, the poetics outlined in his seminal essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." In the very underrated poem, the poet plays the role of cultural archivist by effectively positing musician Charlie Parker as bebop exemplar and the music as template for past and present liberations from white hegemony. At the same time, I argue that his positioning of Parker is strategic for he bridges a musical tradition beginning with Blind Lemon's blues to extending to Parker's successors, like Ornette Coleman and his free jazz prosody.

Similarly, I affirm that through Hughes's construction of catalogues acknowledging socio-political and artistic ancestors, he engages in dialogues with other artists and jazz musicians and with jazz aesthetics, thereby replicating the call-response pattern. This is especially visible, I think, in the way his stanza structures echo the rhythmic jaggedness of bebop improvisation. Such musical dialogues parallel the relationships between various Black political and musical heroes of the Diaspora. In using catalogues as pantheons –thus following the convention of African poems of praise for heroes –Hughes creates a polyphonic tapestry of diasporic African cultural and political revolutionaries as a means to claim a collective history and assure the continuity of cultural education. He thus becomes, by the end of his poetic career, the quintessential jazz griot in the gestalt of postmodern Black poetry. As such, he is the poetic forefather of Baraka and Henderson who both acknowledge the dialogic significance of Hughes in their poetry.

Consequently, the second chapter of my project revolves around David Henderson, whose work with the Umbra group and after shows his desire to embody the key roles of the jazz griot. Indebted to Hughes's blues and jazz poetry and use of musicians as militant artists, Henderson mobilizes generations of black poets to re-inscribe the cultural memory of Africans of the Diaspora. To use Henderson to introduce Sanchez and Baraka is also a critical choice, for I discuss him in terms of his ability to bridge, poetically, the legacy of Langston Hughes with the more radical poetics of the Black Arts Movement. My discussion of Henderson begins with his work in the Umbra Workshop in the early 1960s that prefigures most of the poetic statements that are foundational to the Black Arts Movement. In the tradition of Hughes, Henderson also constructs catalogues of Blacks that represent his configuration of "the people." It is out of these people that a "new mythology" (Cole 166-171) of Blackness emerges which Henderson will employ as basis for his most nationalist poetry. Similarly, Henderson's nationalism posits Africa as locus of cultural memory and historical consciousness. Moreover, Henderson understood jazz in African terms; he sometimes refers to jazz performance as "African Talking Drums." Most importantly his engagement with rhythm and blues and free jazz will also take center place in my analysis as it epitomizes the cross-cultural dynamics of the poetry created between 1960 and 1975.

Thus, his ability to weld music, politics, and poetry with a subversive approach to white popular culture will also be analyzed in terms of his delineation of an intertextual critique of the subtle manifestations of white racism in America. The reassessment of the

potentiality of jazz in the nationalist cause as well as his embrace of Africa place his poetic project at the center of the jazz gestalt and assure Henderson's position as one of Black Arts' key griots. Since Henderson's poetics echo Hughes's, and prefigures Baraka's and Sanchez's in that they too attempt to re-member a collective African past and map a free jazz present, I contend that Henderson's poetry achieves cultural continuity through vibrant communal and cross-generational dialogues that assert his double identity as performer and educator within the larger tradition of African American expressive culture.

My inclusion of Sonia Sanchez is pivotal, for her poetic project aims at portraying black female artists like Nina Simone who, through their music or words, not only embraced Black Power militancy, but also performed and affirmed their femininity to oppose a fundamentally male-centered leadership in the Black Arts and Black Power movements. Sanchez's Black Arts poetry provides an ideal poetic platform to interrogate masculinity as the locus of power in African American culture and allows for an exploration of gender dynamics and politics within black expressive culture. Questioning the pertinence of cultural patriarchy, Sanchez prefers to look at Billie Holiday and Nina Simone as sites of female empowerment. Although she does eulogize masculine figures like Bobby Hutton and Malcolm X, the bulk of her Black Arts poetry revolves around her claiming the black feminine voice and the black female body.

My decision to discuss Sanchez also stems from the critical exposure her Black Arts poems have often failed to receive. While most of the recent criticism tends to focus on her work as "Afrocentric womanist" (Joyce 16), my discussion of Sanchez follows primarily

the trajectory of black female self-determinism in the poems of *Home Coming* (1969) and *We a Baddddd People* (1970), works that anticipate *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women* (1974), which I do not discuss in this dissertation. In fact, most of her poems written during that period aim at constructing a feminine identity that is self-defined and self-contained. I recognize this part of her poetics to be what she terms her “soniasanchezism.” Accordingly, this thesis agrees with Cheryl Clarke who affirms that “Self-knowledge is a paramount theme in the poetry of Black Arts Movement” (74). By mapping the way towards black female empowerment to the tune of jazz, Sanchez, I contend, embodies the griotte as teacher and widens the pathway for the enlargement of a black “sisterhood” capable of configuring Black expressive culture “as a weapon” (Van Deburg qtd in C. Clarke 52) against oppression based on race *and* gender.

In the last part of this chapter, I argue that Sanchez’s ability to match the technical virtuosity of her male counterparts –especially Don L. Lee –in the Coltrane poems, as well as her inventive appropriation of rhetorical games such as the Dozens make her poetry the defining voice of the black female poet in the Black Arts Movement. I proceed to analyze her “a/coltrane/poem” extensively in order to provide a synthesis of Sanchez’s poetics as well as those of her male counterparts in the Black Arts movement. By doing so, I wish to highlight the fact that Sanchez makes Coltrane’s mythic blackness available to both black men and women, whereas it had often been an affirming trope of black masculinity.

Finally, I use Amiri Baraka’s poetry as a conclusion, for, like Henderson and Sanchez, he is still an active griot through which the reinvigoration of the Black Arts ethos

can occur. Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, whose work not only invokes the heritage bequeathed to him by Hughes, but also invests such poetic heritage with the nationalist ethos of Black Power ideology. Baraka's important abandonment of Beat aesthetics in favor of a more radical poetic platform demonstrates, I aver, his understanding of the key problems of representation and integration that affected African American literature at the onset of the 1960s. His reassessment of poetical and political aestheticism also triggered a redefinition of both identity and writing space. This culminated in his move from Greenwich Village and the Lower East Side to Harlem after Malcolm X's death in 1965, and, most importantly, in his self-renaming, from Leroi Jones to Ameer and finally Amiri Baraka (in 1967). I discuss this radical shift in both identity and creative space in terms of how it underlined his movement from bohemianism to cultural nationalism and the formation of the Black Arts Movement. My argument lies in the fact that such movement entailed a necessary rewriting of his poetics, which would come to affirm their Afrocentricity and a social engagement he also found in the music of Ornette Coleman, Thelonius Monk and John Coltrane, all part of a cultural continuum Baraka calls "the changing same."

What I underline in Baraka's Black Arts poems is the fact that by conflating his identities as poet and activist, Baraka also wants his poetry to invoke music as political performance. By emulating free jazz rhythmic dissonance in his atypical stanza structures and parataxis, Baraka provides a poetic assertion of racial pride that responds politically to the aesthetic demands of the new music. Moreover, he triggers the revolutions that he perceives as already in motion in the music of Coltrane or James Brown; both artists draw

from African antiphony for their revision of what constitutes black identity. Also, I argue that Baraka wanted to create a self-determined aestheticism that was entirely black, with Africa as motherland and primary source of cultural history. For instance, his poem “S.O.S” is proof of his internalization of his hermeneutical function as griot/exhorter. His role as Black Arts’ griot is unquestionably vital to any true critical analysis of the Black Arts Movement.

Still, this last chapter also considers Baraka’s post-Black Arts work, especially the long jazz suites “In the Tradition” and *Wise Whys Ys*. I decided to analyze these works despite the fact that they fall outside of the historical framework of this dissertation because they illustrate the continuity of Hughes’s jazz poetics and griotism. At the same time, these works recapitulate the themes and idioms as well as the breadth of jazz techniques employed respectively by Henderson and Sanchez. In spite of their Marxist-Leninist penchant, these two jazz suites are superb examples of the jazz gestalt in continuous gestation and flux. As such, both conclude the argument begun with Langston Hughes.

State of Research on the Topic

The critical interest in the Black Arts Movement has been revived at the turn of the twenty-first century. James Edward Smethurst’s *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* is the first thorough history of the movement.

Published in 2005, the book traces the sociological dynamics that have shaped and informed the embryonic movement in the early sixties. While it discusses the poets of the movement, the book does not provide any significant gloss of the poetic projects of individual writers. Smethurst's study is more interested in detailing the circumstances and contexts that black artists had to negotiate and navigate in order to construct their poetics. The author's historical approach invites a poetry-based study which my doctoral dissertation proposes to do.

Prefiguring Smethurst's work are key essays that have sought to lay the groundwork for a reexamination of the nationalist potentialities inherent in Black Arts jazz poetry. Joyce A. Joyce's "Bantu, Nkodi, Ndungu, and Nganga: Language, Politics, Music, and Religion in African American Poetry" in Johanne V. Gabbin's *The Furious Flowering of African American Poetry* (1999) looks at Black Arts poetry through the lens of diasporic African expressive culture. Her discussion of the dialogic nature of poetry and music is key to the understanding of the role played by Africa in the reassessment of Black Aestheticians. Similarly, Meta DuEwa Jones's "Jazz Prosodies: Orality and Textuality" (2000) examines "the range of textual evidence within poems...that exhibits the influence of jazz" (67). Jones focuses primarily on the Coltrane poems of Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, Elizabeth Alexander and Michael Harper. Also, in her essay she tries to answer Brent Hayes Edwards's own questioning about the possibility of "literature writing music" as discussed in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture* (1998). In doing so, Jones, like Edwards, follows in the footsteps of Sascha Feinstein and Yusef Komunyakaa's *The Jazz*

Poetry Anthology (1996). Their introduction is useful because it situates the critical debate within the poetry itself, thus evoking Barbara Christian's aesthetic platform in "The Race for Theory" (1987). Interested in this cultural dialogue, *Callaloo* magazine produced a special issue (25.1, 2002) in an attempt to define jazz poetics. In his introduction to the special issue, the aforementioned Brent Hayes Edwards argues that recent scholarship of jazz as poetic reference tends to emphasize "historiography, musical form, and cultural politics" (6). Edwards is only partly right, for such emphasis cannot be divorced from the models of interpretation proposed by Henderson, Baker and Gates.

Other pertinent discussions of the dialogic relation between black music and poetry during the Black Arts period include: Kimberley Benston's *Performing Blackness* (2001); Aldon Lynn Nielsen's brilliant *Black Chant* (1997); Wahneema Lubiano's "Standing In for the State: Black Nationalism and 'Writing' the Black Subject" and Phillip Brian Harper's "Nationalism and Social Division in the Black Arts Poetry of the 1960's" both offer pertinent insight into the poetics that redefined the black aesthetic; Mercer Cook and Stephen Henderson's *The Black Militant Writer in Africa and the United States* (1969); Carolyn Rodgers's "Black Poetry: Where It's At" (1969); Eugene Redmond's *Drumvoices* (1976); L.L. Dickson's "'Keep it in the Head': Jazz Elements in Modern Black American Poetry" (1983); Margaret Ann Reid's *Black Protest Poetry: Polemics from the Harlem Renaissance and the Sixties* (2001); Eric Porter's *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?* (2002); Cheryl Clarke's *"After Mecca": Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (2005); Tony Bolden's *Afro-Blue : Improvisations in African American Poetry and Culture* (2004),

especially his chapter on the “elaboration” of blues poetics, which recuperates Baker’s theory; and Michael Borshuk’s more recent *Swinging The Vernacular: Jazz and African American Modernist Literature* (2006).

In order to outline the theoretical contours of this doctoral project, I now need to survey the foundational texts I am indebted to. Obviously, any theoretical framework that uses elements of the black vernacular as model for textual revision should be invested in three inescapable critical studies. The first is Stephen Henderson’s *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1973), which was written at the time Black Aestheticians were still outlining the tenets of the Black Aesthetic. Henderson’s anthology is widely recognized for its extensive introduction in which he proposes a theory to read the New Black Poetry. For this project, I am interested in his discussion of black music as poetic reference, especially his list of “types of usage of Black music in Black poetry” (47). This list not only represents the precepts of ethnopoetic translation of music into poetry, but also the thematic possibilities that jazz, for instance, offers the Black poet. Henderson thus sees “a Black poetic mechanism, much like the musical one, which can transform even a Shakespearian sonnet into a jazz poem, *the basic conceptual model of contemporary Black poetry*. The technique, the fundamental device, would be improvisation, lying as it does at the very heart of jazz music” (61 –my italics). Such theoretical statements paved the way for a new critical approach –a new set of aesthetic points to understand black poetry in vernacular terms.

The second foundational text is Houston A. Baker's *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (1984). Baker's elaboration of a literary theory based on the vernacular tradition represents the point of departure for this doctoral project. Baker proposes to study black literary texts using the model of blues as cultural matrix (3). He understands the blues matrix as "a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit. Afro-American blues constitute such a vibrant network...[Blues] are the multiplex, enabling script in which Afro-American cultural discourse is inscribed" (3). Baker's widely recognized definition of blues as theory is also worth quoting at length:

The blues are a synthesis (albeit one always synthesizing rather than one already hypostatized). Combining work songs, group seculars, field hollers, sacred harmonies, proverbial wisdom, folk philosophy, political commentary, ribald humor, elegiac lament, and much more, they constitute an amalgam that seems always to have been in motion in America –always becoming, shaping, transforming, displacing the peculiar experience of Africans in the New World. (3)

Baker's matrix thus allows for vernacular troping and, accordingly, represents a way to "read" black poetry through the tradition of blues performance.⁴ In my project, such blues matrix becomes a jazz gestalt, a functional theoretical configuration in which music, politics, and poetry cross-fertilize and inform one another, therefore constituting an actualized version of the blues' "multiplex, enabling script." This model seems more

⁴ See also Caponi, p.22.

adapted to the Black Arts Movement's poetics, which occasionally refuted blues as an outdated expression of black life.

The third key theoretical statement comes from Henry Louis Gates's own concept of tropological revision as defined in *The Signifyin(g) Monkey* (1987). Gates conceptualizes "signifyin(g)" as an ongoing process of vernacular repetition or revision that can be applied to the field of textual and musical compositions and studies. Of particular note is Gates's definition of improvisation as "revision and repetition" (63-64), which defeats the common assumption that jazz improvisation is randomly conceived. What Gates's corrective model demands is a deeper understanding of composition within a performance-based tradition that seeks self-definition. In such terms, jazz becomes Gates's "trope for black intertextuality" (64). His concept of "signifyin(g)" is also fundamental because it permits the dialogic sequencing of black texts within a particular cultural continuum—that is, each artist is made to revise or repeat or refigure as a way to assert one's individuality within the community of cultural production. Hence, Gates's proposition in *The Signifyin(g) Monkey* evokes the dialogisms central to antiphony or call-and-response.

These three key critical theorists also inform and shape the course of black critical theory. Accordingly, Samuel A. Floyd in "Ring Shout! Literary Studies, Historical Studies, and Black Music Inquiry" (1991) and, later, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States* (1999), adapts the Gatesian model of textual "signifyin(g)" to the field of music. As Caponi suggests, Floyd's theorization of black musical history—which he terms "Call-Response"—is the conflation of both Baker's and

Gates's vernacular theories applied to the field of music (22-23). Moreover, Floyd's work also recuperates Sterling Stuckey's configuration of the "ring shout" as posited in *Slave Culture* (1987). Stuckey conceives the ring shout as the primary cultural agent in the transmission of black expressive culture. Within the ring, one pays homage to his ancestors by responding through improvisation to a ceremonial "call" for communal unity. Lawrence Levine contends that in such antiphonal rituals, the individual is placed "in continual dialogue with his community, allowing him...to preserve his voice as a distinct entity and to blend it with those of his fellows" (33). Stuckey asserts that "[t]he ring in which Africans danced and sang is key to understanding the means by which they achieved oneness in America" (12). The idea of "oneness" is important for it suggests that the ritualization of performance allows for the reclaiming of a collective black consciousness, thereby hinting at intimations of nationalism achieved through culture. In turn, Floyd understands this to mean that black music evolves within a call-and-response framework as a way to revise or reconfigure the ancestral cultural history. This idea of musical revision or "response" is at the basis of my theorization of the jazz gestalt framework used to understand how Black poets respond poetically to the political imperatives of their times.

Gena Dagel Caponi's introduction to *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin' and Slam Dunking* (1999) is also an important text for it reassesses the main critical statements that have been used to understand black poetry (Henderson, Gates, Baker, Floyd) and, then, reclaims the African aesthetic (detailed in my methodology) as the new critical framework. Caponi's defining of the African aesthetic represents an important part of my theoretical framework

for she suggests an Afrocentric approach to reading black texts that encompasses –and ultimately summarizes –the theoretical statements previously discussed. In that sense, Caponi’s introduction also provides the template for Fahamisha Patricia Brown’s *Performing the Word: African American Poetry and Vernacular Culture* (1999).

Brown’s study evokes Henderson’s concept of Black music as poetic reference, which, here, is rephrased as “Song/Talk,” her term for poetry using music as both theme and idiom. Brown’s theory is deployed as a way to read Black Arts poetry using the guidelines of the music. According to Brown, “the poems are usually musical in their use of sounds, language and rhythm. Also, song and the maker of songs are often the subjects of the poems. Finally, songs and the maker of songs provide a storehouse of referents, metaphor, and allusion for the African American poet” (66). This way of conceptualizing poetic performance is, Brown contends, grounded in the tradition of understanding black life through song.

Moreover, Brown’s “Song/Talk” performance-based theory also evokes what I consider to be the most important critical statement regarding the study of African American poetry, Kimberly W. Benston’s “Performing Blackness: Re/Placing Afro-American Poetry” (1989), which is expanded in the equally pertinent *Performing Blackness*. In the essay, Benston untangles the “division [that] persists between our knowledge of the poetry as text and our awareness of it as performance” (165). Proposing to abandon the assumption that Black Arts poetry is merely “protest” poetry, Benston, instead, challenges the critics to reconsider the poetics of the Black Arts Movement as

seeking self-definition –a process that suggests a return to the epistemology of Black American poetics. Conceptualized as “the hermeneutics of recuperation” (166), Benston’s critical methodology demands that the attention be placed primarily on reasserting the “critical polarization in studies of Afro-American poetry” (167). Benston identifies two principal critical platforms that should be re-evaluated under a new terminology –“one embracing the Black Arts’ ideological claim for an autonomous black poetics, the other seeking to situate black poetics within a larger and more continuous framework of American/Western/Human/creativity” (168). While Benston’s proposition is brilliantly outlined, it does not provide a model for interpreting Black Arts poetry that reclaims its African roots in antiphonal frameworks. My critical approach, then, will be to conflate what Benston deems polarized, and then to divorce the resulting framework from its “American/Western” platform. This substitution will allow the reading of griot poetry possible through the agency of jazz –that is America’s most culturally representative music used diachronically to re-read the cultural history and heritage of the Black diasporic world.

In terms of jazz theory, three texts have informed the core arguments of this dissertation. First, Mark C. Gridley’s *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis, 3rd Edition* (1988) provided me with the necessary technical background and terminology to sustain my analysis of the transpositions and renditions of jazz in the poems. Second, in Paul F. Berliner’s *Thinking in Jazz* (1994), the author constructs a theoretical framework that considers jazz improvisation as a linguistic system. His theories on the conversational aspect of improvisation have influenced the ways I conceived and established the

dialogisms between the jazz poetics of the four poets chosen for this dissertation. Elaborating on Berliner is Ingrid Monson's *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (1997), which, again, looks at improvisation as an implicit conversational device interlinked with call-response dynamics. Other works which have also contributed to my argument include: Ekkehard Jost's *Free Jazz* (1994); Jacques Aboucaya and Jean-Pierre Peyrebelle's *Du Be-Bop au Free Jazz* (2001); Iain Anderson's *This Is Our Music* (2007) is also significant for its interconnected discussions between the music (mainly free jazz) and the politics.

For my discussion of griots, I relied primarily on Thomas A. Hale's *Griots and Griottes* (1998) which provides the most extensive discussion of the characteristics, roles, and other social functions of the griots. Moreover, Hale reserves a chapter to definitions of the griotte, which is often absent in works on African social life. Almost every reference to griots and griottes is founded on Hale's superb map of griotism in the African World.

State of the Research on the Poets

Much of the critical work on Langston Hughes is concerned with his blues poetry. Recently, Steven C. Tracy and David Chinitz have been, arguably, the leading critics in terms of defining Hughes's blues poetics. Critics have been more reluctant, it seems, to engage in critical analyses of Hughes's jazz poetry. When they do discuss his jazz poems,

critics have preferred to focus their analyses on Hughes's *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951). Robert O'Brien Hokanson's "Jazzing It Up: The Be-Bop Modernism of Langston Hughes," Walter C. Farrell Jr. and Patricia A. Johnson's "Poetic Interpretation of Urban Black Folk Culture: Langston Hughes and the 'Bebop' Era," David R. Jarraway's "Montage of an Otherness Deferred: Dreaming Subjectivity in Langston Hughes," and John Lowney's "Langston Hughes and the 'Nonsense' of Bebop" remain the key essays on Hughes's *Montage*. R. Baxter Miller also provides interesting insights into Hughes's use of jazz; however, none of his observations are groundbreaking. Surprisingly, *Ask Your Mama* has received little critical attention despite being hailed as Hughes's most complete work. Larry Scanlon's "News From Heaven: Vernacular Time in Langston Hughes's *Ask Your Mama*" is one of the best studies of Hughes's volume. In it, Scanlon observes how Hughes employs the Dozens as ritual of insult parallel to how jazz was used to "signify" upon the (white) audiences.

Ultimately, the most interesting study of *Ask Your Mama* comes from Onwuchekwa Jemie's *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry*. Jemie begins his chapter-long study by defining Hughes's poetics. Although the definitions are rather long and tend to overlap, they are necessary only if to provide a theoretical framework. Jemie also navigates the various sections of the poem and establishes many interesting links. What most seems to preoccupy Jemie is the socio-economic oppression that Blacks still had to fight at the dawn of the sixties –a motif which was already in place in *Montage*. However, Jemie never discusses Hughes's catalogues in terms of their obvious linkings to African praise poems.

To make up for Jemie's analytical shortcomings, which are understandable given the scope of his work, my study of *Ask Your Mama* focuses on the catalogues' mapping of the Black American cultural and historical consciousnesses.

David Henderson has practically disappeared from the critical spectrum at the turn of the eighties, despite his poetry being frequently anthologized. Aside from a few pages on his work with the Umbra workshop in Benston's *Performing Blackness* (2000), as well as in the aforementioned *Black Chant* by Nielsen and survey by Smethurst, no extensive studies have been produced on his poetry. Perhaps the best "opening statement" on Henderson's work comes from fellow Umbra poet Lorenzo Thomas in "The Shadow of the World: New York's Umbra Workshop & Origins of the Black Arts Movement" (1978). In this essay, Thomas retraces the beginnings of the Umbra Workshop and (re-)introduces Henderson's jazz poems. Umbra's own Tom Dent also provides significant insight into workshop's dynamics as well as into Henderson's poetry in the many essays Dent published on the movement. I intend to fill in the critical oversights and re-position Henderson's poetry at the onset of the Black Arts project. Henderson's body of poems reveals a profound understanding of how music and poetry is the creative nexus of Black creativity in the sixties and seventies.

Sonia Sanchez's jazz poetry has, unfortunately, not received the critical attention that it deserves. The criticism seems to focus, instead, on Sanchez's feminist/womanist voice. It appears necessary, however, that a thorough study which conflates that feminist voice with her jazz poetics should exist, for Sanchez embodies the female griot, the griotte,

of the Black Arts Movement. For instance, Houston A. Baker's widely disputed essay on Sanchez, "Our Lady: Sonia Sanchez and the Writing of a Black Renaissance," does not cover the range of Sanchez multiplicity of voices. Joyce A. Joyce (obviously) finds Baker's essay misleading. In "Cracking the Skull, Mending the Soul: Sonia Sanchez's Role as Teacher/Healer/Poet" by Frenzella Elaine De Lancey and "Giving Our Souls Hears" by Kimili Anderson, both critics argue that Sanchez's poetry has been neglected on the basis of its feminist/radical stance. Instead, both affirm that her poetry should be reassessed in terms of its potential to rewrite the African American historical lineage with Africa and the Diaspora. These critiques are valid and echo the work of Joyce A. Joyce who, as the leading critic on Sanchez, has produced the most complete survey of Sanchez's work from the Black Arts poems to the more recent poetry informed by African poets and poetics. In *Ijala: Sonia Sanchez and the African Poetic Tradition* (1996), Joyce outlines Sanchez's negotiation of the Black Arts patriarchy and the elaboration of a feminist voice shaped by the various portraits of black female artistry. While a significant portion of Joyce's book is dedicated to Sanchez's reclaiming of Africa and African cultural roots, she also offers new critical alternatives to Sanchez's work during the Black Arts period. Joyce also traces the trajectory of Sanchez movement from Black Arts poetics to griot functions. And it is from this brief allusion to Sanchez as griottesse as well as her discovery of Okpewho's work as theoretical framework for analyzing Sanchez's work that my discussion on Sanchez stems. In fact, I use Okpewho's work in an expansive fashion to echo and augment Joyce's critical contribution to the small canon of criticism on Sanchez. To this end, I re-evaluate

Sanchez's Black Arts jazz poetry through the lens of her performance as griotte. As such, my work in this chapter builds on that of critics like Cheryl Clarke's brief discussion of Sanchez in "*After Mecca: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement*"; Jamie Dannyelle Walker's Ph.D. Dissertation *Evolution of a Poet: Re-Membering of the Black Female Aesthetic and the Transformed Consciousness of Sonia Sanchez, Prophetic Voice of the Black Arts Movement* (Howard University, 2005); Sebastian Clarke's "Black Magic Woman: Sonia Sanchez and Her Work;" Regina B. Jennings's "The Blue/Black Poetics of Sonia Sanchez;" D.H. Melham's "Sonia Sanchez: Will and Spirit;" and *Bma: The Sonia Sanchez Review*. It is thus crucial to mention the pertinence of Sanchez's own words from the collected interviews with Sonia Sanchez in *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez* (2007).

Finally, as is the case with Hughes, there have been many critical essays and book-length studies of Amiri Baraka's poetry. The critical work on his Beat period and Third World Marxist period is not central to this dissertation. Though, not to be discounted, these periods will remain peripheral to this project. What interests me for the purpose of this thesis is Baraka's middle period –his Black Arts nationalist period. Several books deal with Baraka's Black Arts period, and his most nationalist work. *To Raise, Destroy, and Create : The Poetry, Drama, and Fiction of Imamu Amiri Baraka* (1981) by Henry C. Lacey contains an interesting overview of Baraka's poetics and use of jazz music. Jeffrey Gafio Watts's *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (2001) analyses the cultural contexts that have informed Baraka's work. Watts' study, however, does not provide any significant gloss of his poetic project. Obviously, the work of Kimberly

Benston, especially *The Renegade and the Mask* (1975) and his edited *Collection of Critical Essays* (1978), both provide potent introductions to the poet, with the latter regrouping most of the common critiques on Baraka. Komozi Woodard's *A Nation Within a Nation: Amiri Baraka and Black Power Politics* (1999) is a key text that outlines the politics inherent in Baraka's more nationalist work. Woodard's most interesting discussions come from his ability to explain Baraka's cultural politics and, especially, to situate them within the nexus of music, poetry and social movements. Often dismissed because of its militant rhetoric and prophetic language, Woodard's book contains, nevertheless, insightful analyses of Baraka's Black Arts poetry, which function as points of reference for my own discussion of the poet. Most recently, Daniel Won-Gu Kim, in "In the Tradition': Amiri Baraka, Black Liberation, and Avant-Garde Praxis in the U.S." (2003), has suggested an innovative way of looking at Baraka's nationalist/separatist poetics. Kim envisions Baraka's poetics as a challenge against white supremacy, which has been constantly renewed, even beyond his nationalist period. The liberation project is thus always dialogically linked with the development of the jazz poetics, especially those deployed in "In the Tradition." In his essay, Kim proposes an overture for future critical debate, which is evoked in my discussion of Baraka's function as griot and exhorter.

The most influential work for my dissertation is William J. Harris's *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka: The Jazz Aesthetic* (1986) in which he recognizes how jazz contains the discursive patterning and intricacies crucial to any study of Baraka's poetry. Harris's critique of Baraka's jazz poems takes into consideration the poet's militant

awareness of the political battles that need to be waged against Euro-American power structures and superimposes them to the same militancy he sees at the core of jazz music, especially in post-bop and free jazz. Moreover, Harris delineates the contours of Baraka's jazz poetics within the larger dialogue promulgated by Black Arts theorists. My argument that Baraka is the militant jazz griot *par excellence* builds on the theoretical foundation provided by Harris's study.

Chapter I: “The Sound of Grammar: Langston Hughes’s Roles as Jazz Griot and Archivist of Black Cultural History in *Ask Your Mama*”

Ask Your Mama, Langston Hughes’s most accomplished work in terms of textual rendition of a jazz performance, follows the historiographical trajectory of Hughes’s ongoing redefinition of the black aesthetic. What distinguishes *Ask Your Mama* from previous volumes of poetry is Hughes’s aesthetic syncretization, which affirms the Diaspora as poetic reservoir and cultural memory.¹ In Hughes’s early poetry, blues is a paradigm of blackness and of resistance into which pours the various “rivers” of the Diaspora. Its invocation through performance functions as a constant cultural reminder of the barriers to be lifted, of the battles to be fought in order to assert one’s individuality and one’s identity. Therefore, before engaging in a thorough investigation of Hughes’s use of jazz as hermeneutical model in *Ask Your Mama*, I want to, first, outline the contours of his definition of Blackness, and, second, discuss the function of the black vernacular in the formulation of his poetics.

Hughes’s theorization of black music as source of historiographical poetry is foundational; it will inspire later theoretical models proposed by Stephen E. Henderson, Amiri Baraka and the Black Aestheticians. For instance, Henderson in “The Blues as

¹ Samuel A. Floyd, in *The Power of Black Music*, defines cultural memory as “[A] repository of meanings that comprise the subjective knowledge of a people, its immanent thoughts, its structures, and its practices; these thoughts, structures, and practices are transferred and understood unconsciously but become conscious and culturally objective in practice and perception. Cultural memory...seems to be connected with cultural forms...the “memory” drives the music and the music drives the memory” (8 –author’s emphasis).

Poetry,” states that, “[i]n structural terms...Blackness in poetry appears as a tendency to explore Black speech forms and a movement toward black song forms” (26). Later generations of black poets, from Umbra poet David Henderson to cultural nationalists like Amiri Baraka, respond to the Hughesian jazz hermeneutics in ways that underlie their desire to (re-)write and revise Black History. In that sense, Hughes’s blues and jazz poetries, because they enact literalized acts of vernacular resistance and historical revisionism, provide the templates for multivocalic definitions of the black aesthetic. Since jazz exists in a constant state of flux and since its performativity is made possible through a procedural improvisatory revisionism, its application to poetry as jazzed texts functions dialogically with issues of identity, voice, and authenticity. In the same vein, by locating the bulk of his vernacular poetry in Harlem, Hughes creates a symbolic locale upon which will be projected these jazz performativities as Harlem constantly acts as an ongoing metonymy for Black America. Hughes’s griotism, defined by the terms of the cultural continuum, performs cultural memory in ways that anticipate the black nationalist postulations of the Umbra and Black Arts movements.

I. *The Griot Speaks of Rivers and Drums: Hughes’s Axiological Study of Blackness in Vernacular*

Hughes’s axiology of blackness, subsumed under the trope of “soul,” is dialogically linked with the poet’s conception of black expressive culture as operative reservoir of black

life and black pride.² In fact, for Hughes, “*Soul* is contemporary Harlem’s *negritude*, revealing to the Negro people and the world the beauty within themselves” (Rampersad *II*, 403 –author’s emphasis). Rampersad cites Hughes,

Soul is a synthesis of the essence of Negro folk art redistilled...particularly the old music and its flavor, the ancient basic beat out of Africa, the folk rhymes and Ashanti stories –expressed in contemporary ways so definitely and emotionally colored with the old, that it gives a distinctly ‘Negro’ flavor to today’s music, painting or writing –or even to merely personal attitudes and daily conversation. (*II*, 403)

In the same breath, Hughes affirms,

As to Negro writing and writers, one of our aims, it seems to me, should be to gather the strengths of our people in Africa and the Americas into a tapestry of words as strong as the bronzes of Benin, the memories of Songhay and Mele, the war cry of Chaka, the beat of the blues, and the *Uhuru* of African freedom, and give it to the world with pride and love. (qtd in Rampersad, *II*, 403)

² Black historian Lerone Bennett, in *The Negro Mood*, contends that, “[t]he whole corpus of the tradition...is compressed into the folk myth of the *Soul*, the American counterpart of the African *Negritude*, a distinct quality of Negro-ness growing out of the Negro’s experience and not his genes. *Soul* is a metaphorical evocation of Negro being as expressed in the Negro tradition. It is the feeling with which an artist invests his creation, the style with which a man lives his life. It is, above all, the spirit rather than the letter: a certain way of feeling, a certain way of expressing oneself, a certain way of being” (qtd in Henderson, *Survival*, 115 – author’s emphasis).

In these expansive aesthetic principles, Hughes outlines the most significant concept that overrides his body of work: his notion of a black aesthetic cannot be divorced from its genesis in folk art, which itself is interlinked with the cultural carryovers from Africa to the New World. If “soul” is Black History contained and synthesized, and if the poet’s duty is to literalize this soul to the tune of blues and jazz, then the poem becomes a textualized performance of blackness. That is, in Hughes’s black aesthetic, music and text intersect and inform one another, thereby perpetuating the passing of (hi)stories of the black experience through its literalized representation. Therefore, it is possible to contend that his theorization of the black “Soul” as repository of cultural memory unifies the collective black consciousness of “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” with the catalogues of black heroes of the Diaspora in *Ask Your Mama*.

Hughes understood the black “Soul” to be an identitive compendium of the experience African Americans had to negotiate in the prejudiced environment of White America. This compendium posits black artistry as pathway to freedom –the penultimate theme of black literature. Hughes’s theorization of the black soul also extends to his blues poetry; more precisely, Hughes underlines how, for instance, blues performs at the level of ritualized music what black life exerts in terms of survival strategies. In the incantation to the blues “coming from a black man’s soul” in “The Weary Blues,” one finds Hughes returning to his encyclopedic “Soul,” which equates blues resistance with the “stories” that define a performative Blackness.

In “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” Hughes performs an initial poetic act of Bakerian “journeying back” to the epistemology of Blackness. As both griot and anthropologist, Hughes arcs back to the historical moments when Blacks across the Diaspora transcended the dehumanization of colonization and slavery. Despite the fact that his identification to blackness in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is initially romantic and comes from a peripheral knowledge of the experience of racism in White America, his identity as poet of the black masses as well as his desire to take his poetry to the people are nevertheless contained in the imaginative continuum of “I’ve known rivers.” His early recognition of Africa as “Motherland” and locus of “pure” blackness anticipates the aesthetic lineage traced and outlined in *Ask Your Mama*, the poetic source from which Henderson and Baraka will draw.³ In *The Big Sea*, Hughes claims the African meaning of “Negro” as marker of Pan-African unity under the denomination “black” (11). By doing so, Hughes hints at early black nationalist ideals similar to those defended by Martin Delany and Bishop Henry Turner.

Afrocentrisms in Hughes’s poetry most often converge in assertions of blackness ritualized in art and used as both process of self-definition and community-affirming politics. In “Negro” (24), the speaker associates his Black American self with a blackness he identifies in a self-appropriated Africa: “I am a Negro:/ Black as the night is black/ Black like the depth of *my* Africa” (lines 1-3 –emphasis mine). This concept of Africa as Motherland situates the genesis of his poetic vision within a syncretized history of black

³ In *The Big Sea*, 10; Ibid. 11

life. Hughes aptly performs the task of the griot as poet/historian in that he re-conceives black historiography as site of resistance that reaffirms the humanity of Diasporic Blacks against attempts at ontological negation.

In “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” Hughes remembers the black collective consciousness and thus engages in a poetic dialogue with ancestral memory. By using the communal “I” of the vernacular tradition, Hughes also inscribes his own identity as ethnographer within the historical and cultural continuum of Blackness.⁴

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 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.

⁴ For more on the communal “I,” see Jeff Westover’s “Africa/America: Fragmentation and Diaspora in the Work on Langston Hughes;” Fahamisha Patricia Brown’s *Performing the Word*, p.68-69.

I've known rivers.

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers. (23)

What Hughes's symbolic speaker performs in the poem is echoed in the hermeneutical model provided by Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic*. The fact that Blacks from the Diaspora were taken and displaced as slaves led to the fragmentation and fissuring of the collective and individual histories. After Middle Passage and the dehumanizing shock of familial dismembering in the New World, Blacks, from different tribes, regions, and cultures, were forced to live submerged under a unilateral and demonizing conception of Blackness. What Gilroy suggests is that “[w]hat was initially felt to be a curse –the curse of homelessness and the curse of forced exile –gets repossessed” (111). In this act of repossession, black History is “affirmed and is reconstructed” (111) as a foundational paradigm of blackness.⁵ Thus, what Hughes's poem performs is a rewriting of black historiography as informed by the collective black consciousness: the poem becomes the

⁵ Westover underscores how, for Gilroy, “the African diaspora” should be conceptualized as “a paradigm of black cultural analysis” (1208).

basis for his ongoing poetic dialogues between Africa and African America.⁶ The thematic and symbolic symmetries of the Euphrates, Congo, and Mississippi converge in the archetype of “rivers” and allow Hughes to navigate the time/space continuum in order to trace the lineage of his cultural ancestry.

In that sense, I agree with Westover that this written performance becomes the postulated task of the black poet as griot/historian.⁷ To that model, I would add the task of griot as musician. Hughes employs the structure of the refrain to emphasize how the orality of the poetic project is embedded in the vernacular tradition. The repetitive orality inherent in “I’ve known rivers” and “My soul has grown deep like the rivers,” evokes a call-response pattern through which the survival of black cultural history is contingent upon its constant oral/aural performativity. The use of refrains, interspersed with lines of irregular meter, also suggests the antiphony of the ring shout within which improvised commentary riffs upon a repeated theme. The various black “histories” evoked in the irregular lines respond poetically to the call for black unity much like Africans of various countries came together through the performance of the ring to oppose the chafe of slavery; these “histories” all unite in the collective archetype of the black “soul,” thereby mapping its genealogical rooting in the ritual of the ring shout.⁸

⁶ Westover prefers the term “diasporan consciousness,” p.1209. I use “black collective consciousness” as an attempt to link Hughes’s poetics with those of the black consciousness movements of the 1960s. In so doing, I illustrate the continuative characteristics of black vernacular traditions.

⁷ In “Africa/America,” p.1221.

⁸ Sterling Stuckey states that the performance of “[t]he ring...is key to understanding the means by which they achieved oneness in America” (12).

Arguing that the ring ritual also gave “form and meaning” to black art (11), Stuckey avers that the circular imagery of the ring can also be found in the framed image of the griot, surrounded by listeners, while he chronicles the history and memorial ancestry of his people (11). In the poem, the alternation between “I’ve known rivers” and the nomenclature of ontologically twined “rivers” –intertextual chronicles within the same historical continuum –provides a polyphonic framework that Hughes will explore and expand in the contrapuntal structures of *Ask Your Mama*. Hughes’s first important poem already establishes his role as griot speaking to, about, and for his community.

The significance of the written poem is, therefore, interlinked with its functionality as speaking or signing verses.⁹ In the aforementioned poem, the emotions and affects of Diasporic Blacks exceed their subjectivity and provide the templates for a collective diasporic consciousness rooted in the ceremonial memorialization of shared experiences. This identity-forming paradigm –to assess Blackness and black culture using a revised historiography and an Afrocentric set of aesthetic praxes, not those imposed by hegemonies –will be at the center of the Black Consciousness movements as well as the Black Arts Movement’s “Criterion” of the 1960s.

That Hughes championed black unity and pride in his cultural heritage is not surprising since he understood blackness to be a pan-African conduit for the identitive quest he so greatly pursued in his art. Hughes perceives in African ritualized drumming one

⁹ In *Performing Blackness*, Kimberley Benston affirms that, “writing, properly reconceived and directed as utterance and as act, [can be] advanced as a signal instrument of cultural liberation” (2).

portal through which the African American vernacular tradition could be expressed; for instance, in his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Hughes advocates the importance of “tom-tom of revolt” for the survival of black expressive culture. Westover importantly notes how, “Hughes makes the drum his instrument for the recuperative work of memory” (1215). In “Drums” (543) for instance, the sound of drumming triggers an antiphonal process of remembering. The syncopation of “Remember, remember, remember!” (line 4), evokes rhythmic drumming patterns and gestures towards a reaffirmation of collective ontology. The repeated “remember” also performs a remembering of the black cultural matrix, often fractured by oppression and racism, and invoked to transcend these burdens encountered daily by Black Americans. The speaker’s call to remember thus catalyzes a musical response that is, itself, charged with the performed “text” of the black experience; here again, antiphony functions as conveyor of historicity, and as active narrative of resistance working against the constant threat of cultural erasure.

Hughes, through his musical griotism in verse, retraces the lineage of the black vernacular in African music and thus establishes a dialogic sequencing between African and African American expressive cultures that is at the basis of the polyphony used in *Ask Your Mama*. As such, both “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” and “Drums” represent Hughes’s attempt to write black historiography using the framework of diasporic expressive culture,

which has its genesis in antiphonal drumming.¹⁰ In “Poem: For the portrait of an African Boy after the manner of Gauguin” (32), he posits his own poetic voice as agent of cultural continuity, using the trope of the talking drums: “All the tom-toms of the jungles beat in my blood” (line 1). Likewise, the speaker of “Danse Africaine” (28) recognizes the power of talking drums to trigger ritualized dancing, which suggests a ring shout ritual within which communal unity is affirmed.

In alluding to the “talking drums” of African music, Hughes opens the poetic vista for a theoretical revision of his use of drum language to mediate his relationship with Africa and sustain his jazz poetics.¹¹ His conceptualization of drum language moves him from the position of the etic observer to that of the emic and active participant. John Miller Chernoff contends that

There are two reasons why Africans can talk with their drums. First, African languages are what are called “tonal” languages. In tonal languages, the pitch of a spoken word is important in determining its meaning, and the “same” sound pronounced at different pitches can mean entirely different things. Second, a drum is not just an instrument to play rhythms: it plays a melody. By using two drums or by striking a drum in different ways, a

¹⁰ Like “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” then, “Drums’ reconstitutes African-American history not only by tracing its origins in Africa but also by alluding to the beginning of African slavery in the New World, to the distinctive drumming and dancing of the slaves in Congo Square in New Orleans, and to jazz” (Westover 1215).

¹¹ See also Westover, 1215.

drummer can duplicate the speech patterns of his language: African music is derived from language (75)

Chernoff's proposition is fundamental, for it reconfigures the function of language to music, not as lyrical expression of voice sung to chords, but as performed cultural memory that underlies a need to convey layered social meaning.¹² Drum language is essential to Hughes's musicological configuration of poetry, for, since African drumming informs later developments in jazz rhythmic structures, Hughes as griot/archivist must assimilate the aesthetic footing of his jazz hermeneutical model in formation. In the same vein, the multivocalic aspect of African drumming –a musical fabric that interweaves rhythm *and* melody, and which produces sonic landscapes that claim tradition –are integral to Hughes's poetics of musical language ritualized through performance. Moreover, in drawing from the language of African talking drums to portray the social dynamics affecting the black experience in America, Hughes not only links, dialogically, Africa and African America, but also points to the necessity of claiming such language for the affirmation of a self-determined black community.

In *Ask Your Mama*, the presence of talking drums signals a return to the etymology of the music, which grounds the poetry in a diasporic dialogue. For instance, in "Blues in Stereo," Hughes conjoins the line "THE MUSIC OF OLD MUSIC'S" (23) with the musical cue asking for "*African drumbeats over blues*" (496). Meta DuEwa Jones states

that, “[o]ne could see this [line] as both literally and figuratively foregrounding the African roots –the drums –of syncopation in...jazz” (1165). In fact, the presence of drums in *Ask Your Mama* catalyses cultural memory.¹³ The potentialities of drumming in Hughes’s poetry correlate his desire to poeticize the black “lowdown folk:” the vernacular voice he creates is imbricated within a language encoded and developed out of the commonality of shared experience. The speaker in “Is It True?” (507) reflects on the origins of black vernacular:

FROM THE SHADOWS OF THE QUARTER
SHOUTS ARE WHISPERS CARRYING
TO THE FARTHEST CORNERS SOMETIMES
OF THE NOW KNOWN WORLD
UNDECIPHERED AND UNLETTERED
UNCODIFIED UNPARSED
IN TONGUES UNANALYZED UNECHOED
UNTAKEN DOWN ON TAPE –
NOT EVEN FOLKWAYS CAPTURED
BY MOE ASCH OR ALAN LOMAX

¹² Here I mean to echo Richard L. Wright’s notion that “[l]anguage is constructed socially, and its group-defining forms and functions emerge out of the contexts, contingencies, and communities that constitute it and which, in turn, are constituted by it” (86).

¹³ Patrick Bernard avers that, “[f]or Hughes, the tom-tom engages the discursive possibilities of memory and the connections it establishes among ideas, experiences, images, and symbols that eventually coalesce into the memorials individuals and communities create to remember and represent their past (35).

NOT YET ON SAFARI. (1-11)

In locating the vernacular nexus in the “SHOUTS” of the African ring ritual and its African American continuity in shouts and hollers, Hughes resituates language within the philology of blackness that elides commodification and appropriation (“UNTAKEN...NOT EVEN...CAPTURED/BY MOE ASCH OR ALAN LOMAX/NOT YET ON SAFARI”). The teleology of these “SHOUTS” also resisted cultural erasure in the “NOW KNOWN WORLD;” they remained at the core of the survival methods slaves employed to preserve their humanity and establish intricate systems of communication among plantations between Africans of different regions. African slaves were thus allowed to sustain their dislocated history through its oral re-enactment in performance. A mixture of ritualized African antiphony and African American idioms, these “SHOUTS” exemplify the creolized “Black idiom” that Claude Brown calls “language of soul” (qtd in Smitherman 1). In Brown’s contention, this form of vernacular expression is authenticated by its linguistic affinity with blackness (soul). Shouts as shared language are dialogically linked with African antiphony in the way “they dictated the form blues took” (Jones, *BP*, 62), thereby creating a musical language Hughes repeatedly borrowed from in his blues and jazz poems. That Hughes understood the function and potential of the shout is evidenced by the fact that he invokes free jazz trepidations in the most revolutionary passages of *Ask Your Mama*, the shout being often used in free jazz expressivity.

For his poetics therefore, Hughes employs the agency of music to create “language” and later, “text as history” which contributes to his definition of blackness. This, in turn,

anticipates literalized performance in Hughes's vernacular poetry, which ultimately gives consideration to the contingencies of inter-cultural dialogisms between music, history and politics, and facilitates the conversations between poems and songs, poets and musicians, language and music.¹⁴ Similarly, Hughes's vernacular historicisms in *Ask Your Mama* is in continuation with his desire to represent the black speaking voice, which begins with the blues personas of *The Weary Blues* and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* and extend to the bebop scat singers of *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. In *Ask Your Mama*, Hughes's theorization of Blackness is congruent with the idea of jazz syncretism—a communicative amalgamation of cultural practices from across the Black Diaspora underscored by the “sound grammar” of talking drums.¹⁵

II. *From Performance to Poem: Literalizing Blues Resistance and Jazz Defiance*

Besides drum language, Langston Hughes, whose main objective was to write for and about the black masses, also employed folk material like blues and jazz extensively in

¹⁴ Fahamisha Patricia Brown states that “African American poetic texts are in conversation with African American vernacular as well as with each other” (3). Brown further contends that “African American poets have at their disposal a language continuum ranging from a communally based vernacular” (4). Inspired by Henderson's theory of “Black music as poetic reference,” Brown defines these cross-fertilizing dynamics as “Song/talk.” Her definition is worth quoting at length: “The language of African American music informs the language of African American poetry...Song functions in African American vernacular culture as primary recorder, the means of documentation of life and experience. Making music, then, continuing the song/talk that records and passes on the story, documents the events, celebrates the heroes, exposes the evils, and exhorts the people to keep on keeping on is the mission of the poet as well. The contemporary African American poet sings to a community and from a vibrant oral tradition by making song/talk” (82).

his works.¹⁶ In so doing, he wanted to show the world, without and within the community, the peculiar emotional strength of the arts African Americans create in spite of racism and oppression; thus, Hughes, early in this poetic arc, already theorizes his role as griot in that he understands how vernacular performativity is ultimately an act of resistance against the culture of racism and oppression in the U.S. Prefiguring Ellison's notion of folk tradition, Hughes also grasped that, in order to come to terms with the notion of an African American poetic tradition, he needed to internalize the folk reservoir of Black Americans as a site of historical confluence between Africa and African America.¹⁷ In the same vein, it is important to highlight that it is out of Hughes's conceptual folk reservoir that flow, naturally, ideas of a cultural continuum that interlink blues and jazz poetics and iterate his function as griot/musicologist that will be fully developed in *Ask Your Mama*. Hughes's poetic project not only revises and refigures black idioms in his poetry, it also posits such idioms as a complex of historiographical reappraisals that map Black American cultural memory.

¹⁵ Title of Ornette Coleman's 2005 live recording on Big Hassle Records.

¹⁶ Jemie provides one more point of entry. He states that Hughes "wanted to record and interpret the lives of the common black folk, their thoughts and habits and dreams, their struggle for political freedom and economic well-being. He wanted to do this using their own forms of expression: their language, humor, music, and folk verse" (1).

¹⁷ In "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," Ellison avers that, "the stability of the Negro American folk tradition became precious as a result of an act of literary discovery. Taken as a whole, its spirituals along with its blues, jazz and folk tales, it has...much to tell us of the faith, humor and adaptability to reality necessary to live in a world which has taken on much of the insecurity and blues-like absurdity known to those who

The poem “The Weary Blues” best encapsulates the dialectics of experiential performativity. In it, Hughes conveys the essential dynamics between performer and audience, which result in a Gilroyan cultural conversation and subsequent creative exchange. This ritualized exchange reveals the potential of performance transformed into text: the listener/poet responds to the performer’s blues ritual by refiguring it in writing. Therefore, the poem becomes an instance of compositional aesthetics whereby orality and aurality lead to literacy.¹⁸ The listener/poet’s creativity derives directly from his interconnectedness with the performer’s ritual; he even includes the song in the poem because it is essential to his own creative ritual. Moreover, Hughes captures the improvisational qualities of both song and performer, which informs, in turn, his own stanza organization: the first eight-bar blues is revised and extended into a traditional twelve-bar blues.¹⁹ Instances of aesthetic modulations show Hughes’s technical knowledge

brought it into being.” From *Shadow and Act*, 58-59; See Levine’s *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* in which he considers slave tales as historical documents, pp. 83-90.

¹⁸ I agree with Grey Gundaker who, in *Signs of the Diaspora/Diaspora of Signs*, argues that African American vernacular practices blurred the lines between the usually dialectical orality and literacy, and produced an interactive framework within which vernacular performativity ultimately yields literacy (4-5).

¹⁹ Langston Hughes did not publish any eight-bar blues poems with the recognizable AA stanza; the two conventional stanzas that he used in his eight-bar blues poems are the AB stanza and the AB refrain (Tracy 161). Hughes adapted the conventional AB stanzas to fit his rhyme scheme. As was the case with the twelve-bar blues, the caesura creates the C-line. Hence, the rhyme scheme becomes ABCB. For instance, “Workin’ Man” (119) is a prototypical eight-bar AB blues poem with an ABCB rhyme scheme. Here, Hughes adapts his rhyme scheme and employs a caesura to fragment the two different thoughts (A and B) within each stanza to spread the thematic and rhythmic development over four lines. Other eight-bar blues poems such as “Dressed Up,” “Bad Luck Card,” “The New Cabaret Girl,” “Evil Woman,” “Share-Croppers,” “Announcement,” “Evil Morning,” “Monroe’s Blues,” “Lonesome Corner,” “Border Line,” “As Befits Man,”

of the many forms of blues stanzas. The notion of idiomatic knowledge is key here: Hughes has internalized blues performances as expressive of black American postbellum resistance. The modulated blues stanzas provide an expansive commentary on the creative process of the poet, whose perception of the performance and ontologically connective communication with the performer's song "make" the poem happen. The performer's blues parlance is transformed into poetic language that reaffirms cultural continuity.

It is also significant that both poem and song speak the same language: they enact a cathartic ritual of transcendence whose loci are a shared history, a shared language and a shared refusal to capitulate under the weight of oppression. Both listener/poet and blues performer show abilities to "converse" without literal words but through a coded musical language that underscores the resilience African Americans affirm through art. The performer's and listener/poet's compound idea of blues vocalism reflect their respective

"Homecoming," and "Could Be" are all modeled on the ABCB stanzaic pattern. The core of Hughes's blues poetry follows the predominant stanza pattern of vaudeville blues, the AAB stanza popularized by W. C. Handy, who heard it in the Mississippi Delta in 1903 (Tracy 154). Interestingly, Hughes often modifies and adapts the organization of his lines in an effort to follow the musical beats and rhythms of a vaudeville blues performance. In terms of rhyme scheme, however, one should note that in fragmenting the B-response line, Hughes's caesura creates a C-line. Hence the rhyme scheme becomes ABABCB. Even if the conventional stanza, as Tracy and Waldron state, is AAB, Hughes's ethnopoetic rendition of this stanza nevertheless conveys his refusal to be enslaved by these conventions. Similarly, Hughes adapts other conventional blues stanzas such as the ABC stanza. Other blues poems such as "Midwinter Blues," "Gypsy Man," "Ma Man," "Listen Here Blues," "Lament Over Love," "Fortune Teller Blues," "Homesick Blues," "Suicide," "Hard Luck," "Red Rose," "Gal's Cry For A Dying Lover," "Bad Man," "Hey!," "Hey! Hey!," "Young Gal's Blues," "Hard Daddy," "Love Again Blues," "Out of Work," "Evenin' Air Blues," and "403 Blues," follow this twelve-bar AAB pattern.

reiteration of Blackness –for which blues is an identitive signifier –as marker of communal cultural memory. In this thematic and idiomatic antiphony, Hughes prefigures the intricacies between poetry and music.²⁰ He states that, “[t]he music should not only be background to the poetry, but should comment on it” (qtd in Tracy 56). Thus, “The Weary Blues” is Hughes’s metacommentary –as poet *and* as active participant in the blues ritual – on the fundamentality of the black aesthetic experience for the survival of oral and aural-to-literal traditions. At the end of the poem, the listener/poet is able to imagine the performer sleeping “like a rock or a man that’s dead” because they have shared the same cathartic ritual; both transcended their “troubles” through oral and literary performances and have produced, as a result, creative acts that are inscribed within the same cultural continuum and within the same history of resistance.

In *Ask Your Mama*, the intrinsic commentaries between music and poetry are conjoined in the blues trope of the leitmotif, the traditional “Hesitation Blues.” That Hughes chose the “Hesitation Blues” as motif for his narrative history of Black American cultural memory is consequential with his desire that the poem should represent a synthesis of his own work.²¹ Hughes borrows from the aesthetic vocabulary of jazz composition when he uses “motivic or thematic development” in which his leitmotif is subjected “to recurrent use and variation while preserving its fundamental identity” as primary signifier

²⁰ Curtis also notes how the “participatory style of the black musical experience combines rhythm and language to create a dialogue between speaker and audience, also known as call and response” (25).

²¹ James A. Emmanuel, in “The Literary Experiments of Langston Hughes,” prefers to talk about *Ask* as an “update” of the poetics outlined throughout Hughes career. In O’Daniel, 145.

(Berliner 193). In fact, the “Hesitation Blues” returns *Ask Your Mama*’s free jazz framework to its idiomatic genesis in the blues praxes of “The Weary Blues.”²² Hence, while “The Weary Blues,” dedicated to W.C Handy, fostered most of Hughes’s blues themes and idioms, the leitmotif of *Ask Your Mama* conjures up, once again, the spirit of the “Father of the Blues.”

Handy produced his own version of the traditional blues titled “The Hesitating Blues” and later to be revisited by Louis Armstrong, to whom, accordingly, *Ask Your Mama* is dedicated.²³ Armstrong recorded Handy’s version of “Hesitating Blues” for Columbia on the highly praised *Louis Armstrong Plays W.C. Handy*.²⁴ In this recording, Armstrong acknowledges the folk heritage in jazz composition, especially the flatted fifths also known as blue notes. Throughout the recording, one can note how Armstrong’s jazz was “fathered,” in great parts, by African American folk idioms perfected by “ancestors” like Handy –Satchmo’s compositions become extensions of a communal tradition passed on from folk blues generations to jazz improvisers who, in turn, revise and reframe song structures.

The modeled correlation between performer and song is thus reframed in *Ask Your Mama* in terms of the performative potential of artistry channeled politically. In that sense, the recurring blues phrase “Tell me how long/ Will I have to wait” of Handy’s “Hesitating

²² Johnson and Farrell, in “The Jazz Poetry of Langston Hughes: A Reflection,” prefer to label *Ask* as “hard bop poem,” 2.

²³ Hughes considered Armstrong to be “the greatest horn blower of them all.” In *Rampersad II*, 319.

²⁴ On Legacy/Columbia. Catalogue no.: CK 64925 (1997)

Blues” becomes a lyrical extension of the work songs, spirituals, and other freedom songs that African Americans have used to exorcize the demons of antebellum and post-bellum of racial oppression.²⁵ Moreover, the recurring theme of both Handy’s blues and Hughes’s

²⁵ The important “Bluegrass Messengers” online database notes that “On the surface, ‘Hesitating Blues’ appears to be a very benign and jovial song, engaging with the simple and sentimental theme of the impatience of lovers when they are separated from or unable to possess the subject of their affection for even a short period of time. However, themes of hesitation and waiting and phrases such as “tell me how long will I have to wait” carry a great deal of meaning and significance within the context of African-American culture and history. The genealogy of these themes and phrases stretches all the way back to the era of slavery in the United States. Black slaves, working in the fields on plantations in the south, would often engage in call and response singing to help pass the time and to distract themselves, however briefly, from the bleak and nearly hopeless circumstances of their lives. These “slave songs” frequently repeated phrases such as “how long will I have to wait” in reference to the seemingly impossible dream of someday being free. After slavery was abolished, however, themes of hesitation and waiting continued to appear constantly in African-American fiction and music, including blues, for the specter of slavery had merely been replaced by those of racial discrimination and segregation. Now, African-Americans were “waiting” for an end to the poverty and racism that darkened their lives, to be recognized as equals, and to be able to enjoy all of the simple pleasures and luxuries, such as liberty and justice, that were readily afforded to white people...”Hesitating Blues” as an example of the dialectical nature of the blues. On the one hand, it is a very warm and humorous song, and Louis Armstrong and Velma Middleton perform it with a great deal of mirth and laughter. However, this laughter exists simultaneously with and in spite of the genealogy of suffering that is evoked by the themes of hesitation and waiting. This song employs a characteristic blues technique of overlaying or covering grave matters with mirth in an effort to combat and overcome the suffering occasioned by these matters. However, this mirth is never able to provide a complete cover, for there are always residual traces of suffering visible in the product of this emotional mimesis. In “Hesitating Blues”, these residual traces are apparent in the lingering unanswered question “why do you hesitate?” The memory evoked in this song by the themes of hesitation and waiting includes a time when African-Americans were denied the right to even basic familial relations, and when these relations were constantly being cruelly torn asunder. As a result, even when faced with the prospect of an apparently safe and loving relationship, the ominous traces of this collective memory still cause many African-Americans to hesitate.”

<http://www.bluegrassmessengers.com/master/hesitationblues2.html>.

leitmotif expand the “dream deferred” motif of the latter’s bebop poetry, especially in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, thereby tracing the lineage of bebop in blues phraseology and the reinstated “blue note.”²⁶ In thus using blues as foundation for a poem that invokes the vast array of black vernacular aestheticism from work songs, to bebop, to an anticipated free jazz future, Hughes maps the geography of blackness through the prism of revisionist black idioms. Hughes’s use of the “Hesitation Blues” provides musical commentary on his poetic development of catalogues; it also allows for political commentary encoded with syncretized vernacular.

Thematically, “Hesitation Blues” offers Hughes with an opportunity to engage further with segregationist politics and the ramifications of White America’s socio-economic oppression of African Americans. Particularly damaging to the black spirit was the continued enforcement of Jim Crow politics across the U.S. The demeaning experience of segregation –reiterated in the refrain “How long must I wait” –is depicted in the imagery of

THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES
 WHERE THE RAILROAD AND THE RIVER
 HAVE DOORS THAT FACE EACH WAY
 AND THE ENTRANCE TO THE MOVIE’S

²⁶ Mariann Russell states that the leitmotif is “a sixties version of the dream deferred,” in “Langston Hughes and Melvin Tolson: Blues People.” Reprinted *The Furious Flowering of African American Poetry*, edited by Joanne V. Gabbin, 38-46.

UP AN ALLEY UP THE SIDE (31-35)²⁷

The meaning inherent in “QUARTER” is Hughes’s anthropological “journey back” to the slave quarters on the plantations, where African slaves endured daily degradation. Similarly segregated or “quartered” in Harlem’s urban ghetto “WHERE DOORS ARE DOORS OF PAPERS” (“Cultural Exchange,” 4), denied access in the body politic and tricked out of equal economic opportunities by White America’s failure to fulfill its constitutional promises –the trickery is a “SHADOW” of King “LEOPOLD” II –African Americans have to endure demoralizing living conditions and social stratification based on racial prejudices.²⁸

Thus evoked in the demonizing symbols of the movie theatre’s “coon heaven” and “THE COLORED LAUNDROMAT” (39), segregation’s oppressive measures also reinforce the economic hardships Black Americans have had to face on a daily basis. Of the main difficulties encountered as a result of socio-economic equality is the fragmentation of the family. Black families disintegrate because the father, afflicted by unemployment, leaves the family, who must turn to welfare programs such as AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) and ADC (Aid to Dependent Children) in order to survive. In the urban ghetto, female-headed families with multiple children have no other recourse than welfare: “*I WANT TO GO TO THE SHOW, MAMA/ NO SHOW FARE, BABY –/ NOT*

²⁷ In “Cultural Exchange,” 478.

²⁸ Scanlon associates “QUARTER” with its translation from the French, “quartier,” which designates “a section of a city,” 53; King Leopold II of Belgium represents an archetypal image of colonial terror and trickery for Africans. See *African Perspectives on Colonialism*, A. Adu Boahen, p. 20-32.

THESE DAYS” (96-98). Here, Hughes anticipates –and somewhat reorients the debate on economics –the devastating conclusions of the Moynihan Report on the African American family, which identifies the “crumbling” of the familial nucleus in the black community as the “fundamental problem” in Blacks’ quest for equality.²⁹ The refrain of the “Hesitation Blues” “*asking over and over its old question, ‘Tell me how long?’ until the musical dies*” reiterates the fact that deferral in economic improvement is the real source of the fragmentation of the black family, thereby placing the blame on the power structure that maintain black poverty. As the music “dies,” the family has already begun to collapse under the crushing weight of poverty that welfare programs can only partially palliate:

...BABIES BORN IN SHADOWS
 IN THE SHADOW OF THE WELFARE
 IF BORN PREMATURE
 BRING WELFARE CHECK MUCH SOONER
 YET NO PRESENT DOWN THE CHIMNEY.

²⁹ The report created a furor in black communities across the nation for its claims of black dependence on the white-ruled power structures, an ethos that reverts back, according to Moynihan’s research, to slavery. One of the slogans that emerged in the black community was “blame the victim,” which illustrates the perversion of the black economic situation by white intellectuals and politicians. The report, instead of acknowledging how the racial divide created the economic vacuum Blacks have to endure, established that African American families, especially its devaluation of fatherhood and, ultimately, of black manhood, was one of the reasons why black families could not survive economically. This ethos of victimization was enhanced by Moynihan’s endorsement of Nixon, whose politics continued to denigrate Blacks. In many ways, the report can be seen as the white elite’s fear of the growing black middle-class. The Moynihan Report, “The Negro Family: The Case

IN THE SHADOW OF THE WELFARE
 CHOCOLATE BABIES BORN IN SHADOWS
 ARE TRIBAL NO LONGER
 SAVE IN MEMORIES OF GANGRENOUS ICING
 ON A TWENTY-STORY HOUSING PROJECT
 THE CHOCOLATE GANGRENOUS ICING OF

JUST WAIT.

TRIBAL NO LONGER PAPA MAMA
 IN RELATION TO THE CHILD,
 ONCE YOUR BROTHER'S KEEPER
 NOW NOT EVEN KEEPER TO YOUR CHILD – (71-86)

As a result of this fragmentation, the black family as microcosm of the larger black community is “TRIBAL NO LONGER,” disunited in its struggle to survive and unable to help its “BROTHER” whose survival is compromised by poverty.³⁰ Conversely, “TRIBAL NO LONGER” also suggests the inevitable destruction of the tropes of primitivism and stereotypical representations of blackness found in scientific racism and racialist rhetoric. Instead of internalizing these definitions, Hughes points to ways of reclaiming the “tribe,” divorced from sociological shame. For that, Hughes aligns the musical cue that calls for

for National Action,” was published in 1965 by Patrick Moynihan. Retrieved at: <http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/webid-meynihan.htm>.

“*Drums alone softly*” with “TRIBAL NO LONGER” as a call to (re-)member a collective past and a shared ancestry that Hughes perceives in African antiphonal drumming.

It is thus the entire future of the black community –contained in the symbolic “CHILD” –that is compromised by these economic hardships. The child’s future is unequivocally linked with his ethnicity, which, in post-WWII America, is still a marker of socio-political and economic inferiority:

SHELTERED NOW NO LONGER
 BORN TO GROW UP WILD –
 TRIBAL NOW NO LONGER ONE FOR ALL
 AND ALL FOR ONE NO LONGER
 EXCEPT IN MEMORIES OF HATE
 UMBILICAL IN SULPHEROUS CHOCOLATE:
GOT TO WAIT –
 THIS LAST QUARTER OF CENTENNIAL:
 GOT TO WAIT. (87-95)

Aptly, the stanza comes full circle with the “*Hesitation Blues’ beginning slowly*,” which not only reiterates the deferred dream motif, but also functions as reunifying “matrix” dialogically linked with African “*Drums*.” The “Hesitation Blues” repetitive structure allows Hughes to point out that the socio-economic systems that deny equal opportunities and break apart communities (“TRIBAL NO LONGER ONE FOR ALL/ AND ALL FOR

³⁰ See also Scanlon 59

ONE NO LONGER), despite the promises of equality made after Emancipation, are founded on a legacy of primitivist and racist myths (“MEMORIES OF HATE”) as well as representational templates embedded in discriminating stereotypes (“SULPHEROUS CHOCOLATE”).

Ultimately, Hughes contends that the damaging effects of segregation and unresolved economic inequality –contained in the musical motif and repeated in the poem (“*GOT TO WAIT ...GOT TO WAIT*”) –are continuations of the demeaning measures White America has used to deprive Blacks of their basic rights. As such, the de jure welfare system is another way to thwart or lynch, symbolically, generations of Black Americans who must continue to endure racist economic politics:

ON THE BIG SCREEN OF THE WELFARE CHECK

A LYNCHED TOMORROW SWAYS...

WITH ALL DELIBERATE SPEED A

LYNCHED TOMORROW SWAYS. (99-102)

By invoking the failure of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* judicial decision to end segregation (“ALL DELIBERATE SPEED), Hughes reaffirms the absurdity of the bitter line of poetry “Separate but Equal” which is at the basis of the African American blues-infused dream deferred that still prevents the “CHILD” from attending “*THE SHOW*” of the (Euro-) American Dream.³¹

³¹ “After the *Brown* opinion was announced, the Court heard additional arguments during the following term on the decree implementing the ruling. While the NAACP lawyers had proposed to use the word ‘forthwith’

Hughes found represented in the blues a particular quality of African Americans: the refusal to capitulate, to relinquish their identity, and succumb to the dehumanizing definitions of Euro-American oppressors.³² Therefore, even though the content of the blues lyrics was generally filled with sadness and despair, its spirit was imbued with survival and hope. In *The Big Sea*, Hughes formulates his own blues aesthetics: “I tried to write poems like the songs they sang on Seventh Street –gay songs, because you had to be gay or die; sad songs, because you couldn’t help being sad, sometimes. But gay or sad you kept on living and you kept on going” (209). For Hughes, the blues is life-affirming: it resituates the “laughing-to-keep-from-crying” motif as central to a functioning reservoir of folk idioms that are used to exorcize racism and oppression. This motif morphs into a dominant trope for Langston Hughes’s blues aesthetics: it positions the necessity of performance at the center of the poetic project.

It is this ontological ambivalence that characterizes the paradoxical existence of the black experience and necessitates the catharsis of the blues ritual –the ability to laugh in the face of despair and frustration –that sets in motion the ritual of catharsis. One can infer from Hughes’s blues poetics that the poet finds aesthetic beauty in the lives of the black

to achieve an accelerated desegregation timetable, Chief Justice Earl Warren adopted Justice Felix Frankfurter's suggestion to use a phrase associated with the revered Oliver Wendell Holmes, ‘with all deliberate speed.’ Shortly after Warren retired from the Court he acknowledged that ‘all deliberate speed’ was chosen as a benchmark because ‘there were so many blocks preventing an immediate solution of the thing in reality that the best we could look for would be a progression of action.’” From Library of Congress. Retrieved at <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/trr007.html>.

masses he depicts. Hence, his blues poems seek to neutralize the unrelenting attempts by white Euro-American racist society “to make ‘black being’ into ‘nonbeing’ or ‘nothingness’” –what Caroline F. Gerald terms the black’s “zero image of himself” (83).³³ In so doing, Hughes re-conceptualizes blues as “resistance” and constructs a paradigmatic call-and-response set of folk poetics that epitomizes his concepts of both vernacular tradition and blackness as pathways to freedom.³⁴

Accordingly, in the section “Cultural Exchange,” Hughes resorts to the “Hesitation Blues” to engender a call to action that would echo the independence movements in Africa. Here again, Hughes employs cultural dialogisms to establish the discursive potentialities of the continuum.³⁵ Through his demand for blues performance, Hughes invokes the vernacular traditions of the Diaspora foreshadowed in the previous musical cue “*distant African drums join the blues*” (479). This prefigured communication between Africa and African America initiates an exploration of the pan-African struggle for self-determinism as well as revolutionary movements that led to various manifestations of nationalism. While in

³² To this end Chinitz notes that the blues, for Hughes, is “an expression of the resilience and tragedy of the African-American lower class” (178).

³³ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, p. 7.

³⁴ Tony Bolden argues that “political significance of blues stems largely from its capacity for communicating certain feelings and ideas as well as its inscription of African American style” (46).

³⁵ For Albert Murray, the cultural conversation between blues and African idioms is natural: “The blues is percussive statement. It is the talking drum that has become the old, down-home American locomotive with its chugging pistons, its ambiguous and ambivalent bell, and its signifying, insinuating, tall tale-telling whistle.” In “Improvisation and the Creative Process,” in O’Meally’s *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, 113.

the margin, the “Hesitation Blues” repeats “*its haunting question, ‘How long must I wait? Can I get it now?’*” (479-480), Hughes remembers the battles revolutionary nationalists have won against colonial rule and other forms of socio-economic oppression; they should be used as inspiration for African Americans in their civil rights struggles:

IN THE SHADOW OF THE NEGROES

NKRUMAH

IN THE SHADOW OF THE NEGROES

NASSER NASSER

IN THE SHADOW OF THE NEGROES

ZIK AZIKIWE

CUBA CASTRO GUINEA TOURÉ

FOR NEED OR PROPAGANDA

KENYATTA

AND THE TOM DOGS OF THE CABIN

THE COCOA AND THE CANE BRAKE

THE CHAIN GANG AND THE SLAVE BLOCK

TARRED AND FEATHERED NATIONS (63-75)

Appropriately, the nomenclature of revolutionaries and anti-colonialists begins with Kwame Nkrumah, the father of Pan-Africanism who led Ghana to independence from colonial rule in 1957. Nkrumah’s call for Pan-African unity that challenged European hegemonies reverberates in Hughes’s incremental configuration of Africa as ancestral site

of cultural and political confluence. Moreover, Nkrumah's call for unity in the African Diaspora anticipates the Black Arts poetics of Amiri Baraka, who in "SOS," is "Calling all black people."

Similarly, Gamal Abdel Nasser's overthrowing of the British regime in Egypt and subsequent foundation of Arab nationalism constitute examples of the possibility for Black Americans to unite –which is what *Ask Your Mama* attempts to do by reconciling oppositional poetics, politics and histories of the Black American world –and challenge the supremacy of European power structures. Allusions to Nnamdi "Zik" Azikiwe's drive towards Nigerian independence (achieved in 1961), Fidel Castro's Communist takeover of Cuba, Sekou Touré's Guinea which became independent in 1958 (from French colonial rule), and Mzee Jomo Kenyatta's impending rule of Kenya complete Hughes's tableau of anti-colonialists who refused the dehumanizing status of "TARRED AND FEATHERED NATIONS." This is Hughes's invitation to shed the integrationist image of Uncle Toms segregated in symbolic "CABINS" which promotes black inferiority –an image of cultural betrayal Hughes had already reproved in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." Hughes's tableau also seems to answer the questions of the musical cue: the revolutionary nationalists could no longer "*wait*" for socio-economic freedom. Hughes thus uses the "Hesitation Blues" as agency for his historical reconstitution of liberation movements, which themselves provide commentary on the political scope of the poetic project. By subverting the effects institutionalized of racism and doctrines of racial inferiority through vernacular expressions, Hughes suggests how black music has historically conveyed

African American resilience and how jazz, especially, underscored the desire for self-determination that will form the basis of revolutionary impulses in the 1960s and 1970s.

III. *(Re-)membering through Repetition: Jazz Techniques, and the Politics of Free Jazz Improvisation for the Refiguration of Black Cultural History*

As griot-genealogist, Hughes not only uses jazz themes in *Ask Your Mama*, he also constructs the catalogues so that their organization correlates the atypical structures of free jazz improvisation. My contention is that Hughes, in the stanzas of *Ask Your Mama*, follows the compositional pattern of jazz “interplay and interaction” –to borrow Hodson’s terms –that are foundational in improvisation. Thus, if the melody of Hughes’s synthesis of black history is the blues of “Hesitation Blues,” and if the rhythm of black life is “a jazz rhythm” –therefore one that adopts the syncretism of African antiphony –then Hughes’s stanzaic improvisation is firmly ingrained in the cultural continuum deployed in free jazz aestheticism.³⁶ It functions in an intertextual context and reveals the wide spectrum of African American cultural memory. The cultural heroes in the catalogues that will be discussed in the following sections interact with one another, enhance one another’s meaning and place within the tradition and within the larger narrative framework of the poem, therefore creating a polyphonic tapestry united by a common theme.

³⁶ This echo of “The rhythm of life/ is a jazz rhythm” is from the first two lines of the poem “Lenox Avenue: Midnight,” *CP*, 39.

One of the improvisational techniques Hughes employs in *Ask Your Mama* and which I touched on briefly earlier is that of motivic or thematic development. For jazz theorists like Robert Hodson and Thomas Owens, this “strategy of creating coherence through the repetition and development of motives” was especially present in the improvisational politics of Charlie Parker (Hodson 127). That Hughes would try to emulate in verse Bird’s innovative playing is unsurprising given that Parker is memorialized as jazz deity and pre-eminent ancestor of jazz-as-social action in the catalogues of *Ask Your Mama*. Thus, Hughes constructs each “mood” in relation to the theme –both musical and literary – of the larger project, the “Hesitation Blues.” By repeating the theme through stanzaic developments, which, themselves, riff upon both poetry and musical cue, Hughes reproduces the structure of jazz composition. As Hodson suggests, improvisation is “but one thread in that [musical] fabric [of jazz], and it is a thread supported by, responded to, and responsive of the parts being played by the other musicians in the group” (1). Each stanza is thus a chorused improvisation that takes as its thematic core and/or “point of departure,” the blues leitmotif.³⁷ Moreover, each “improvised” stanza, by positing thematic continuity, develops geographies of musicians, performers, politicians, and activists, whose historiographical stylizations –their responses as well as the way in which they respond to racial discrimination –of the grand narrative of black liberation embeds the cultural matrix of “memory.”

³⁷ Murray, in “Improvisation and the Creative Process,” contends that “jazz composition is...made up of a series of ‘choruses’ which function like stanzas in a poem” 112.

Accordingly, Paul Berliner, in *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*, asserts that, “the development of ability in jazz depends upon honing the memory” (111). Essentially, *Ask Your Mama* represents Hughes’s cumulative geography of black cultural heroes whose successful cultural and political negotiations of racism have symbiotically strengthened the aesthetic underpinnings of the poet’s socio-historical “memory.” As an attempt to poeticize the panoramic history of the black experience, Hughes, as griot and poet/ improviser, reverts to black musical traditions for their ability to interpret the “Soul” of the black masses. In doing so, he proffers a hermeneutical model that employs revision or sounding as primary creative process. A direct result of the thematic coherence created through motivic repetition, Hughes’s poetic –and archival –revisionism further connotes the improvisational technique employed in jazz. His revisionism aims at representing the profundity of cultural memory for the survival of the black archives.

Hoping to recreate poetically the dynamics of jam sessions, wherein musicians’ improvised solos respond to both theme and each other’s solos, Hughes’s stanzas therefore constantly revisit the rhizomic theme of the leitmotif. Hughes evokes the call-and-response structure whereby his stanzas respond to each other, while also responding to the musical cues. Even the musical cues engage in such dialogues. For instance, in “Cultural Exchange,” “*African drums throb against blues*” (478), while in “Ode to Dinah” “*Drums alone softly merging into the ever-questioning “Hesitation Blues”*” (492) and in “Blues in Stereo” the cue demands “*African drumbeats over blues*” (496). These examples underscore Hughes’s wish to highlight –in words and in sound –the African heritage in

Black American music as well as the correlations between anti-colonial movements in Africa and civil rights movements in the U.S., which I discussed earlier. Thematically, these pan-African struggles invoke the centripetal lines of the leitmotif “How long must I wait?,” which antiphonal rituals attempt to transcend. Moreover, one can infer that jazz, the primary signifier in *Ask Your Mama*, is indebted to both African drums for its syncopation and to blues for its basic structure. Thus, in *Ask Your Mama*, poetry, musical references and politics all operate in a dialogic gestalt; their interactions are both complementary and acts of individualization, a fact which echoes Lawrence Levine’s definition of the precepts of antiphony.

Ingrid Monson, echoing Hughes’s reading of “jazz as communication” writes that “jazz improvisation [is] a mode of social action that musicians selectively employ in their process of communicating” (285). Cultural critics and jazz theorists like Berliner, Murray, and Thomas all highlight the conversational aspect of jazz and its rooting in antiphony. What underlies these notions of interactive jazz communicability is the idea that the poetics of dialogisms or antiphony in jazz performance –especially vibrant in the compositional politics of improvisation –requires a vocabulary capable of both storytelling and political commentary.³⁸

In the twelve “moods” of *Ask Your Mama*, Hughes constructs his kaleidoscopic jazz vocabulary by drawing and borrowing from various sources across the musical panaroma; in the process Hughes prefigures the aesthetics of free jazz which drew from various

³⁸ See Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, 201-205.

musical traditions.³⁹ For example, in “Cultural Exchange,” the guira of Dominican merengue merges with German lieder to lead to blues and African drums. One also finds Dixieland and the mention of “When the Saints Go Marching In,” played with maracas. Those confluences of idioms support the theme of cultural exchange in the section, while also revealing the cultural “flowchart” from which Hughes conceptualizes his improvised stanzas. In “Red, Ride, Red,” the maracas of cha-cha morph into West Indian calypso then into the “*discordant*” flute of Eric Dolphy. Similarly, Hughes’s musical demands in “Shades of Pigeat” range from spirituals (“All God’s Chillun Got Shoes”) and Jewish liturgy (*Eli Eli*) to Afro-Arabic music and blues.

In “Gospel Cha-Cha,” gospel and cha-cha are conjoined to underscore Hughes’s mapping of religions in the Diaspora. One discovers “IN THE QUARTER OF NEGROES” spoken “PAPIAMENTO,” a mixture of Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, English and French, and a potent symbol of the effects of black slave trade. The musical indications provide added commentary on the results of black slave trade for the revision and refashioning of African-derived religions as Voodoo Damballa co-exists with Haitian god Ogun, travels to Brazil (Fortaleza, Bahia), and arrives in America through Voodoo Queen of New Orleans Marie Laveau. Likewise, gospel and cha-cha conjure up Dambella, United House of Prayer for All People founder Daddy Grace, and Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church founder John Jasper, thereby marking the importance of black religion as means of resisting dehumanization; Hughes correlates black religious catharsis with the revolutionary

³⁹ As Josh Kun mentions Hughes borrows heavily from Latin jazz and Afro-Cuban jazz (170-183).

impulses of Toussaint L'Ouverture and Jamaican Alexander Bedward.⁴⁰ Hughes's act of cultural revisionism makes possible dialogues between idioms, between heroes, and, more importantly, between Diasporic Africans whose ancestors' victimization in the slave trade fragmented familial ties. In this fundamental poetic re-membering of a shared history, Hughes's use of "[p]rimary materials" reflects his engagement with the Diaspora as quintessential black family and black world; this move anticipates the Barakian black world. Clearly, the doubled interests in black "primary materials," especially blues and bebop, and world music, an important reservoir of ideas for free jazz improvisers, make *Ask Your Mama* a free jazz poem.

Among the other jazz techniques Hughes transposes poetically in *Ask Your Mama*, one finds his use of the repeated refrain pattern, the break and step progression. Briefly, Hughes's use of a repeated refrain ("IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES") indicates his musicological knowledge that is fundamental for the ongoing development jazz improviser. The refrain importantly restates the theme of segregation, which the content of the chorused stanzas attempt to defeat. Moreover, Hughes's jazz knowledge shows his awareness of the continuum, since he includes fundamental formal elements of jazz that derive directly from the blues in his poem such as the call-and-response format or jazz conversation and the repeated refrain pattern.

⁴⁰ The Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) instilled fear of slave uprisings in the American South. L'Ouverture became a symbol of the revolutionary trickster. See Bennett, 97-109.

Albert Murray defines the break as “a disruption of the normal cadence of a piece of music...The break is an extremely important device both from the structural point of view and from its implications. It is precisely this disjuncture which is the moment of truth. It is on the break that you ‘do your thing’” (112).⁴¹ In the moods of *Ask Your Mama*, breaks are represented by “TACIT.” The silence imposed by the breaks not only disrupts the musical cue, but also often serves to shift the content of the stanzas in another narrative direction. By counterbalancing musical “silence” with such shifts, Hughes offers another way of conceptualizing “conversation.” While musical cues usually comment on the poetry, the shifts between stanzas reproduce the alternation and succession of chorused solos usually found in a jazz performance.

Finally, Hughes employs step progression, which, according to Berliner, “involves weaving in and out of the guiding model...so that the melodic accents of a phrase create the strong motion of an ascending or descending scale pattern (198).⁴² Hence, the section “Cultural Exchange” (477) opens with rhythmic crescendo that ends with a statement of refrain: “IN THE/ IN THE QUARTER/ IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES” (1-3). In “Horn of Plenty” (498), Hughes reverts to step progression as a means to leave open creative space—a space consciously open, presumably for improvisation:

SINGERS

⁴¹ In “Improvisation and the Creative Process,” 112.

⁴² Jemie prefers the term step-rhythm, which he defines as the “jazz instrumentalist’s predilection for picking on a note or phrase and playing with it, repeating it over and over and over and weaving it into changes on a theme, thereby creating unexpected intensities” (82). See also Wagner, p. 461-462.

SINGERS LIKE O-
 SINGERS LIKE ODETTA –AND THAT STATUE
 ON BEDLOE’S ISLAND MANAGED BY SOL HUOK (1-4)

Hughes resorts to the same pattern in “Blues in Stereo” (516):

DE –
 DELIGHT –
 DELIGHTED! INTRODUCE ME TO EARTHA
 JOCKO BODDIDLY LIL GREENWOOD
 BELAFONTE FRISCO JOSEPHINE
 BRICKTOP INEZ MABEL MERCER (1-5)

The progressive construction of “DELIGHTED” leads into the speaker’s introduction to famous African American entertainers such as singers Eartha Kitt, Lil Greenwood, Josephine Baker, Mabel Mercer and Inez Fox, actor/singer Harry Belafonte, boxer Frisco McGale, guitarist Bo Diddley, and Ada Smith of Bricktop saloon fame.

In “Shades of Pigmeat” (486), the process culminates in a rephrasing of the question contained in the blues leitmotif, “How long must I wait?:

IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES
 WHERE NEGROES SING SO WELL
 NEGROES SING SO WELL
 SING SO WELL

SO WELL

WELL? (8-12)

By placing the accents on a different word in each line, Hughes reproduces in verse a rhythmic decrescendo that questions why white consumership and appreciation (“SO WELL”) of black culture has not yet led to socio-economic equality.

IV. *Poeticizing Ancestry, Performing Memory: Cultural Continuity and Hughes as Griot/ Genealogist of the Black Aesthetic*

As mentioned earlier, Hughes’s poetics in *Ask Your Mama* demonstrate how intertextuality between music and written poetry –itself a form of call-and-response – derives from African antiphony and are an essential part of the ongoing revision and refashioning of black identity. His use of jazz vocabulary and historiography allows him to “establish the relationships of the improvisers to their larger tradition” (Berliner 103). For instance, in establishing a jazz genealogy in the musical cue that begins with Charlie Parker’s bebop and ends with the revolutionary sounds of Ornette Coleman via the coded flute of jazz activist Eric Dolphy, Hughes performs the task of the griot in that he “place[s] the individual” –as well as his own poetic voice –“into a long-term perspective that includes the ancestors” (Hale 19). Moreover, by placing “the notions of history and literature into one category broadly defined as interpretations of the past,” Hughes, as griot-

historian, “emerges as ‘time-binder,’ a person who links past to present” (23). His ability to weld together music, politics, and the sociology of his people under the trope of a shared history allows him to reconstruct black historiography and reclaim black ontology. As griot, Hughes can convey the allogamous polyphony of the jazz gestalt within which music, politics, poetry and history intersect with and inform one another.

Thus, like bebop, itself a “composite” of folk idioms (Jones, *BP*, 65), Hughes’s jazz poetics recuperate and synthesize his theoretical statements about how music is vital to black life. For instance, in “Lenox Avenue: Midnight” Hughes, using Harlem’s cultural intersection as trope, contends that “The rhythm of life/ Is a jazz rhythm” (39, lines 1-2).⁴³ To equate jazz rhythm to the pulsation of Black Harlem is Hughes’s way of reconfiguring jazz as interplay between Black History and cultural memory. In “Jazz as Communication,” Hughes affirms that “Jazz is a heartbeat” and that its heartbeat is Black America’s (494).⁴⁴ If jazz constitutes an amalgamation of what black life is, then this syncretic quality encompasses the complex of black cultural traditions in both music and literature.⁴⁵ In fact, in the teleology of jazz, Hughes finds a unique vehicle for his depiction of black

⁴³ David Chinitz, in “Rejuvenation Through Joy: Langston Hughes, Primitivism, and Jazz,” provides another reading of “rhythm” in connection with Lesche’s own theorization of rhythm. In *American Literary History*, 9.1 (1997): 60-78.

⁴⁴ I refer to the version reprinted in *The Langston Hughes Reader*, pp.492-494. Jemie also discusses the essay in *Introduction*, 21-24.

⁴⁵ Jemie notes that in Hughes’s poetry, “[j]azz, literature, and life share the same heartbeat and constitute a unity. Each is a metaphor for the others; in their structures and significances they parallel and illuminate and reinforce one another” (23). In that sense, Jemie is correct when he states that, “[b]lack music is...a paradigm of the black experience in America” (12 –author’s emphasis).

negotiation of white racism, which re-invokes etymologies of blackness conjured up in performance. Indeed, Hughes finds in the heroism of jazz performance –especially in the powerful metaphor of freedom contained in improvisation –the etymology of black folk idioms.

Hughes’s aforementioned couplet further anticipates a 1929 journal entry in which Hughes states his “ultimate hope” for the creation of “a Negro culture in America –a real, solid, sane, racial something growing out of the folk life, not copied from another, even though surrounding race.”⁴⁶ In the poem “Laughs” (27-28), Hughes creates a catalogue of nameless black heroes from the masses whose inter-cultural connection is the “laughing-to-keep-from-crying” of black artistry reframed as resistance against racism and oppression. Their resistance forms the basis of a black expressive culture “solid” enough to overcome continuous discrimination and degradation by the (politically) dominant group. Hughes’s repetitions of “laughs” and spatial isolation of “My people” create a thematic continuum that function as running commentary on the ability of Black Americans to ritualize performance as dissent. The “laughs” refusal to accept their stereotypical representation –fed mainly by minstrelsy –becomes a political weapon that warrants self-determinism. In “Parade” (388-389), the “laughs” signal their desire to build on this “solid” culture in their march towards black civil rights.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Rampersad, *Life I*, p. 173.

⁴⁷ For more on the meaning of the parade, see Lowney 370-372.

This desire subtends the street parade, which reproduces traditional cultural communal expressivity. The parade of a Harlem “community in transition” inscribes itself within the continuous attempt to revitalize the “dream” deferred. In the prefatory note to *Montage*, Hughes parallels his montage of Harlem vignettes with bebop’s “conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms, and passages sometimes in the manner of the jam session...punctuated by riffs, runs, breaks, and distortions of the music of a community in transition” (387). For the poem, Hughes employs bebop’s “jarring dissonances and broken rhythms” (Redding in Dace 387) to establish a “dialogic sequencing” (Lowney 370) between the music and the recurrent motif of Harlem’s deferred dream.⁴⁸ Hughes also parallels the important procession of black dignitaries and leaders with the affirmation of a historical and cultural continuum reflected in bebop’s aesthetic radicalism. At the same time, Hughes, by transmuting the parade into an affirmation of racial solidarity, hints at nationalism for which bebop’s continuity in free jazz could be re-conceptualized as an aesthetic counterpart.

Rampersad notes how Hughes saw in bebop “the growing fissure in Afro-American culture, the myth of integration and social harmony jarred by a message of deep discord;” in bebop he also heard “the unmistakable sounds of cultural change.” In that sense, the capitalized “PARADE” is one instance of “impudent interjections” that Hughes borrows from bebop’s rapid and unexpected “rhythmic changes” to signify politically upon white

power structures.⁴⁹ Moreover, Hughes's choice of word, impudence, is interesting for it evokes one of the most punishable crimes a slave could commit in antebellum America. Transfigured in a bebop motif, impudence becomes political. Gunther Lenz adds that the structural patterns of bebop elaborated by Parker and employed by Hughes –in “Parade” as in elsewhere in *Montage* –do not only “demonstrate the improvisational, dynamic, expressive quality of black culture” but also represent “black music itself as a *political* act of cultural liberation from white domination” (274 – author’s emphasis).

The constant dialogue between the form and the content, bebop and the parade, therefore draws from a well of sociopolitical history already in motion in Hughes’s “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” rephrased here to echo the continuous frustrations of the Harlem community. The “solid” culture Hughes hoped to create is reformulated in the poem’s image of “Solid Black” (18). The parade of solidarity featuring black dignitaries and war heroes “Marching...marching... / marching...”(20-21) alongside the masses conveys the unification of all forms of frustrating racial experiences encountered and symbolized by “Motorcycle cops” (13) –an image that also encompasses the complex of symbols of white racialism and other demonizing socio-historical stereotypes.⁵⁰ The

⁴⁸ J. Saunders Redding, in his review of *Montage*, “Langston Hughes in an Old Vein with New Rhythms,” originally published in *The New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, March 11, 1951. Reprinted in *Langston Hughes: The Contemporary Reviews*, edited by Tish Dace, p. 387.

⁴⁹ *Life II*, p. 151.

⁵⁰ Here, I refer primarily to tropes of primitivism that affected Blacks, especially during the Harlem Renaissance. See, for instance, James Clifford’s *The Predicament of Culture* and Marianna Torgovnick’s *Gone Primitive*. In the latter, Torgovnick states that, “[P]rimitives are like children, the tropes say. Primitive

syncopation of the lines with their shifts, breaks, and interjections underscores the particular environment in which black music –in this case, bebop –is created. The “march” towards civil rights correlates the musician’s –and the poet’s – aesthetic canvassing of a self-defined and self-contained black artistic expression. Moreover, allusions to “band” and “drum” sharing the musical space are important. They once again link African American jazz “jam sessions” with African antiphonal drumming; both “band” and “drum” perform community and history in terms of their potential to elicit political action.

In *Ask Your Mama*, the “laughers” and “Solid Blacks” invoke the heroic “STARS” of a shared genealogy.⁵¹ In reuniting them in the grand poetic constellation of *Ask Your Mama*, Hughes crystallizes his role as griot, whose twelve-part epic, “multigeneric narrative...includes genealogies, praises, songs, etymologies, incantations...[thereby] recounting the past –the history –of [his] people” (Hale 23):

GRANDPA, DID YOU HEAR THE
HEAR THE OLD FOLKS SAY HOW
HOW TALL THE CANE GREW

are our untamed selves, our id forces –libidinous, irrational, violent, dangerous. Primitives are mystics, in tune with nature, part of its harmonies. Primitives are free. Primitives exist at the “lowest cultural levels;” we [Eurocentric Whites] occupy the “highest,” in the metaphors of stratification and hierarchy commonly used by Malinowski and others like him. The ensemble of these tropes...forms the basic vocabulary of what [Torgovnick] call[s] primitivist discourse, a discourse fundamental to the Western sense of self and Other” (8). It is when she dares entering the terrain of biopolitics that Torgovnick’s argumentation is most effective. For instance, the trope of primitives as children –and Africa as synonymous with the aforementioned “childhood” of man (10) illustrate my point.

⁵¹ In the section “Bird in Orbit,” p.518-519.

SAY HOW WHITE THE COTTON COTTON
 SPEAK OF RICE DOWN IN THE MARSHLAND
 SPEAK OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS'S BEARD
 AND JOHN BROWN'S WHITE AND LONGER
 LINCOLN'S LIKE A CLOTHESBRUSH
 AND HOW SOJOURNER HOW SOJOURNER
 TO PROVE SHE WAS A WOMAN WOMAN
 BARED HER BOSOMS, BARED IN PUBLIC
 TO PROVE SHE WAS A WOMAN?
 WHAT SHE SAID ABOUT HER CHILDREN
 ALL SOLD DOWN THE RIVERS.
I LOOK AT THE STARS,
AND THEY LOOK AT THE STARS,
AND THEY WONDER WHERE I BE
AND I WONDER WHERE THEY BE.
 STARS AT STARS STARS....

TOURÉ DOWN IN GUINEA

LUMUMBA IN THE CONGO

JOMO IN KENYATTA....STARS...STARS (39-60).

In this stanza, Hughes establishes a diachronic panorama of black cultural heroes that iterates the dialogisms of freedom movements in Africa and African America: he creates a

“dialogic sequencing” of liberation figures using the comparison of the white beard and cotton. The beard, growing long and white as slavery and other forms of discrimination that affect the African American dream of equality, symbolizes the dehumanizing conditions under which Blacks are “LIVING 20 YEARS IN 10” (103).⁵² Moreover, in this sequence, the beard of the metonymical “Grandpa,” keeper of black oral history, Frederick Douglass’s and John Brown’s beards are continuation of the imagery of slavery contained in “WHITE COTTON COTTON.” At the same time Lincoln, who, in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is portrayed as the great emancipator, wears a symbolic beard that “brushes” and cleans off, momentarily, the stain of slavery with the Emancipation Proclamation –a legal document that supports and affirms the work of Truth, Brown, and Douglass. Similarly, the promises of the Emancipation Proclamation could not withhold the supremacist impulses to deny Blacks of their basic rights through such degrading measures as lynchings, sharecropping systems and the Grandfather Clause that significantly slowed down the voting ardor of “GRANDPA[’s]” children.

The references to famous abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass, John Brown, and Sojourner Truth are underscored by Hughes’s musical cue, which asks for “*The Battle Hymn of the Republic*.” The hymn is of particular importance, for it bridges the chronological gap between abolitionists and desegregationists. Hughes also refers to the hymn to evoke the first national meeting of the Niagara Movement in 1906, which resulted in an address to the nation demanding the equality of rights for Blacks and ultimately to the

⁵² In “Ode to Dinah” 492.

creation of the N.A.A.C.P.⁵³ In support of their powerful address, the group, led by W.E.B Du Bois, sang “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” to honor Frederick Douglass and John Brown (Bennett 281). The hymn further connotes the heritage bequeathed by Brown and Douglass to Du Bois and Martin Luther King, and reverberates in other liberation efforts in Africa. In fact, Hughes’s allusions to Sekou Touré, Patrice Lumumba and Jomo Kenyatta connect them, politically, to the nascent cultural and revolutionary nationalism Hughes is hinting at for Black America: their respective break from colonial rule and “march” towards African independence echo what the N.A.A.C.P. was trying to implement – meaning the judicial defeat of segregation and socio-economic disparity –in African America.⁵⁴ Thus, they become, along with Brown, Truth and Douglass, ambassadors of liberation, “stars” Blacks across the Diaspora can look up to (“*I LOOK AT THE STARS/ AND THEY LOOK AT THE STARS*”) and identify with in their quest for freedom –the “STARS” potential is to highlight identification to blackness as primordial signifier of emergent nationalism. Here, Hughes doubles the meaning the image of Sojourner Truth’s microcosmic familial tragedy, where her children “ALL SOLD DOWN THE RIVER” used

⁵³ Bennett cites the address, “We claim for ourselves every right that belongs to a free-born American – political, civil, and social –and until we get these rights, we will never cease to protest and assail the ears of America with the story of its shameful deeds towards us” (281); John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, p. 318-319.

⁵⁴ Jomo Kenyatta was responsible for the golden era in Kenya. He fought and succeeded to establish political stability. He was also the catalyst for the economic progress of the country as well as its educational, industrial and agricultural advances. Kenyatta’s purpose was “to work out a fusion between tribal custom and modern ways,” in Hughes’s “Introduction’, *An African Treasury: Articles, Essays, Stories, and Poems by Black African*, ed. Langston Hughes”. Reprinted in *The Collected Works Vol. 9*, p. 505.

the stars as reunifying agency, in order to illustrate, again, African American resilience in the face dehumanizing circumstances. Transposed onto the macrocosm of Black History, the “STARS” become symbols of black survival methods. Therefore, in looking at the same “STARS,” Blacks of the Diaspora can conceptualize an international black liberation project.

In the same manner that Brown and Douglass embody the sociopolitical source from which the N.A.A.C.P. and the Civil Rights movement drew their activist ideals, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” is the musical and thematic resource for bebop and post-bop defiance symbolized by the *“flute solo.”* The flute call obviously refers to Eric Dolphy’s playing and further connects his musical activism with that of post-boppers like Mingus. In fact, the versatile Dolphy played alto saxophone on Mingus’s “Fables of Faubus,” which chastised the segregationist platform of Arkansas governor Orval Faubus. Just like the political dimension of the hymn, Dolphy’s flute becomes synonymous with the demands of the civil rights movement. Thus, Hughes, again, interlinks song/song performance with text in order to produce political commentary. If we go back to the beginning of the stanza, it is interesting to note how Hughes underlines that this genealogy of cultural heroes is kept alive through the oral tradition and passed on by “THE OLD FOLKS.” Like the music that accompanies their journey from slavery to freedom, “THE OLD FOLKS” legacy is the oral survivals they performed against the threat of cultural erasure in the postbellum world that promised them equal rights.

Accordingly, in Hughes's historiography, black civil rights have been "frozen" by "THE WHITENESS" (35) of winter, an image that reaffirms whiteness as marker of socio-political superiority and that, historically, has enforced racial discrimination. Faced with the continuous failure of White America to fulfill these promises still after "100-YEARS EMANCIPATION" (9), Hughes recuperates the hymn to allude, once again, to liberation movements from the Underground Railroad to the Niagara Movement:

WHEN NIAGARA FALLS IS FROZEN
 THERE'S A BAR WITH WINDOWS FROSTED
 FROM THE COLD THAT MAKES NIAGARA
 GHOSTLY MONUMENTS OF WINTER
 TO A BAND THAT ONCE PASSED OVER
 WITH A WOMAN WITH TWO PISTOLS
 ON A TRAIN THAT LOST PASSENGERS
 ON THE LINE WHOSE ROUTE WAS FREEDOM
 THROUGH THE JUNGLE OF WHITE DANGER
 TO THE HAVEN OF WHITE QUAKERS
 WHOSE HAYMOW WAS A MANGER MANGER
 WHERE THE CHRIST CHILD HAD ONCE LAIN. (23-30)⁵⁵

Echoing the multi-layered imagery of "STARS," the image of the Niagara Falls is also doubled. First, the Niagara was Harriet Tubman's chosen pathway through which she led

⁵⁵ In "Ode to Dinah" 489-490.

slaves to their freedom. During the Underground Railroad, Tubman also secured the freedom of slaves with the help of Quaker farmers who would hide the runaway slaves in their haymows.⁵⁶ Moreover, in order to convene runaway slaves, Tubman encoded the spiritual “Steal Away to Jesus,” which became a determinant form of cultural call for freedom: her code re-instigates the functionality of the vernacular as portal to liberation and transcendence. Second, Hughes’s musical cue re-invokes “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” which reunifies Niagara Falls with the Niagara Movement.⁵⁷ Thus, Hughes perceives the Niagara Movement –and subsequent formation of the N.A.A.C.P. –as the inheritor of liberation missions begun with Tubman’s Underground Railroad.⁵⁸ Historically-charged, Tubman’s “train” is also evocative of the Northern migration and its failure to provide Blacks with appropriate living conditions, which is a recurrent theme of Hughes’s blues poetry.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Jean Wagner contends that in doing so, Quakers “echoed the charitable gesture that, long ago, allowed Jesus to find shelter in a manger” (467).

⁵⁷ See note 280 in Wagner, 466-467.

⁵⁸ Hughes perceives the N.A.A.C.P. as the political agency of desegregation. He often wrote columns about the organization, and he even devoted book-length volume to its history. For some of his columns, see *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, Vol. 10: Fight for Freedom and Other Writings on Civil Rights*, edited by Christopher C. De Santis, 31-42.

⁵⁹ I refer to Hughes’s own catalogue of the themes he explores in his poetry that he details in “Songs Called the Blues.” The “left-lonesome” blues poems deal essentially with themes of exclusion and the difficulties encountered by Blacks in the South in the aftermath of Emancipation, which led to the migration to the North. The “broke-and-hungry” blues poems are interlinked with the “left-lonesome” blues poems in that they deal with the consequences of the failure of migration and the promises of the North as the savior of African Americans. In “Evenin’ Air Blues” (225) Hughes evokes the black masses’ alienation in the North:

Folks, I come up North
Cause they told me de North was fine.

In fact, the evocation of the Underground Railroad in the quoted passage above is triggered by other symbolic northbound journeys. Despite the fact that the chronology is reversed:

MAMA'S FRUITCAKE SENT FROM GEORGIA
 CRUMBLES AS IT'S NIBBLED
 TO A DISC BY DINAH
 IN THE RUM THAT WAFTS MARACAS
 FROM ANOTHER DISTANT QUARTER
 TO THIS QUARTER OF THE NEGROES
 WHERE THE SONG'S MAHALIA'S DAUGHTER (13-19)

Larry Scanlon considers this passage to be an "indication of the fracturing of families in the post-Jim Crow migrations to northern cities" (58). While the passage certainly reveals the traumatizing experience of African American northern movements in postbellum America, it also gestures towards ontological reparation, which Hughes frames through vernacular

I come up North
 Cause they told me de North was fine.
 Been here six months –
 I'm about to lose my mind. (1-6)

See also the first stanza of "Po' Boy Blues" (83), Hughes's speaker also expresses his regret about leaving the South. The speaker of "Homesick Blues" (72) evokes a similar longing to return to the South. He is "Lookin' for a box car / To roll me down South" (11-12). Via both speakers, Hughes denounces the segregation, the oppression, and the presence of Jim Crow in Northern cities (Bennett 233). More importantly, Hughes highlights the illusion of the North as "The Promised Land" for African Americans (Levine 265). One of the inevitable consequences of socioeconomic inequality in the North is cynicism. Some of Hughes's blues poems describe the cynicism and irony of African Americans as a means to negotiate their status in America. Moreover, In "Brief Encounter" (247), for example, the speaker, obviously afflicted by unemployment, has recourse to violence as a response to hunger.

expression. Hughes opposes the familial “fracturing” with the reconstitution of the black cultural continuum, another vital form of black genealogy. The “DISC BY DINAH” heard across the Diaspora, from the Afro-Cuban world (“IN THE RUM THAT WAFTS MARACAS/ FROM ANOTHER DISTANT QUARTER) to Black Harlem (“THIS QUARTER OF THE NEGROES”) via the slave “quarters” invokes the dialectics of secular and sacred contained in the continuum. Thus, the song by Dinah Washington, the “Queen of the Blues,” is echoed in Harlem through Mahalia Jackson, the Gospel Queen, whose own gift to her community (her “DAUGHTER”) is a gospel performance that reiterates the African American ethos of the secular blues of Blind Lemon Jefferson, a “Father of the Blues” whose blues prosody “STEP-FATHERED” (20) Jackson’s gospel. As mentioned earlier, Jackson’s role as voice of the Civil Rights Movement (Werner 4-10) enlarges the scope of her presence in this catalogue; her performance serves to illustrate how African Americans conceptualize music as political and ontological resistance. It is in this folk “family” that Hughes confirms his engagement in using vernacular expressivity as means to maintain the black archives alive despite threats of erasure. Hughes underlines this desire in his musical cue as well; he calls for “*Traditional blues in gospel tempo à la Ray Charles to fade out.*” In this vernacular genealogy, Charles’s music not only unifies the sacred and secular, but also becomes an aesthetic continuation of Washington, Jackson, and Jefferson. The confluence of rhythm and blues and soul in Charles’s music further exemplifies Hughes’s drawing from the well of African American music to “write” history. Moreover, Charles’s music affirmed black pride and black identitive aspirations that reflected the civil

rights struggles.⁶⁰ Charles, like Harry Belafonte, whose crucial presence at the beginning of “Cultural Exchange” underpins an artistic radicalism realized in his refusal to perform in the South from 1954 to 1961 because of racial discrimination and segregation, also refused to play segregated Atlanta. Charles’s activism, albeit often covert and largely ignored by critics and historians, is nevertheless both recognized and claimed by Hughes as stylized political assertions of the black aesthetic experience and expressivity, which the catalogues highlight. His role in the creation of “soul” places him at the historically transitory crossroads of the civil rights and Black Power movements, thus making the music politically and aesthetically significant in the ongoing delineation of black identity.

V. *Tropings and Groupings: Artistry, Activism and the Horn(s) of Plenty*

The long opening stanza of “Horn of Plenty” (498), while evoking the embodiments of African American achievement of “Cultural Exchange” analyzed above, maps a geography of successful African American artists who overcame the color barriers to claim their individuality and their “NAME.” There exists a dialogical relationship between names and politics that reveals the presence of the continuum in both poetic and cultural

⁶⁰ See Ward 184-185.

memorialization. Once again, the catalogue is triggered by a singer, which restates the power of song to effect change:

SINGERS

SINGERS LIKE O-

SINGERS LIKE ODETTA –AND THAT STATUE

ON BEDLOE’S ISLAND MANAGED BY SOL HORUK

DANCERS BOJANGLES LATE LAMENTED

KATHERINE DUNHAM AL AND LEON

ARTHUR CARMEN ALVIN MARY

JAZZERS DUKE AND DIZZY ERIC DOLPHY

MILES AND ELLA AND MISS NINA

STRAYHORN HIS BACKSTAGE WITH LUTHER

DO YOU READ MUSIC? AND LOUIS SAYING

NOT ENOUGH TO HURT MY PLAYING

GOSPEL SINGERS WHO WANT TO PACK

GOLDEN CROSSES TO A CADILLAC

BONDS AND STILL AND MARGARET STILL

GLOBAL TROTTERS BASEBALL BATTERS

JACKI WILLIE CAMPANELLA

FOOTBALL PLAYERS AND LEATHER PUNCHERS

UNFORGOTTEN JOES AND SUGER RAYS (1-19)

If we adopt the politics of jazz composition, the presence of folk singer Odetta at the beginning should provide the theme for this stanzaic solo. Significantly, one of Odetta's most important songs is "John Henry," a vernacular commemoration of the folk epic hero.⁶¹ Henry, a former slave, is a "symbol of man's foredoomed struggle against the machine and of the black man's [often] tragic battle with the white man."⁶² The myth is especially significant for African Americans since it aims at defeating the stereotype of black inferiority. Moreover, John Henry's challenge to the white man's machine is an invitation for Blacks to rise against the culture of white hegemony.⁶³ In Hughes's pantheon, Odetta's song functions as a thematic call that "challenges" African Americans to affirm their empowered blackness in the face of adversity and to use culture as a means to repudiate Euro-American definitions of black life.

Various artists who have used black artistic expression in order to break through the thick veneer of racial prejudice and succeed in the white-dominated entertainment world answer Odetta's vernacular "call" in the stanza. The wide spectrum of groundbreaking

⁶¹ For explanations to and variations of the John Henry epic, see Harold Courlander's *A Treasury of Afro-American Folklore*, 383-392; see also Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 420-427.

⁶² Taken from: www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/305006/John-Henry

⁶³ In "African American Music as Resistance," in *African American Music: An Introduction*, Burnim and Maultsby, eds, 596. Levine adds that "John Henry's longevity in Black song [is] due to the fact that he became a culture hero: a representative figure whose life and struggle are symbolic of the struggle of worker against machine, individual against society, the lowly against the powerful, Black against White. Black workers saw in the death of John Henry not a defeat but a challenge"

black artists begins with Bill “Bojangles” Robinson.⁶⁴ Robinson’s innovative tap dancing allowed him to “talk” with his feet, thereby asserting his blackness against the difficult environment of white vaudeville. Moreover, Robinson overcame, through performance, the limitations of his illiteracy and has achieved success and recognition from White America. Bojangles’s achievement has lead Marshall and Jean Stearns to conclude that he was a “modern John Henry” who “instead of driving steel, laid down iron taps.”⁶⁵ Therefore, Hughes recuperates the motif of Odetta’s song and reiterates it through Bojangles’s performavity. This process of recuperation and repetition –firmly ingrained in jazz aesthetics –triggers Hughes’s investigative geography of black dancers, which reaffirms his role as griot/ genealogist.⁶⁶

Hence, Bojangles serves to introduce Katherine Dunham, pioneer of black dance and famous anthropologist, as well as Al Minns and Leon James, both part of “Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers,” who further developed the aesthetics and politics of black jazz dance through the Lindy Hop, the original swing dance.⁶⁷ Although they performed in the segregated Cotton Club, the group claimed their blackness as aesthetic platform for their performances. Renown as “true jazz improvisers,” whose dancing functioned in a call-response pattern with jazz musicians, Whitey’s “dancers transposed the rhythms and riffs

⁶⁴ For more on Robinson, see James Haskins and N.R. Mitgang’s *Mr. Bojangles: The Biography of Bill Robinson*. New York: William Morrow & Co., 1990.

⁶⁵ In *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1994. 180-189.

⁶⁶ See also James A. Snead, “Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture,” in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. New York: Methuen, 59-80.

⁶⁷ Minns was also part of the Harlem Congaroos, Herbert “Whitey” White’s top dance group.

into movement and the musicians, watching, responded to what they saw with a frenzy of jazz innovation.”⁶⁸

Faithful to his desire to poeticize the cultural continuum, Hughes shows how the innovations of Katherine Dunham and Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers opened the pathway for greater access to the white entertainment world, and future performative developments in black dance.⁶⁹ These are symbolized by ballet dancer and Dance Theatre of Harlem co-founder Arthur Mitchell, dancer Alvin Ailey of *Revelations* (1960) fame, longtime Ailey dance partner Carmen De Lavallade, and dancer/teacher Mary Hinkson who toured with Ailey in singer/ activist Harry Belafonte’s “Sing Man, Sing.”⁷⁰ Hughes’s dialogic sequencing evokes the primacy of Dunham’s timely teaching and poetic resonance in the work of Mitchell and Ailey, two former students. For instance, Dunham’s *Tropics and Le Jazz Hot: From Haiti to Harlem* combines folk elements from across the Black Diaspora with other intercultural idioms and, in so doing, affirms the intertextuality between the various elements of the vernacular tradition. Moreover, in the 40s and 50s, Dunham was a fervent activist, denouncing institutionalized segregation.⁷¹ In this sequence, Hughes thus

⁶⁸ See the history of the Savoy style at: http://www.savoystyle.com/whiteys_lindy_hoppers.html.

⁶⁹ For a pertinent summaries of the aesthetics of black dance in America, see Richard A. Long’s *The Black Tradition in American Dance*. New York: Smithmark, 1995; Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003; Lynne Fauley Emery’s *Black Dance: From 1619 to Today*. New Jersey: Princeton, 1988.

⁷⁰ Ailey’s work drew from both secular and sacred as he conjoined dance and gospel to depict his experience of being black in the racist South.

⁷¹ Retrieved from the PBS “Free to Dance” collection of biographies at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/freetodance/biographies/dunham.htm>.

portrays Dunham as key innovator of the black aesthetic experience, whose intertextuality between performance and politics, he, as poet/griot, tries to replicate in his poetry.

Hughes further illustrates the interplay between elements of the vernacular tradition in the following line. He traces a jazz genealogy of artists who, like the dancers, have “MADE IT,” while maintaining an Afrocentric aestheticism. From Duke Ellington’s swing bands to Dizzy Gillespie’s bebop quintet via Eric Dolphy’s aesthetic hybridity—a conflation of African American and classical music—Hughes’s jazz mosaic points to Miles Davis’s post-bop, and a community of black female voices symbolized in the blues-inflected jazz of Ella Fitzgerald and jazz singer-activist Nina Simone. That the line ends with Simone is not a result of “free association,” but a conscious poetic decision Hughes makes to posit her as “the voice of [the civil rights] movement.”⁷² Simone’s work became much more concerned with civil rights struggles by the mid-1950s while working “under the tutelage of the black playwright Lorraine Hansberry” (Ward 300). By contextualizing Simone’s work within the framework of black art as activism, Hughes restates the potential of jazz music to correlate with the political battles of black liberation movements; Simone thus extends the cultural and political mission portended earlier by Katherine Dunham and anticipated in the John Henry myth. Again, it is the music that galvanizes political commentary and Hughes, by

⁷² See the insightful essay on Simone by key critic Mark Anthony Neal for seeingblack.com, retrieved at: http://seeingblack.com/2003/x060403/nina_simone.shtml. In it, Neal delineates the contours of Simone’s activism. It is interesting to note also that, by the end of the 1960s, Simone moved from the non-violent platform of MLK’s movement to the more radical politics of Black Power.

poeticizing these interlinkings, establishes a network of creative energies that “writes” black history.

Simone’s musical and political activism is further evoked in the next line’s mention of Billy Strayhorn, composer for Duke Ellington and civil rights advocate. His hanging out “BACKSTAGE WITH LUTHER” points to this dialogic relationship between jazz and civil rights activism as “LUTHER” could be Luther Henderson, who worked with Strayhorn for Ellington, *and* Martin Luther King through his de facto friendship with Strayhorn. Ellington’s centrality is the lines aligns him with Dunham and Simone, in that his vernacular performativity is also a political assertion of black identity and black pride that prefigures the nationalist politics of Black Consciousness movements.

For, like Dunham’s *Tropics and Le Jazz Hot* –and Hughes’s poem –Ellington’s work aims at reclaiming black history.⁷³ In fact, his *Black, Brown, and Beige* (1943) maps the black experience in America by drawing on the vernacular tradition, which interpolates sacred (he would later enlist Gospel Queen and voice of the Civil Rights Movement Mahalia Jackson) and secular commentaries denouncing racism and all forms of oppression. Interestingly, the eighth section of Ellington’s work is titled “Blues in Orbit,” which, in Hughes’s *Ask Your Mama*, becomes a section that canonizes Charlie Parker (“Bird in Orbit”).⁷⁴ Hughes employs Ellington’s song title as poetic catalyst for his depiction of Charlie Parker the bebop exemplar and aesthetic radical, which he perceives as

⁷³ For a brief, but pertinent survey of Ellington’s desire to represent Black History in music, see Barry Ulanov’s “The Ellington Programme,” in O’Meally’s *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, 166-171.

a correlative to the political battles fought by the civil rights movement and the N.A.A.C.P. Thus, in Hughes's jazz genealogy, Duke Ellington's historiographical swing, embedded in the spirit of the blues, exists as a primal signifier, on the same aesthetic plane as Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker's bebop and Nina Simone's jazz; despite their success with white audiences, they all perform jazz as acts of resistance, doubling their role as performers and political activists.

Interestingly, Duke Ellington's *Black, Brown, and Beige* resituates his aesthetics within a re-emerging nationalist ideal, which will be fully acknowledged by Black Arts poets.⁷⁵ Often decried as accommodationist and accused, especially earlier in his career⁷⁶, of compromising his blackness for greater accessibility to the white entertainment industry, Ellington has nevertheless produced works like *Black, Brown, and Beige* and the full length *Blues in Orbit* that demonstrate a profound engagement with the black experience in the Diaspora, and that affirms the continuity of the aesthetics Hughes posits in *Ask Your Mama*. Eric Porter states that Ellington's "expressed goal of creating an 'authentic Negro music' that was 'a genuine contribution from [his] race' also indicates that [his] musical project

⁷⁴ Ellington released a full-length LP entitled "Blues in Stereo," in February of 1958.

⁷⁵ For the memorialization and Black Arts commemoration of Ellington by Black Arts writers, see De Jongh, 148-150.

⁷⁶ One of the most virulent critique came from John Hammonds in "The Tragedy of Duke Ellington, the 'Black Prince of Jazz.'" Originally published in *Down Beat* in 1935, Hammonds accuses Ellington of looking the other way while racial discrimination and oppression permeate the entertainment world. His accusation that Ellington forsook "simplicity for pretension" is the basis of the ensuing quarrel between the two.

Retrieved from the *Down Beat* archives at

http://www.downbeat.com/default.asp?sect=stories&subsect=story_detail&sid=199.

was consistent with some of the fundamental goals of the diasporic, black cultural renaissance of the early twentieth century” (1). Moreover, “Ellington tried to define a socially relevant black aesthetic under conditions that limited black creativity” (1), thereby providing a political dimension to the performance of black vernacular traditions.

Like Ellington, Louis Armstrong has also been often accused of accommodationism and of Uncle-Tomming his way into success.⁷⁷ It is no coincidence that Hughes would join them in the same stanza, for Satchmo also recognized the significance of affirming black resilience through performance. Robert G. O’Meally contends that behind “Louis’s smiling face” sometime lay “political anger” or an “effective assertion of power” (292). Hence, in the interpolated dialogue of Hughes’s stanza, Armstrong states his own black-centered jazz politics: “*DO YOU READ MUSIC? AND LOUIS SAYING / NOT ENOUGH TO HURT MY PLAYING.*” In *Swing That Music*, Armstrong acknowledges that black jazz had been co-opted, and ultimately corrupted by “writing it down” (qtd in Porter 44). In thus politicizing performance as a refusal to acculturate and to adopt the more “classical” approach to composition symbolized by sheet music, Armstrong claims improvisation as black cultural practice and “champion[s] an African-derived approach to making music” (44). This partial political refutation of sheet music (“*NOT ENOUGH*”) makes him musically “illiterate” in Europeanized terms –a trope Hughes recuperates to correlate

⁷⁷ Robert G. O’Meally summarizes Ellison’s defense of Armstrong against such attacks in “Checking Our Balances: Louis Armstrong, Ralph Ellison, and Betty Boop,” in *Uptown Conversations: The New Jazz Studies*, 278-296. See especially n.3 where O’Meally lists other important works on Satchmo and “stereotypical racial humor,” 292.

Armstrong with Bojangles; they both achieved success and transcended the color barrier of race identification while, aesthetically, remaining conscious of and promulgating with pride their inherent blackness. Hughes equates their achievements with those of Jackie Robinson, Willie Mays, Roy Campanella, and boxers Joe Louis and Sugar Ray Robinson, who, as black athletes, overcame the limitations imposed upon them because of race and became heroic figures, modern-day John Henrys, for African Americans.⁷⁸

In the catalogues of cultural heroes, Hughes merges those who have “MADE IT,” those

WHO BREAK AWAY LIKE COMETS
 FROM LESSER STARS IN ORBIT
 TO MOVE OUT TO ST. ALBANS
 WHERE THE GRASS IS GREENER
 SCHOOLS ARE BETTER FOR THEIR CHILDREN (20-24)

with those whose dream of upward mobility “IS FROZEN/ IF SHOW FARE’S MORE THAN 30¢” (28-29). Here, “THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES” is symbolized by “¢,” while upper and upper middle class life is symbolized by “\$.” Hughes’s speaker thus contrasts “WHERE THE GRASS IS GREENER \$\$\$\$\$\$” (23) with “AND NIAGARA FALLS IS FROZEN ¢¢¢¢¢¢¢¢” (28) to illustrate the economic divide within the black community. The exact same number of “\$” and “¢” on each line suggests rhythmical

⁷⁸ The first black baseball player to break the baseball color line, Robinson played his first game with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947.

symmetry, but thematic asymmetry. As Scanlon notes, the “¢” can also be a “QUARTER”(53). He states, “[p]unning on his initial sense,⁷⁹ Hughes will supplement the recurrence of QUARTER in QUARTER OF THE NEGROES with ‘quarter’ in the original sense of ‘fraction,’ and in a specific application of that sense, the 25-cent coin” (53). Both meanings of the word connote the hope of hearing “THE HORN OF PLENTY BLOWING” (34), achieving in the process, the realization of the dream.⁸⁰

Still, Hughes reconciles the socio-economic divide between middle and lower classes of Black America in an effort to consolidate the efforts and activism of an emerging black nation he sees symbolically represented in jazz innovations, and thus, to prevent the erosion of class dialogue between the “socially mobile and socially stagnant” (Farrell and Johnson 67): “IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES/ WHERE WINTER’S NAME IS HAWKINS” (26-27).⁸¹ Once again, the allusion to “Hawkins” is doubled to signify both the slang definition of “hawkins,” which Hughes and Bontemps, in *The Book of Negro Folklore*, define as “the wind, wintertime, cold weather, ice, snow” (484), and to pioneering saxophone “blower” Coleman Hawkins.⁸² In the first case, the “hawkins” that chills “THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES” and freezes the “NIAGARA FALLS” is White

⁷⁹ Earlier in his essay, Scanlon associates “QUARTER” with its translation from the French, “quartier,” which designates “a section of a city,” p. 53.

⁸⁰ In the section “Blues in Stereo,” p. 496.

⁸¹ Riffing upon his early poems such as “To Certain ‘Brothers’” (55) and characters such as Tempy in his novel *Not Without Laughter*, Hughes criticizes the black bourgeoisie in “Low to High” (411). In the poem, the lowdown folks (“Low”) denounce the bourgeoisie (“High”) for “turning their backs on them, the masses” (Jemie 73).

America's betrayal of its constitutional promises that maintains economic inequality and defeats the concerted efforts of organizations like the Congress of Racial Equality and the N.A.A.C.P., evoked metonymically in "NIAGARA."⁸³ As noted earlier, Hughes employs the images of "THE WHITENESS" and "THE COLD" to symbolize Euro-America's racist politics that prevent Blacks from gaining full access into society.

Accordingly, in his bio-bibliographical study of Hughes, James A. Emanuel considers the following lines from the section "Blues in Stereo" as the central "plight of the urban Negro" (167):

DOWN THE LONG HARD ROW THAT I HAVE BEEN HOEING
 I THOUGHT I HEARD THE HORN OF PLENTY BLOWING
 BUT I GOT TO GET A NEW ANTENNA, LORD –
 MY TV KEEPS ON SNOWING. (33-36)

The image of the maladjusted TV set –the "SNOWING" being another form of "hawkins" –is a summarizing metaphor for these ongoing economic hardships that have affected African Americans from post-Depression to post-wartime America. Moreover, with the TV imagery in the section "Ode to Dinah" (489), Hughes's imagery restates the failure of White America to fulfill its promises of equality since Emancipation:

SINCE IT'S SNOWING ON TV

⁸² Smitherman, in *Black Talk*, defines "hawk" as "[e]xtremely cold weather, made more so by the wind-chill factor," 160.

THIS LAST QUARTER OF CENTENNIAL

100-YEARS EMANCIPATION

MECHANICS NEED REPAIRING

FOR NIAGARA FALLS IS FROZEN

AS IS CUSTOM BELOW ZERO. (7-12)

Hughes employs the Gatesian model of repeating and rephrasing in his imagery in order to emphasize both his theme and leitmotif. In recuperating the images of the snowing television and the frozen Niagara Falls, Hughes displays his ability at improvising around the theme of dreams deferred. The poet attributes this reality to the continuous and ubiquitous segregation and oppression of African Americans on all fronts. Euro-American power structures enforce segregationist doctrines, which, Hughes restates, attempt to nullify the political and judicial efforts of the N.A.A.C.P. Hughes even argues for the creation of new organizations, “MECHANICS NEED REPAIRING” (8). Here, Hughes’s speaker puns on “MECHANICS,” which refers to the name of a Black Lodge, similar to other fraternal organizations such as the Black Freemasons.⁸⁴ However, such idealism results in the same acknowledgement of economic impotence, for in the closing lines of the last section of *Ask Your Mama*, “THE TV’S STILL NOT WORKING” (34).⁸⁵ Whether rich or poor, whether migrated to suburban “ST. ALBANS” or confined “IN THE QUARTER OF THE

⁸³ Refers to the location of the first meeting of the Niagara Movement in 1905. Organized by Du Bois, the movement demanded “the abolition of all distinctions based on race and color.” See Bennett, p. 280-281.

⁸⁴ See John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, p. 416.

⁸⁵ “Show Fare, Please,” p. 525.

NEGROES,” African Americans cannot escape “THE SHADOW” of racism which, like a biting “hawkins,” seeps in through every pore of society (Farrell and Johnson 19): “YET THEY ASKED ME OUT ON MY PATIO/ WHERE DID I GET MY MONEY/ I SAID, FROM YOUR MAMA!” (47-49).

Coming back to “Horn of Plenty,” Hughes employs repetition and rephrasing in his postulation of jazz musicians as cultural bearers. Thus, in the genealogy of saxophonists, Coleman Hawkins’s aesthetic prescience can be found in bebop and free jazz; he serves as artistic forefather to Charlie Parker, whose orbital radiance (“IN ORBIT”) already permeates the section “Bird in Orbit.” Hawkins’s innovations of the saxophone make him a “transitional figure” (Porter 89), one whose difficult classification often “left [him] in the cold” (Rosenthal 41) in terms of jazz historiography.⁸⁶ Yet, Hawkins’s “transitional” status makes him a primary conduit via which jazz moves from swing to bebop: his role as griot/musician is reflected in the work of Thelonious Monk and Sonny Rollins, for instance. Hawkins’s presence in this catalogue further signals Hughes’s recognition that jazz performance as activism has the ability to “bridge” “generational gaps.” In the aftermath of the Newport Riots, the older Hawkins was invited to play a key role in Max Roach’s *Freedom Now Suites* (Saul 128).⁸⁷ This “musical and political collaboration” (128) validates Hughes’s belief that jazz *is* communication between musicians and aesthetics, but also between politics and literature, history and identity.

⁸⁶ Deveaux even mentions that after 1945, Hawkins’s status has “declined” significantly (36-37).

VI. *Bebop Memory: Towards Cultural Nationalism and the Sounds of the Riot*

In *Ask Your Mama*, Hughes employs bebop as process of re-memory, thereby refiguring the musical motif of blues and re-actualizing its meaning for the black masses. In essence, however, blues and bebop perform the same history and the same continuum. It is worth therefore examining Hughes's use of bebop as theme and idiom in *Ask Your Mama* as a way to reinforce the cultural continuum. In the section "Bird in Orbit" (516-519), for instance, Hughes's musical cue asks for "*Cool bop very light and delicate rising to an ethereal climax....*" The musical cue iterates a musical continuum that begins with Du Bois's fascination with the spirituals and ends with Charlie Parker's dissonant and rebellious bebop, thus evoking the African American musical tradition from slavery to the onset of the Civil Rights movement:⁸⁸

METHUSELAH SIGNS PAPER W. E. B.

ORIGINAL N.A.A.C.P.

ADELE ROMANA MICHAEL SERVE BAKOKO TEA

IRENE AND HELEN ARE AS THEY USED TO BE

AND SMITTY HAS NOT CHANGED AT ALL

⁸⁷ Hawkins "protested" that the riots and subsequent cancellation of the Festival were "terrible...Nothing worse could have happened." In Rampersad, *Life II*, 315; see also Saul 121.

⁸⁸ See Chapter XIV: "Of the Sorrow Songs," in *The Souls of Black Folk*, reprinted in *Three Negro Classics*, p. 377-387.

ALIOUNÉ AIMÉ SEDAR SIPS HIS NEGRITUDE
 THE REVEREND MARTIN LUTHER
 KING MOUNTS HIS UNICORN
 OBLIVIOUS TO BLOOD
 AND MOONLIGHT ON ITS HORN
 WHILE MOLLIE MOON STREWS SEQUINS
 AND LEDA STREWS HER CORN
 AND CHARLIE YARDBIRD PARKER
 IS IN ORBIT. (18-31)⁸⁹

Beyond cultural continuity, Hughes also underscores the continuous black struggles for equality, from Du Bois' ideals of desegregation to Senghor's rejection of Western imperialism with "Négritude" to Martin Luther King's civil rights.⁹⁰ In Hughes's genealogy, Du Bois becomes the patriarch of the great Black liberation project, symbolized

⁸⁹ In the section "Bird in Orbit," p. 516-517.

⁹⁰ Du Bois is compared to Methuselah because he is one of the first African American intellectuals to be active in the fight against desegregation. The comparison also lies in the fact that he founded the N.A.A.C.P., thus making him a dean of African American civil rights. The Methuselah myth has become a synonym for longevity. Even though Hughes disapproved of Du Bois' elitism, he still regarded the man as a hero for African Americans. The dedication of his first book of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, indicates his recognition of Du Bois' accomplishments; Senghor's personal interpretation and definition of Negritude has become the model for other writers. In *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (1981), Abiola Irele, defines the Negritude movement as a reaction to colonization, which rejects the political, social, and ontological domination of the "white" world (112).

by the longevity of the legal struggle of the N.A.A.C.P., which yielded considerable judicial victories against segregation. Alongside Du Bois, Myra Adele Logan, the famous Harlem Hospital surgeon and N.A.A.C.P. activist, “serves” “BAKOKO TEA.”⁹¹ Hughes’s inclusion of the language of Cameroon (Bakoko) is a way to reaffirm the diasporic linkage in the struggle for black self-determinism and freedom from oppression. Linguistic and musical continuums intersect here to suggest the cultural dialogues between Africa and African America.

That linkage is strengthened by the dialogic allusions to Irene Morgan Kirkaldy, Helen Clayton as well as Négritude intellectuals Alioune Diop, Aimé Césaire, and Leopold Sedar Senghor, interspersed with mention of “SMITTY,” a calculated nod to bluesmen Big Bad Smitty and Blue Smitty of Muddy Waters’s band, whose blues repeat the thematic chorus and re-invoke the melody of the poem.⁹² Irene Morgan Kirkaldy, for instance, fought against Jim Crow rides in Saluda, Virginia, and defied white supremacy in the South as one of the original “Freedom Riders,” thereby paving the way for the Rosa Parks to come.⁹³ Similarly, Diop, Césaire, and Senghor, along with Léon Damas, sought to promote black unity and self-awareness, while rejecting the supremacy of Western colonialism that

⁹¹ For instance, Logan was very active in terms of suffrage rights. Also, as member of the New York State Committee on Discrimination, she advocated an anti-discrimination legislation that was rejected by Governor Dewey. That event led to her resignation as protest in 1944.

⁹² Clayton was the first black president of the YCWA as well as an active member of the N.A.A.C.P.; Big Bad Smitty’s real name is John H. Smith; Blue Smitty’s real name is Claude Smith.

debased black identity.⁹⁴ Their conjoining of politics and poetry –informed mostly by their revolt against colonial capitalism (Kesteloot 16) –was crystallized in Diop’s *Présence Africaine*, a magazine that would become the conduit via which the cultural concept of Négritude was expressed and expanded.⁹⁵

The literalized parade of heroes then extends to National Urban League Guild fundraiser and civil rights activist Mollie Moon as well as to Martin Luther King, whose non-violent activism (“OBLIVIOUS TO BLOOD”) continued the groundwork against segregation and the economic dream deferred of African America. The fact that King is also oblivious to the “MOONLIGHT” on his “HORN” of his unicorn links him directly with (the then late) Charlie Parker, who, in the stanza, oversees the civil rights battles while “IN ORBIT.” The symbol of the horn is transferred from Parker’s own aesthetic battles for artistic freedom onto King, who now leads the charge of freedom against oppression. Thus, Hughes correlates Parker’s bebop resistance against the artistic and economic co-optation and commodification of jazz with that of the other cultural heroes who also fought discrimination; he becomes a bebop exemplar whose artistic merits and “anti-

⁹³ See the New York Times article at the time of her death. Retrieved at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/13/us/13kirkaldy.html?n=Top/Reference/Times%20Topics/Organizations/S/Supreme%20Court>.

⁹⁴ The Négritude intellectuals were also at the basis of the First Congress of Black Writers and Artists, held in September of 1956 in Paris; it was a pan-African gathering that symbolizes the unity of the Diaspora in the fight for liberation. In fact, Paris had long been the locus of cultural meetings between black artists the Diaspora: Hughes and other Harlem Renaissance writers often met with Négritude poets in Paris as students. See Kesteloot, 56-74; Rampersad *I*, 343-344; 47-52.

⁹⁵ See chapters 19 and 20 in Kesteloot for more on the magazine’s politics.

assimilationist sound” (Jones, *BP*, 181) equal the political platforms of freedom movements across the Diaspora.⁹⁶

Thus, in this diasporic syncretization of resistance –musical, literary, and political – Hughes establishes an intertextual framework of intersecting histories symbolized by bebop. It would seem, then, that Hughes’s theorization of bebop as vernacular matrix echoes Ellison’s. In “The Golden Age, Time Past,” Ellison avers that “[i]n [bebop]the steady flow of memory, desire and defined experience summed up by the traditional jazz beat and blues mood seemed swept like a great river from its old, deep bed” (203).⁹⁷ Memory is the core concept here: not only limited to the memorization of vernacular idioms, memory, as recorder of the black experience, is also consciously reminding of the circumstances that created the “jazz beat and blues moods” and, as such, invites historical attention. Moreover, for Ellison, bebop’s idiomatic innovations incorporate “the old moods in the new sounds” (203) –a cultural dialogue that involves intergenerational as well as intercontinental exchanges. In that sense, Hughes’s definition of bebop preserves the essentialism of the cultural continuum in both musical and social commentary. In terms of militancy, there is no difference between the music, the political battles, and Hughes’s text that keeps them interactive. Here, bebop functions as the musical matrix that holds all past

⁹⁶ See Deveaux, 298-299, 351-352.

⁹⁷ In *Shadow and Act*, 199-212.

and present forms of black militancy.⁹⁸ Hughes's placement of the musical cue in the margin of the text suggests a similar idea. In fact, both musical cue and text operate individually and dialogically. Hence the reader / militant is always in constant dialogue with the musician who, through the music, comments on the text.

Bebop's aesthetic complexity, which directly opposed the playfulness of the swing ensemble, also reveals a technical radicalism that advocated separation from mainstream jazz.⁹⁹ In this, one can see a potent metaphor for black self-determinism so crucial to Black America's (re-)emergent nationalist ethos. For Hughes, in *Ask Your Mama*, bebop, as music and ideology embedded in the vernacular tradition, becomes an afferent and foundational cultural signifier capable of mobilizing the black masses and sensitizing them to the struggle for freedom. In the section "Jazztet Muted," Hughes's demand for "*Bop blues into very modern jazz burning the air eerie*" posits bebop as precursor to free jazz. Fundamentally, what Hughes suggests in the musical cue is not only the musical continuum, but also the social reach of the music; for free jazz will become the sonic expression of the Black Arts and Black Power movements. That Hughes anticipates the formation of these movements is symbolized by his portrayal of free jazz innovator Ornette Coleman as the catalyst of an impending black riot, which Henderson will poeticize in the poem "Keep on Pushing:"

⁹⁸ Eric Lott notes that "[b]rilliantly outside, bebop was intimately if indirectly related to the militancy of its moment. Militancy and music were undergirded by the same social facts; the music attempted to resolve at the level of style what the militancy fought out in the streets" (246).

⁹⁹ For more on bebop technique, see the first chapter of David M. Rosenthal's *Hard Bop*.

IN THE NEGROES OF THE QUARTER
 PRESSURE OF BLOOD IS SLIGHTLY HIGHER
 IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES
 WHERE BLACK SHADOWS MOVE LIKE SHADOWS
 CUT FROM SHADOWS CUT FROM SHADE
 IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES
 SUDDENLY CATCHING FIRE
 FROM THE TIP A MATCH TIP
 ON THE BREATH OF ORNETTE COLEMAN. (1-9)¹⁰⁰

Hughes connects Coleman's free jazz radicalism with its ancestry in bebop, which, as mentioned above, performed sonically "outburst[s] of black rage" (Rosenthal 16). Ornette Coleman's "free" jazz expressivity becomes a political threat to the socio-cultural hegemony of White America, which, in turn, links him inevitably with the trope of otherness filed under Communism:

IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES
 ORNETTE AND CONSTERNATION
 CLAIM ATTENTION FROM THE PAPERS
 THAT HAVE NO NEWS THAT DAY OF MOSCOW (54-57)¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Scanlon also discusses this passage, 55-56.

¹⁰¹ In the section "Cultural Exchange," p.479, lines (54-57).

Coleman's avant-gardism correlates with Parker's in that their compositional politics resist co-optation and refute any attempt to claim the music that comes from

THAT GENTLEMAN IN EXPANSIVE SHOES

MADE FROM THE HIDES OF BLACKS

WHO TIPS AMONG THE SHADOWS

SOAKING UP THE MUSIC (65-68)¹⁰²

Beyond co-option of the music, what this "GENTLEMAN" really wants is to cut at the root any separatist or nationalist platforms –whether aesthetic or politic –and continue the groundwork towards a vicious type of integration, one that contends that contact with Euro-Americans and, thus, access to the dominant group will silence any intimation of a rising black militant voice: "[THAT GENTLEMAN] ASKED ME RIGHT AT CHRISTMAS/ DID I WANT TO EAT WITH WHITE FOLKS" (69-70).

In his assimilationist design, the "GENTLEMAN" –as embodiment of White America's cultural politics that produced Jim Crow segregation and other measures that enforce tropes of black inferiority –reaffirms his "CONSTERNATION" over dissidents who question the socio-historical and socio-economic superiority of "WHITE FOLKS:"

THOSE SIT-IN KIDS, [the GENTLEMAN] SAID

MUST BE RED!

KENYATTA RED! CASTRO RED!

NKRUMAH RED!

¹⁰² In "Bird in Orbit," 518.

RALPH BUNCHE INVESTIGATED!
 MARY McLEOD BETHUNE BARRED BY
 THE LEGION FROM ENGLEWOOD
 NEW JERSEY HIGH SCHOOL!
 HOW ABOUT THAT N.A.A.C.P.
 AND THE RADICALS AT THAT SOUTHERN CONFERENCE?

(71-81)¹⁰³

Ornette Coleman’s free jazz sounds, like Nkrumah’s pan-African challenge of European hegemonies, like “THOSE SIT-IN KIDS” who demonstrated against segregation, like Ralph Bunche, who questioned the racist ancestry of White America by stating that “democracy is color-blind” and is “incompatible with segregation,” who ultimately refused a position as assistant secretary of state because segregation was still rampant in Washington D.C., and like Mary Mcleod Bethune, whose activism was based on the education of black women, partake in the emergent politics of dissent “othered” as Communist-affiliated in the Cold War environment of the 1960s.¹⁰⁴

Riffing upon the U.S. fear of Communism as threat to democracy and the Great American Way, the “GENTLEMAN” –a mouthpiece for Senator McCarthy and the FBI’s J. Edgar Hoover –works at containing the “outbursts of black rage” he sees enacted in

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ From Gregg, Phifer’s “Ralph Bunche: Negro Spokesman,” in *American Public Address*, Loren Reid, ed. Columbia, Mo., University of Missouri Press, 1961. Retrieved at www.nobelprize.org.

Coleman's jazz.¹⁰⁵ In fact, the "GENTLEMAN" symbolizes the repressive organizations such as Cointelpro (Counterintelligence Program), that sought to destroy nationalist organizations and freedom movements from within. His "SOAKING UP" of the music is but another example of cultural misunderstandings that lead to Coleman being labeled a Communist. Here Hughes reaffirms that black American vernacular "CULTURE" is *not* "A TWO-WAY STREET," but a compendium of the black experience, often misappropriated and misrepresented by Euro-Americans.¹⁰⁶

Let us return then to "Jazzted Muted," to where the section reaffirms the indispensable contribution of Parker's bebop in the formation of Coleman's revisionist jazz. It is from this revision that the "Jazztet" as political formation and innovators of black idioms –thus, as interpreters of the black "Soul" –will retrieve their "voice." Coleman's "apparent [aesthetic] formlessness" is similar to the compositional politics of improvisation employed by Hughes in the poem.¹⁰⁷ Coleman's sound thus embodies the "spirit" of "THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES," which "in its relentless progression" results in "freedom rides, sit-ins, riots, and fires" and foreshadows more radical movements like the Black Power and Black Arts movements (Jemie 95).¹⁰⁸ Accordingly, as the section reaches its

¹⁰⁵ Farrell and Johnson state that "Hughes's contrived red-baiting of the worldwide struggles of oppressed people for self-determination reveals the sheer absurdity of McCarthyism, which held that the anticolonial movements abroad and the struggle against racism at home were both communist inspired" (14).

¹⁰⁶ In "Cultural Exchange," 481, line 110.

¹⁰⁷ In Rampersad's "Introduction" to *Ask Your Mama*, in *The Collected Works Vol. 3*, p. 1.

¹⁰⁸ With the "vox-humana" quality of his intonations, Coleman could imitate the roaring cries of his audience and thus exceed the musical limitations of tuning and harmony. Moreover, Coleman suggested a rejection of

conclusion, Hughes depicts an effervescent Harlem environment comprised of jazz clubs performing “freedom sounds.” It is not only the clubs that “HAVE DOORS THAT OPEN OUTWARD/ TO THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES” (16-17), but also jazz that, while claiming community within “THE QUARTER,” provides pathways to freedom through its symbolically significant improvisational nature.

Finally, the section ends when Hughes rephrases the opening lines of the section, refashioning it into a refrain structure:

WHERE THE PRESSURE OF THE BLOOD
IS SLIGHTLY HIGHER –
DUE TO SMOLDERING SHADOWS
THAT SOMETIMES TURN TO FIRE.

HELP ME, YARDBIRD!

HELP ME! (18-23)

Here, Hughes includes a coda, usually a concluding feature of jazz composition, to the section that invokes the spirit of Charlie “Yardbird” Parker. The coda serves to restate the dialogic link between bebop and free jazz, as well as mapping a genealogy of musical heroes acting as signifiers in the struggle for equal rights. Already present in the musical

harmony in favor of melody and rhythm, which could be now perceived as interchangeable, meaning that one could read melody as rhythm and vice versa. Coleman’s “suppleness of phrasing” implies the expression of artistic freedom through a revision of established forms. See the liner notes to the CD *The Definitive Ornette Coleman*, in the Ken Burns Jazz Series, Columbia, cat.# CK 61450, 2000.

cue, but now (nick)named in the coda, Parker –and bebop –becomes the agency for Coleman’s free jazz revisionism. Take for instance Coleman’s composition “Bird’s Food.” In it, Coleman performs an act of jazz refiguration in which he not only claims Parker as influence, but also reinstates the AABA blues structure as foundational pattern of composition, acknowledging in the process the blues legacy in jazz.¹⁰⁹ Hughes thus emphasizes the cultural continuum by highlighting the presence of a bebop mentality in free jazz, each innovator of the jazz idiom becoming a centralizing influence to his successor, a “helper” passing on the desire to repeat and revise.

Because jazz development can be seen as a signifying process, Hughes employs jazz agency to follow motivic continuity:

IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES
WHERE THE PENDULUM IS SWINGING
TO THE SHADOW OF THE BLUES,
EVEN WHEN YOU’RE WINNING
THERE’S NO WAY NOT TO LOSE.¹¹⁰

It is in “THE SHADOW OF THE BLUES” that jazz finds its embedded history and tradition, which musicians will transform into an aesthetic activism capable of revitalizing dormant nationalist fervor. Furthermore, it is by transcending the burden of living constrained in “THE QUARTER” through performance that the germinating seeds of both

¹⁰⁹ See Berliner 90-91, where he discusses the compositional politics of Coleman’s “Bird’s Food” in relation to the AABA blues structure.

revolutionary and cultural nationalisms will develop into the practices and politically-charged axioms about art that characterize and inform the Black Power and Black Arts movements.

VII. *“Keep on Soundin’:” The Dozens as Bebop Jazz Corollary and Agency of Cultural Nationalism*

The threat of black revolution—a constant source of fear for white supremacists from the early days of slavery to the civil rights movement—is firmly ingrained in Hughes’s bebop poems. As mentioned earlier, Hughes also saw bebop as revolt; Rampersad contends that Hughes understood the necessity of rebelling against swing as idiom and thought, for it embodied the white co-optation and denaturalization of black culture which, ultimately, leads to the negation of black identity (152).¹¹¹ The intertwined ideas of social dissociation and aesthetic radicalism inherent in bebop were not lost on Hughes. In his essay, “Harlem’s Bitter Laughter,” Hughes articulates his recurrent leitmotif: “To defeat us you must defeat our laughter” (115).¹¹² This leitmotif encapsulates the overt defiance at the foundation of

¹¹⁰ In “Ode to Dinah,” lines 111-115.

¹¹¹ Rampersad states that, “[I]n the music of the jazz musicians revolting against the dishonor of swing [Hughes] heard both resignation and rage, despair and defiance, and the faint persistence of the dream” (152). Hughes’s position seems to echo Dizzy Gillespie who, in “To or Not to Be Bop,” points out that [w]e [beboppers] refuse to accept racism, poverty, or economic exploitation, nor would we live out uncreative humdrum lives merely for the sake of survival. But there was nothing unpatriotic about it. If America wouldn’t honor its Constitution and respect [African Americans] as men, we couldn’t give a shit about the American way. (189). For more on Gillespie, see also Charters and Kunstadt, *Jazz: A History of the New York Scene*, p.316-327; Jones, *Blues People*, p.188-190.

¹¹² In *Langston Hughes and the Chicago Defender*, Christopher De Santis, ed., p. 113-115.

Hughes's bebop aesthetics that emerge out of Harlem's "Dream within a dream" meta-culture. It is this meta-culture that Hughes rephrases for his tropological revisions of the black experience and foundational poetics of vernacular expressivity already outlined in *The Weary Blues*.

Hughes's interwoven theorizations of jazz performativity and historiography are acts of political resistance that foreshadow the cultural nationalism of the New Black Poetry of the 1960s. In *Ask Your Mama*, literalized instances of jazz defiance conflate in the ironic retort of the Dozens.¹¹³ The context of Hughes's poem further indicates that his use of the dozens is underscored by racial politics. John Dollard, whose essay "The Dozens: Dialectic of Insult" Hughes "knew well" (Rampersad, *II*, 317), affirms that the Dozens aimed at "neutralizing black aggression against whites" and at transcending their "frustration" (291). The irony at the basis of the retort –and intricately present in jazz – evokes Hughes's conception of blues humor concentrated in the "laughing-to-keep-from-crying" motif.¹¹⁴ It is also an echo of a central passage in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain:" "the tom-tom laughs and the tom-tom cries" (30).¹¹⁵ Subsumed under the "signifying riff" (Gates 105), "ASK YOUR MAMA," Hughes's use of the retort also suggests the Dozens with "the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in the white world"

¹¹³ See also Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, p.99-101; H. Rap Brown, *Die Nigger Die!*, p.24-30; Jemie, *Yo Mama*, 46-51. Hughes also employs the Dozens in "Feet Live Their Own Life," in *The Best of Simple*, p. 1-3.

¹¹⁴ In *Saying Something*, Monson, echoing Gates, underlines the presence of irony and parody in jazz (8, 104-105, 117-118). She argues that musical practices such as transformation and revision allow jazz players to invert, challenge, and often triumph over the ordinary hegemony of white aesthetic values (8).

(Hughes 30), doubly found in the aesthetic radicalism of bebop and free jazz. In this jazz rhetorical morphology, Hughes finds a mode of expression that, again, evokes a ritual firmly anchored in the black folk continuum.

Through the revisionist riff, Hughes's speakers are thus able to counter the stereotypical attitudes of Euro-American society and to voice the ineffability of the demonizing portrayal of Blacks and their culture.¹¹⁶ For instance in "Cultural Exchange" (480), the speaker, confronted with questions of cultural appropriation and ontological "borrowings," says "AND THEY ASKED ME RIGHT AT CHRISTMAS/ IF MY BLACKNESS, WOULD IT RUB OFF/ I SAID, ASK YOUR MAMA" (85-87). Here, Hughes's speaker also hints at the problematic of mongrelized culture already highlighted in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" and denounced in "Movies" (395) through the image of a Harlem movie audience that laughs at the stereotypical representations of blackness projected on the screen. The retort alludes to the interracial sexual taboos that permeated antebellum and postbellum America, especially the image of the mulatto.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ See Jemie's *Introduction* 25-28 for more on Hughes's conception of black laughter.

¹¹⁶ About the Dozens, Scanlon adds, "the retort is always a response to naive attempts at cross-cultural understanding" (57).

¹¹⁷ Hughes often resorts to this image; for instance the speaker in the poem "Cross" (58-59) wonders "where [he's] gonna die/ Being neither white nor black" (11-12) since "[His] old man's a white old man/ And [his] old mother's black" (1-2). Hughes's poem "Mulatto" and short play *Mulatto* also discuss the often-tragic results of miscegenation. See Webster Smalley's "Introduction" to *Five Plays by Langston Hughes*, where he discusses *Mulatto*, x-xii. Webster states that the "germ idea" for the play was the poem "Cross." In turn, *Mulatto* will lead to the opera *The Barrier*. For a good introduction to the image of the tragic mulatto, see Sterling Brown's "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors" in *A Son's Return: Selected Essays of Sterling*

Similarly, in the section “Is It True?” (509), Hughes’s speaker employs the signifying riff to confront the Euro-American belief in African American hypersexuality, and further suggests miscegenation “THEY ASKED ME AT THE PTA/ IS IT TRUE THAT NEGROES –? / I SAID, ASK YOUR MAMA.” (54-56). Hughes thus uses the ultimate insult of the Dozens to signify upon the perpetrators of the myth of black sexual degeneracy.¹¹⁸

The jazzed political engagement of the retort of the Dozens is nowhere as powerful as in “Bird In Orbit” (516): “THEY ASKED ME AT THANKSGIVING/ DID I VOTE FOR NIXON? / I SAID, VOTED FOR YOUR MAMA” (15-17). Here, Hughes signifies upon the idea of the “Great Silent Majority,” so precious to Nixon. In focusing only on the “unyoung, unpoor, and unblack” to woo the electorate, Nixon ran on a law and order platform that excluded and segregated the majority of African Americans. Moreover, Nixon’s elitist objectives led to “a slowdown” in the civil rights demands of Blacks.¹¹⁹ In thus using the dozens as rhetorical weapon, Hughes claims a space for vernacular culture to effect liberation.

The political potential of the ironic dozens allows Hughes to deepen his theorization of humor as resistance and hints at an impending (rhetorical) black takeover of white

A. Brown, edited by Mark A. Sanders. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996. 169-173.

¹¹⁸ See Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, pp. 3-42, 108-112, 116-118, 236-241. It is worth noting that challenges to Euro-American distortions of black sexuality were already in motion in the poems “Question” and “Mellow” in *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951).

¹¹⁹ Blum, Mcfeely, Morgan, Schleisinger, Stamp, and Woodward. *The National Experience: A History of the United States*, p. 882-883.

racialist America.¹²⁰ In the section “Cultural Exchange,” Hughes alludes to an impending black revolution –one that invokes the Harlem riots of 1943, one that anticipates the 1964 riot in Henderson’s “Keep on Pushing” –that will turn the degraded “QUARTER OF THE NEGROES” into the locus of Black power:

WON’T LET GO UNTIL IT THUNDERS
 WON’T LET GO UNTIL IT THUNDERS
 TEARS THE BODY FROM THE SHADOW
 WON’T LET GO UNTIL IT THUNDERS
 IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES (80-84)

The musical cue, which calls for “*drums [that] roll thunder,*” inflates the idea of a call to action requiring a communal response –antiphonal drumming here acting as performative communal memory.

The drumming in the cue suggests Art Blakey, for his fearless percussive expressivity looked back to Africa and ahead to post-bop innovations.¹²¹ Blakey’s group, the Jazz Messengers, also functioned as training ground for most of the important post-bop musicians, thus positing Blakey and the Messengers as innovative jazz educators and

¹²⁰ Schechter points out that “[Hughes’s] definition of humor seems to stem from...all the years of deprivation that Blacks in America experienced. He considered humor and laughter at a lack which one rightfully deserved, or the interim between the joke’s being on someone else and its turning on one’s self” (108). Levine explains this process of reversal, as “the trivialization or degradation of ideas or personages normally held to be lofty or noble, and the advancement of those normally consigned to an inferior or inconsequential position” (301). For additional discussions of this process, see pp.298-366, and n2, p. 488, in Levine.

¹²¹ See Frank Kofsky, 136; Monson, *Freedom Sounds*, 133-140.

cultural interpreters of Black American cultural history. It is this intergenerational dialogue between musicians and politics that Hughes conveys in the musical direction; it further proposes an aesthetic transition which jazz seems to correlate. Aesthetically, Blakey's drumming more than often moved beyond regular rhythmic pattern (4/4) into an "asymmetrical raucousness" (Lott 601) that Hughes's irregular line and stanza structures seek to reproduce.

In the antiphonal dynamism of the drum and the repetition of "WON'T LET GO UNTIL IT THUNDERS," which seems to provide clues to answer the questions "What happens to a dream deferred?" "does it explode?" (1, 11)¹²² of the bebop framework of *Montage*, Hughes suggests that an emerging black political "power" will someday overcome the limitation imposed upon Blacks and reverse the racial order:

DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES...
 NIGHTMARES...DREAMS! OH!
 DREAMING THAT THE NEGROES
 OF THE SOUTH HAVE TAKEN OVER –
 VOTED ALL THE DIXIECRATS
 RIGHT OUT OF POWER –
 COMES THE *COLORED HOUR*:
 MARTIN LUTHER KING IS GOVERNOR OF GEORGIA
 DR. RUFUS CLEMENT HIS CHIEF ADVISOR

¹²² From "Harlem [2]" in *Montage*. Taken in *Collected Poems* 426.

ZELMA WATSON GEORGE THE HIGH GRAND WORTHY
 IN WHITE PILLARDED MANSIONS
 SITTING ON THEIR WIDE VERANDAS,
 WEALTHY NEGROES HAVE WHITE SERVANTS,
 WHITE SHARECROPPERS WORK THE BLACK PLANTATIONS,
 AND COLORED CHILDREN HAVE THEIR WHITE MAMMIES:

MAMMY FAUBUS

MAMMY EASTLAND

MAMMY PATERSON

DEAR, *DEAR* DARLING OLD WHITE MAMMIES –

SOMETIMES EVEN BURIED WITH OUR OWN FAMILY

DEAR OLD

MAMMY FAUBUS! (88-112)

In this African American “DREAM” that prefigures the cultural production of the Black Arts Movement, and Baraka’s *Black Magic* and *It’s Nation Time* in particular, it is the entire mythology of white supremacy that is turned on its head. “MAMMIES,” symbols of black generational subservience on the plantocracies, are now the (white) mothers of ardent segregationists; they are now nurses to black children.¹²³ Arkansas governor Orval Faubus of Little Rock “fame,” who proclaimed that segregation was the only avenue to avoid a

¹²³ See also Scanlon 58 for more analysis of this passage.

bloodbath he would not prevent from happening, Mississippi Senator James Eastland, who ferociously opposed the civil rights movement and denounced the historical *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), and John Malcolm Patterson, Alabama Senator who, as Attorney General banned the N.A.A.C.P. from operating in Alabama with backing from the Ku Klux Klan, are reframed as genealogically belonging to the dominated society –a reversal which highlights the contradictory nature of segregationist politics.

In Hughes's new U.S., the segregationists have been replaced by black cultural heroes whose brand of social rule is reflected in the non-violent activism of Martin Luther King, now governor of Georgia. Alongside King, Dr. Rufus Clement, the first Dean of Louisville Municipal College of Negroes and the longest serving president of Atlanta University, stands for an activism based on education. Dr. Clement's election to the Atlanta Board of Education –the first African American since Reconstruction –further emphasizes the reversal of stereotypes of black intellectual inferiority propagated by advocates of white supremacy. Similarly, operatic diva-musicologist-sociologist Zelma Watson George's positioning at the center of this new racial order symbolizes black achievement and success.¹²⁴ These cultural heroes march to the tune of the musical cue "When the Saints Go Marchin' In," which itself riffs on the aforementioned "Battle Hymn of the Republic;" they embody a reinvigorated African American nation "*Marching in*" the new South.

¹²⁴ In another version of the poem, A. Philip Randolph replaces George. The allusion to "THE HIGH GRAND WORTHY" seems to refer to Randolph however.

In fact, the musical cue also provides another layer of meaning, which Hughes employs to underscore the function of jazz as commentary. “When the Saints Go Marchin’ In” is a jazz composition which has its roots in the idioms of the blues and the spirituals; its AABA structure borrows from the form of both black sacred and secular music. In the poem, “When the Saints Go Marchin’ In” returns to its early uses as a funeral march performed for the “death” of the segregated South. Its apocalyptic content is thus maintained in the image of the Southern “NIGHTMARE” to see “NEGROES/ OF THE SOUTH” who “HAVE TAKEN OVER.”¹²⁵ However, in this new South, the Archangel Gabriel’s trumpet announcing the Final Judgment is replaced by Satchmo’s blowing, which signals the end of white supremacy and the beginning of black empowerment in the South. Hughes’s musical cue further indicates his continuous reliance on the black vernacular as portal to liberation and call to black unity. Here, Satchmo’s jazz rendition of the song becomes the call to end segregation, thereby further establishing the centrality of the musician in *Ask Your Mama*. As such, the choice of Armstrong as jazz archangel sounding the end of segregation is also fitting since Satchmo openly denounced the Little Rock incidents and governor Faubus’s racist platform.¹²⁶ Armstrong’s political militancy was something new for the artist, whose stage persona was more “accommodating”

¹²⁵ For more on the African American meaning of “apocalypse,” see Maxine Lavon Montgomery’s brilliant *The Apocalypse in African-American Fiction*.

¹²⁶ In “(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue,” recorded in 1929, Armstrong had already engaged in revisionist musical activism by revisiting Andy Razaf and Fats Waller’s composition about the ongoing ravages of racial discrimination. His improvisational additions to the song foregrounds the potential of jazz to actualize civil rights struggles.

(Monson 3). Still, Armstrong's activism inscribes jazz performance within the gestalt of Black expressive culture and the cultural politics of freedom movements. From his own performance of the leitmotif to his "(What Did I Do) to Be So Black and Blue?," Armstrong embodies the essential qualities of the griot, whose music performs the history Hughes literalizes in the catalogues of *Ask Your Mama*.¹²⁷

The presence of Louis Armstrong alongside Parker and Coleman indicates how Hughes understood the necessity of mapping the entire continuum to sustain black cultural activism. In the expansive "soul" of the catalogues as well as in the social inversions and subversions that they intimate, Hughes foregrounds the belief that black culture is the agency of black liberation, a belief later expounded by Malcolm X and Amiri Baraka. It is no wonder then that *Ask Your Mama* is often perceived as the aesthetic point of departure for the emerging New Black Poetry. Hughes's poem posits jazz, from Armstrong's blues-jazz to bebop and to free jazz, as cultural history and as marker for political assertions of blackness. By constructing –or poeticizing –the catalogues, Hughes rewrites African America in the hope of transcending the constant deferral of the dream of black self-determination.

¹²⁷ In "Griot/Djeli," Baraka sees Armstrong as a griot of the black continuum. Reprinted in *Diggings*, 8.

Coda

In *Ask Your Mama*, Hughes portrays the ideal jazz griot whose poetry sings African American History. And while he sings the praises of cultural heroes, he also ascribes to them social responsibilities aimed at the liberation of Black Americans from the shackles of racial discrimination. *Ask Your Mama*, Hughes's penultimate poetic representation of his encyclopedic memory, reflects the poet's understanding of the intricacies and interlinkings between African American music and poetry. In fact, *Ask Your Mama* underpins what Berliner argues when he affirms that "[a]s a result of diverse influences contributing to its tradition, jazz in performance reveals layered patterns of cultural history" (491). Thus, by affirming cultural history and memorializing ancestry, Hughes gestures towards the potential of artistry to effect nation building, which justifies his place as literary forefather of many of the cultural nationalists to emerge in the turbulent decades of the 1960s and 1970s.¹²⁸

Hughes's "image-making" historiography functions within an antiphonal pattern that responds poetically to the political demands of Black America at the onset of the 1960s. Hughes would come full circle in a 1965 essay, "The Task of the Negro Writer," in which he reiterates the foundational aesthetic principles outlined in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain:

¹²⁸ See James Smethurst's excellent "Don't Say Goodbye to the Porkpie Hat": Langston Hughes, the Left, and the Black Arts Movement," 1228-1232.

We possess within ourselves a great reservoir of physical and spiritual strength to which poetry, fiction, and the stage should give voice ... There is today no lack within the Negro people of beauty, strength, power –world shaking power ... Ours is a social as well as a literary responsibility. (171)¹²⁹

Ultimately, by poeticizing and politicizing music, Hughes's synthesis of the black experience in the Diaspora provides the poetic canvas on which Henderson, Sanchez, and Baraka will write their "Black poem[s]." In its panoramic representation of jazz as heartbeat of Black people and with Africa deeply ingrained in the very fabric of its words, *Ask Your Mama*, at curtain call, reveals a richly innovative approach to jazz poems as Black History. The gestalt. *Rim shot*. TACIT.

¹²⁹ In *Good Morning Revolution: Uncollected Writings of Langston Hughes*, ed. Faith Berry.

Chapter II: “Move On Up: Rhythm and Blues, Jazz and Harlem Geographies in David Henderson’s *De Mayor of Harlem*”

The Umbra workshops that took place in New York’s Lower East Side from 1962 to 1965 were born out of black writers’ impetus to take their poetry to the stage, to the people, like contemporary griots of the black urban experience.¹ Recuperating the folk embeddings of urban blues thematics, Umbra poetics and politics proposed the means to reconnect with socio-cultural lineages that sought to codify black ontology. For Umbra poets, the linkage with tradition was made possible by the agency of jazz performance. Umbra poets borrowed from the creative dynamics of jazz improvisation for poetic templates. Calvin Hernton, a central figure of the Umbra group, describes how as “[p]oets, we behaved in the tradition of the jazz session; spontaneity and improvisation were our guides” (581). Fundamentally, the critical and political contexts of the Umbra workshops succeeded in negotiating the creative transposition from the page to the stage, thereby returning African American poetry to its African rooting in the communicative oral tradition of the griot. Imbued with the griot’s folk sensitivity and oral traditions, Umbra poets returned poetry to its ritualistic dimension; the call-and-response that underlies the intersections between African aesthetic communality and improvisational jazz reveals processes of cultural re-inscription that emphasizes both individual and group consciousness.

¹ I refer to Michael Oren’s chronology in “The Umbra Poets’ Workshop, 1962-1965: Some Socio-Literary Puzzles” 177-182.

David Henderson states that Umbra sprang from African American traditions and cultural roots.² In regards to lineage then, the community of black poets who united under Umbra used the “model” of Langston Hughes’s *Ask Your Mama* to develop “a kind of historical consciousness” (Dent qtd in Oren 184) that, like Hughes’s poem, retrieves the cultural and conversational links with the Diaspora.³ The interconnectivity between vernacular, poetic and socio-political practices found in Hughes’s poem and transposed in Henderson’s poetry aims at reconfiguring cultural memory as Afrocentric consciousness.

What rises from the socio-political contexts and aesthetic premises of Umbra is the formation of a cultural nationalist ideology, as evidenced by a collaborative effort to transfigure negative assumptions of blackness into the assertion of black pride. In “Lower East Side Coda,” Dent describes the collective dimension of the Umbra workshops as “we-ness,” which, for its members, meant “a way of absorbing and interpreting the times, which were deeply imbued with the struggle for diasporan and anti-colonial political liberation, and the emergence of black cultural identity” (597). The workshops represented an occasion for black writers to engage in literary dialogues while implicitly –and in some exchanges, explicitly –establishing criteria for assessing black art. They prefigured the debates over the multiplicity of meanings ascribed to the black aesthetic at the turn of the

² Marcoux, Interview with David Henderson, 2008.

³ For more on Hughes’s influence on the Umbra poets, see also Smethurst’s “Don’t Say Goodbye to the Porkpie Hat,” 1228-1231.

1970s, proving Umbra's postulation as "a predecessor [and] a progenitor" (107) of the Black Arts Movement.⁴

Even the group's denomination intimated at a recurrent trope of Black Power: "'Umbra' began to take on a meaning not limited to the magazine or the Workshop: It meant the soul, the *spirit* of what we were into" (Dent 107 –emphasis author's).⁵ In thus referring to the black collective "soul," Dent foregrounds most of the critical attention about socio-philosophical, political and aesthetic assessments of blackness based on soulfulness and a black-centered terminology. In *Right On!*, Michael Haralambos contextualizes the meaning of "soul" in 1960s black culture: "Soul symbolizes the re-evaluation and re-definition of black identity, experience, behavior, and culture. Soul associates those aspects considered essentially black and stamps it with a seal of approval" (130).⁶

⁴ In Dent, "Umbra Days."

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Black poet A.X. Nicholas, in *The Poetry of Soul*, defines soul music as "the expression of the Black man's condition in (fascist Amerika) –his frustrations, his anger, his pride –a ritual in song that...Black people can identify *with* and participate *in* collectively...*Soul music, then, is the poetry of the Black Revolution* (xiii – emphasis Nicholas's). As mentioned earlier, Maultsby believes that, as a cultural concept, soul was central to the rhetoric of black cultural nationalism (54). Accordingly, William L. Van Deburg defines "soul" in the context of the early sixties: "Soul was the folk equivalent of the black aesthetic. It was perceived as being the essence of the separate black culture. If there was beauty and emotion in blackness, soul made it so. If there was a black American mystique, soul provided much of its aura of sly confidence and assumed superiority...It was a "tribal thing," the emotional medium of a subculture. To possess a full complement of soul was to have attained effective black consciousness...As a cultural concept, "soul" was closely related to black America's need for individual and group self-definition" (195).

In Henderson's poetry, this essentialist soul is firmly ingrained in the Hughesian tapestry of cultural heroes, thereby further establishing the inherent dialogisms between the poets. Moreover, Henderson's symbology of soul is intertwined with its musical textuality. His poems literalize the musical performativity of that cultural "soul." In so doing, Henderson's poetics anticipate Baraka's idea of poetry as musical form.⁷ The cultural continuum that Henderson invokes in *Felix of the Silent Forest* and in *De Mayor of Harlem* interlinks elements of the black folk tradition (spirituals, blues, gospel) with more popular and avant-garde idioms (rhythm and blues, and later free jazz) which, as Smethurst mentions, evokes Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain."⁸ These cultural interlinkings between black artists and black idioms result in a poetic map of blackness synchronically and dialogically sustained by a shared African ancestry, a map that resembles that of *Ask Your Mama*.

The following chapter will thus discuss how Henderson, using the New Music, especially rhythm and blues and free jazz, as motif, recuperates Hughes's intimations of rebellion "IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES" and details the meaning of the riots in terms of their defining cultural and revolutionary nationalisms. Moreover, Henderson continues two of Hughes's poetic strains. First, Henderson portrays Harlem as locus of blackness; that is, by depicting cultural life in Harlem, Henderson outlines the core values of black pride and black self-determination that authenticate black identity. Second,

⁷ In "New Music/New Poetry." Reprinted in *The Music*. 243.

Henderson forwards Hughes's griotism by heralding cultural workers like Malcolm X and John Coltrane whose revolutionary politics and jazz poetics converge to define the Black Aesthetic, much like Hughes did with the catalogues and much like Baraka will do with "In the Tradition" and *Wise Whys Ys*.

To do so, Henderson resorts to the New Black Music, incarnated in rhythm and blues and free jazz. This chapter therefore analyzes how Henderson imbricates the themes and sounds of the New Music into his poetry. Rhythm and blues themes and motifs underscore his description of the 1964 Harlem riot, while free jazz themes and idioms underlie his poems about cultural nationalism. Like Hughes, Henderson's theorization of the cultural continuum reveals his understanding that literalized music performs history.

I. Authenticity, Soul, and Literalized Musical Performances of Black Self-Determination in Harlem

As cultural workers, poets like Hughes and Henderson had to re-appropriate black culture and restore black pride in black art. For Hughes, the denaturalization of black culture by a white capitalist recording industry is a central theme of his post-Harlem

⁸ In "Don't Say Goodbye to the Porkpie Hat: Langston Hughes, the Left, and the Black Arts Movement," 1229.

Renaissance work. The poem “Note on Commercial Theatre” (CP 215-216) written in 1940, suggests the depth and breadth of his poetic project of cultural re-inscription:

You've taken my blues and gone –
 You sing 'em on Broadway
 And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,
 And you mixed 'em up with symphonies
 And you fixed 'em
 So they don't sound like me (lines 1-6)

 But someday somebody'll
 Stand up and talk about me –
 Black and beautiful –
 And sing about me,
 And put on plays about me!
 I reckon it'll be myself
 Me myself! (12-18)

In this poem, Hughes uses re-appropriation as a means to achieve cultural nationalism. By asserting the necessity of a self-determined culture that will highlight both black pride and black beauty –tropes that will be central to the black consciousness movements of the sixties and seventies –Hughes performs a poetic and political call to action. As discussed in the previous chapter, that call to action is sustained in *Ask Your Mama*; to portray the black continuum is one way Hughes employs to galvanize the cultural nationalist impulses he perceives in black music. For Hughes, self-determination in both culture and politics is the portal to a reclaiming of black history and black identity. His poetry therefore attempts to (re-)authenticate black culture in order to counter-balance the effects of dreams deferred.

In 1963, Jay and the Americans had a Top 30 hit with “Only in America.” The song had originally been composed for the all-black combo, The Drifters. Written by hitmakers Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller with the civil rights movement and Martin Luther King’s freedom crusades as backdrops, the song spoke of the trials of black life in a society that still looked at blackness as a sign of inferiority. The original verse of the song went:

Only in America
 Land of Opportunity
 Can they save a seat in the back of the bus just for me.

Only in America
 Where they preach the Golden Rule
 Will they start a march when my kids want to go to school.⁹

Atlantic’s Jerry Wexler refused The Drifters’ interpretation of the song for fear of being “lynched” by a bigoted industry. More concerned with job security than political integrity, Lieber and Stoller rewrote the song into a patriotic manifesto praising core American values of Gospel of Wealth and Manifest Destiny. The Drifters refused to release it, for it would betray the message of the original song. Lieber and Stoller gave it to all-white group, Jay and the Americans. The song became:

Only in America
 Can a guy from anywhere
 Go to sleep a pauper and wake up a millionaire

⁹ Retrieved at: <http://geocities.com/spectropop/hlieberstoller.html#only>.

Only in America
 Can a kid without a cent
 Get a break and maybe grow up to be President

Only in America
 Land of opportunity, yeah
 Would a classy girl like you fall for a poor boy like me.

It was a hit.

When rhythm and blues was not rewritten to omit the edicts of desegregation, self-determination rhetoric, or cultural nationalism, it was often covered or stolen by white entertainers. In *'Scuse Me While I Kiss the Sky*, a biography of Jimi Hendrix, David Henderson states that a “cover trend” (48) began in 1954. Underlying this trend is the fact that while white singers or combos “would sing the songs often with a new ‘pop’ arrangement for the white masses” (48), the economic benefits and/or the cultural representation were often denied to black lyricists, composers, and performers. Henderson’s poem “Boston Road Blues,” from his first collection *Felix of the Silent Forest*, reveals how black artists’ cultural productions were stolen and denaturalized for capitalist purposes.¹⁰ Hence, Pat Boone is portrayed as “the corny man” (line 100)

who stole Little Richard’s tunes
 & parodied them into a fortune
 Little Richards receiving lyricist royalties
 but not TV show

¹⁰ *Felix of the Silent Forest* does not have page numbers.

no life insurance & old age compensation (101-105)

Similarly, Buddy, the manager of The Starsteppers and the poem's speaker's fictional r&b combo,

wrote and recorded a song
called "SCHBOOM"
then the Crewcuts swept away the bread
the Man couldn't use a colored group on TV 1954 (116-119)

Henderson notes, in *'Scuse me While I Kiss the Sky*, how "SchBoom," originally performed by black combo The Chords, became a "classic 'cover'" (48) when reprised by Canadian combo The Crewcuts. Their polished image and polite Tin Pan Alley music fitted with what white America wanted to see represented, culturally, on television. While The Crewcuts' version became "*the* monster hit of 1954", The Chords' received "moderate airplay" (48 –emphasis Henderson's).

"Boston Road Blues" also reveals how black acts, personified in the poem by The Starsteppers, that longed for success often had to forsake their roots in order to succeed in a white-dominated recording industry. Therefore, The Starsteppers, after

record hops (anywhere and everyone)
community center and house party gigs
background harmony (of our own invention) for
BIG TIME RECORD COMPANY
ten dollars a day
steady gigging Goodson's (gay) Little Club
on Boston-Road-by-Randolph

(The clientele loved fresh young talented

they said / Goodson too),

finally record “Broadway in a white Cadillac” (140-149). As a result of having recorded for “the Man,” The Starsteppers have to inform Goodson, a black club owner who prides himself on providing black r&b combos with opportunities to perform, that they are “no longer accepting anymore clubdates/ on Boston Road” (155), following the instructions of their managers, who have themselves forsaken ties to the black community (156). Here, Henderson’s poetic portrait criticizes a black bourgeoisie, symbolized by the managers in the poem, whose collusion with white power structures further severs intra-communal dialogues. Such critique recuperates Hughes’s relentless attack on the black bourgeoisie begun in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” and carried through *Ask Your Mama*. The black bourgeoisie’s cultural betrayal will also be at the forefront of Baraka’s nationalist and Third-World cultural productions.

Finally, when the new Starsteppers record is out, the effects of betrayal –by the managers and by a hegemonious industry –evoked in the title of the song “You’re Gone” are deeply felt; the record is not picked up by both radio stations nor is it supported the black community:

we waited
 six months a year
 reading CASHBOX weekly
 we waited (never to Goodson)
 we waited
 and after a while
 started to sing to ourselves once more. (91-97)

The Starsteppers' descent into musical oblivion –their record is never charted because there can only be one Temptations (Cole 168) –is Henderson's autobiographical commentary on the necessity to affirm blackness through intra-communal performance; it is one of the essential means via which memory can be affirmed and cultural nationalism can be claimed. By "singing to themselves," The Starsteppers are re-inscribed in the urban black ethos from which the blues inflections of their songs originated; finally, they regain their "soul."

Unlike the Starsteppers, The Drifters, in David Henderson's poem "Neon Diaspora," shed the pathos of musical co-optation and dreams deferred motifs to become cultural embodiments of the very essence of the black tradition of oral performance.¹¹ Despite being sometimes accused of selling out for performing diluted black pop, The Drifters remained culturally significant for the black masses because their rhythm and blues, as well as the way they were performed, recalled the blues rituals that exorcized the evils of oppression and institutionalized racism: their music provided catharsis for the black community who had to endure daily degradation. In the poem, the band arrives in Harlem, a symbolic homecoming in the black metropolis that reunites them with the northern black masses after touring the South and "singing *their* songs of freedom to the blackbelted/bucks of our America" (230, lines 10-11). The italicization of "their" emphasizes the irony behind the composition of these "songs of freedom."

¹¹ Anthologized in *Black Fire*, 230-232.

Take for instance “On Broadway.” This “song of freedom” was penned by white lyricists who “evoked key aspects of the black mental and physical world” (Ward 215) at a time when most labels “were cautious about cutting songs with racially specific settings or subjects” (214). What is further interesting is the fact that these white lyricists used the agency of black performers, like The Drifters, who “helped to legitimize their observations for black audiences” (215). Yet, in Henderson’s “Neon Diaspora,” The Drifters appropriate the subject matter of the songs because they are, in essence, conveyors of the black experience in music. As mentioned in the previous section, Hughes conceptualizes Broadway as a projected extension of the South’s socio-economic inequalities.¹² The opening stanza of The Drifters’ “On Broadway” recuperates the Broadway motif and reiterates the dream deferred correlative of Broadway “as a neon-lit symbol of the wealth and opportunity routinely denied to most blacks” (Ward 215):

They say the neon lights are on Broadway (on Broadway)
 They say there’s always magic in the air on Broadway (on Broadway)
 But when you’re walkin’ down that street
 And you ain’t had enough to eat
 The glitter rubs right off and you’re nowhere on Broadway (on Broadway).¹³

Through their reconceptualizing this into a “message song” (Ward 215), The Drifters depict the devastating realities of black life in the demonizing environment of white-dominated capitalist institutions. More importantly, the song reveals the pervading inequalities within

¹² In “Jazz as Communication” reproduced in *The Langston Hughes Reader*, 492.

¹³ <http://www.lyrics-database.org/the-drifters-lyrics/on-broadway-lyrics/b3cd3b5c6c06747d.html>.

the entertainment industry for which Broadway becomes an all-encompassing signifier. The dispersion of neon signs that sell escape and whose protruded glittering meanings exclude the black masses is but another instance of racial discrimination that leads to the symbolic hunger in The Drifters' song, a hunger that, in Henderson's poem, turned Harlem into "the foul auricle of the city" (19) and "fetid bosom of Manhattan" (35).¹⁴ As such, Harlem and Broadway are conceptualized as the two extremes of the cultural axis; the latter –a metonymical representation of "the great white metropolis" – being one "Neon Diaspora" whose sole purpose is to entertain and forward, subconsciously, the ideals of the Dream for the historically elect.

Conversely, when, in Henderson's poem, the poet claims to "see the enigmas of our Neon Diaspora" (41), he contrasts the Broadway motif with the ways in which symbolic Black Harlemites –those cultural workers emerging from "THE QUARTERS" –ritualize black performance. The enigma, for Euro-Americans at least, lies in the cultural miscomprehension of black conceptualization of artistry as resistance to a systematized entertainment industry that co-opts, appropriates and denaturalizes stylized black art forms. As griot-chronicler of the black experience, Henderson "see[s]" Harlem's "Neon Diaspora" as the dispersed locations where blackness is affirmed and claimed through performance in the metropolis. The Drifters' music thus summons Blacks (back) to the Apollo; all dispersed venues conflate in the metropolis' cultural loci. The Apollo Theatre becomes the

quintessential urban atrium where Blacks of all classes converge to hear their reunifying rhythm and blues:

The Drifters are in the Palm Café strutting for the
 aristocracy
 the Post Office Employees, the Parks Department truck
 drivers, the
 Transit Railroad Clerks and policemen. The nurses, the Fish
 and
 Chips' shack owners
 The fully employed, steady working hands of Harlem. The
 Drifters
 are in the Palm Café to wave and shout, stomp and lead the
 privileged, the responsables
 to the Apollo
 along with the rest. (21-33)

In Henderson's view, The Drifters' ability to reach Blacks across and beyond status, class, or any other socio-economic definition discloses how their stylization of rhythm and blues is, above all, an antiphonal attempt to invoke black resistance and unity.

Thus, for Henderson, The Drifters' role as cultural workers exceeds the labels that reduce them to pop stars. The music they perform situates them at the very core of black aesthetic principles: they sing for *and* about black people. They are blues originators, whose embedment in cultural memory refigures and revises black idioms and whose

¹⁴ De Jongh, echoing the title of Claude McKay's *Harlem: Black Metropolis*, further contends that: "Harlem – the great black metropolis – within New York City – the great white metropolis – symbolizes the deferred

success derives primarily from signifying, not from aping or appropriation like artists, say The Beatles, of the British Invasion: “These imbibers of barbecue and Gordon’s Gin/ are not from Liverpool” (59-60). Through their call-response performance, The Drifters reinstitute black historio-cultural memory as the foundational trope shared by the “blues people.” Henderson portrays them as articulators of blackness who are firmly ingrained within the very fabric of the black experience of a dream deferred: “These incantators of neon disasters/ do not clown” (57-58). In Harlem’s cultural geography, The Drifters sing to transcend the “neon disasters” that Broadway embodies.

As audience member, Henderson’s ability to “see” through the performance –to decode signifiers –allows him to grasp the inherent ontological meaning in it:

When I see them strut to the footlights, faintly
 smiling amongst themselves. Giving measured “cool” response
 to the screaming, the dancing, the reaching, and then looking
 into the crowd and darkness, swagger a retreat with that
 Elemental sexuality (that has been our only hope for so long)
 I love those black bastards with all the heart I dare. (61-66)

By praising the presence of “Elemental sexuality” in rhythm and blues, Henderson highlights how this African American performance –in song and in dance –destroys the reductive stereotypes of uncontrollable sexuality ascribed to Blacks. Moreover, the (sometimes) covert sexual content of rhythm and blues songs denotes a radical departure from the puritan mindset of white America. Through The Drifters’ performance then, it is

dream of black America within the American Dream” (109).

not only the black body and the whole range of affects that define it that are affirmed, it is also the cultural self-determination that is claimed. Escaping the racialized definitions of the white entertainment industry, the rhythm and blues ritual at the Apollo, because of its imbrications in the vernacular tradition, is one that provides the black audience with catharsis and momentary transcendence.

In “The Last Set Saga of Blue Bobby Bland” (41-42), Henderson conceptualizes the Apollo as the venue within which essential blackness is asserted, and assessed, through performance. Echoing the cultural disinvestment of The Starsteppers in “Boston Road Blues,” Henderson depicts the descent of Bobby Bland from “KING OF BLUES” (line 22) to integrationist traitor. While Bland’s “canary-powdered face” (5) certainly evokes minstrelsy, his “moot eyes” (6), a direct effect of his being “high” (20), also indirectly convey his cultural distance from the “mellow blues” (9) he sings. Through his impersonation of a blues singer, Bobby Bland fails to engage in ritualized cultural dialogue with his black audience, who perceive, in his act, disaffiliation from black ontology. Symbolically represented by his “custom-made hair do” (11), whose “marcel” (17) suggests “process[ed]” (Cole 170) hairstyling –his “conk” is a sign of his intergrationist politics –Bland’s acculturated blues lacks the “[e]lemental” qualities of The Drifters’ performative aestheticism. Decoding in Bland’s “gyroscopic” (12) hair signs of cultural disingenuousness is “the soul sister/ who bust[s] onstage/ to talk about her natural hair” (14-16). The opposition between the soul sister’s “*naturale*” (18) and Bland’s conked “marcel” connotes the gradual widening of the gap between the masses and the black

bourgeoisie, whose desire for integration clashed with the radicalism of an emerging Black Power.¹⁵ In fact, the soul sister embodies the change in cultural representation of black pride and black identity, and especially for black women in nationalist rhetoric.¹⁶ Moreover, while referring to up-and-coming black female liberationists –who often subverted machismo language and black misogynist tropes –and other such black sisterhoods, the term “sister,” like its counterpart “brother,” also extends conceptual forms of address –initially church-based –that “emphasize solidarity and unity.”¹⁷

The inherent nationalism implied in the brother-sister denominations is what triggers activist members of Bland’s audience to reprimand him for his bourgeois integrationist denunciation of revolutionary nationalism:

one could say
you came back too many times
talking shit
over politics (25-28)

While Bland’s hairstyle betrays his class allegiances, his politics also affect the authenticity of his blues. Henderson’s speaker, as member of the audience, witnesses how Bland’s

¹⁵ For a discussion of the emergence of the Black Power concept, see Peniel E. Joseph’s introductory chapter in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil-Rights-Black Power Era*, 1-25 or his *Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America*. New York: Owl, 2007; Stokely Carmichael, *Ready for the Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael*. New York: Scribner, 2005.

¹⁶ For more on gender dynamics in literary nationalism, see Cherise A. Pollard, “Sexual Subversions, Political Inversions: Women’s Poetry and the Politics of the Black Arts Movement,” in *New Thought on the Black Arts Movement*, 173-186.

¹⁷ In Geneva Smitherman’s *Talkin and Testifyin*, 56-57.

performance does not elicit any response because he “*ain’t got no soul!*” (32). The absence of “soul” agencies highlights the fundamentality and foundational significance of developing both cultural consciousness and black-centered politics, thereby reclaiming individuality and community, both of which the Apollo audience cannot recognize in Bland’s performance.

Elsewhere in Henderson’s poetic figuration of Harlem in *De Mayor of Harlem*, the Apollo Theatre functions as both cultural center and as secular church. Thus, to memorialize Martin Luther King’s death, the Apollo houses a gospel “ritual” (line 14) presided over by Reverend James Cleveland and the Gospel Singers:

1

we were in the Apollo
 at the gospel show
 james cleveland broke down
 over the lords prayer
 sobs of women
 exploding all around
 echoing
 in the blue shell
 of the black theatre / (1-9)

 the only ritual
 we knew
 in those long days (15-17)

By allowing the gospel performance to coexist lyrically with poetic references (“blue shell,” “black theatre”) to Andy Razaf and Fats Waller’s politically coded ragtime “(What Did I Ever Do to Be So) Black and Blue,” Henderson’s stanza carefully interweaves secular and sacred in order to extend the ritualistic and cathartic dimension of the music to the entire black community –again, Blacks from all classes are invited to mourn the loss of another black leader. The musical allusion also invokes the spirit of Louis Armstrong’s griotism in the framework of Hughes’s *Ask Your Mama*. MLK’s death occasions remembrances of Malcom X (El Malik). Henderson even extends an invitation to Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam (NOI), whose disagreement with Malcolm X led to the latter’s split with the NOI, and whose organization has long been suspected of having plotted the murder.¹⁸ Once again, the trope of “unity-in-struggle” prevails over ideological differences in this nationalist context.

The vernacular ritual at the Apollo –“the only ritual” capable of transcending loss and suffering –is Henderson’s aesthetic correlative to the riots that followed news of MLK’s assassination:

and the
 death ceremonies of fire
 across the nation /
fires that cannot be put out
 cremation
 of king

¹⁸ For a discussion of the break between Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, see Dean E. Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought*, pp.34-50.

and all his kind
going with him (23-30)

The italicization of “*fires that cannot be put out*” confers to the “death ceremonies of fire” a significance beyond the actuality of the riots; Henderson underlines the tradition of resistance in ritualized aesthetic “ceremonies” that police repression and degrading politics have not been able to contain. The black “*fires*” also suggest the revolutionary impulse at the basis of the new music –rhythm and blues, soul, and free jazz, what Baraka calls “Unity music” (210)–that underscores the movement towards nationalisms.¹⁹ In “Keep on Pushin’: Rhythm and Blues as a Weapon,” Ronald Snellings, proclaims that,

[t]he Fire is spreading, the Fire is spreading, the Fire made from the merging of dynamic Black Music (Rhythm and Blues, Jazz), with politics (GUERRILLA WARFARE) is spreading like black oil flaming in Atlantic shipwrecks spreading like Black Fire (450-451)²⁰

In accordance with Snellings’s statement, the cultural nationalism inherent in ritualizations of artistry as resistance demands enactments of communal activism based on shared (hi)stories of experiential blackness.

Thus, the “secret of the blood/ across the nation” (34-35), which catalyzes revolutions in the streets as well as in song, morphs into affirmations of black brotherhoods:

¹⁹ In “The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music),” reproduced in *Black Music*, 180-211.

²⁰ Originally published in *The Liberator*, V (1965): 6-8. Reproduced in *Black Nationalism in America*, edited by John H. Bracey, Jr., August Meier, and Elliot Rudwick, 445-451.

5

brother
 you my boy
 if anybody fuck with you
 they got to fuck with me
 we are down together
 if they get to you
 they get to me
 too (62-69)

Such call for unity employs rhythm and blues as both primer *and* proselytizer of black vernacular culture. In fact, the sixth and final section of Henderson's elegy is infused with elements from the traditions of the spirituals ("mountain high/ valley low") and the folk spiritual of "Free at Las" ("he sang that song/ of glory") that informed MLK's seminal "I Have a Dream Speech."²¹ Simultaneously, Henderson draws from blues ethos and motifs:

what did he have to do
 to make him
 so black
 so blue (83-86)

²¹ "I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together" (1425). Anthologized in *Call& Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition*, pp.1423-1425.

The elegy inscribes MLK (and through memorialization, Malcolm X) within the all-inclusive anthem of “Many Thousand Gone.”²² Thus, by the end of the elegy, the dialectical tension between the political platforms of MLK, Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad is evocatively resolved, and therefore provides another instance of prospective nationalism based on aesthetic experience (secular/ sacred, blues/ spiritual-gospel, Malcolm X/ MLK).

II. Rhythm and Blues Politics: Conceptualizing the Harlem Riot of 1964 as a Map of Dreams Deferred and Kaleidoscope of Cultural Nationalism

Congruent with the fact that Henderson is considered as the “literary heir” of Hughes (Cole 167), is the notion that Henderson absorbs the socio-cultural Harlem landscape of Hughes’s poetry and infuses his poetics with the ethos of rhythm and blues, the black idiom that affirms “African American folk and existing urban forms” (Maultsby 248) through its fusion of jazz and blues.²³ For Henderson then, “Rhythm and Blues is now/

²² For Lorenzo Thomas, the eulogistic “Many Thousand Gone” echoes throughout Henderson’s “They are Killing All the Young Men.” In “The Shadow World: New York’s Umbra Workshop & Origins of the Black Arts Movement,” 61.

²³ Henderson notes the invaluable contributions and generous help of Langston Hughes. In Marcoux, Interview with David Henderson, 2008. Henderson also acknowledges and eulogizes Hughes in the poems “Sketches of Harlem,” “Do Nothing till You Hear from Me,” and “Harlem Xmas” in *De Mayor of Harlem*. He also dedicates his third volume of poems, *The Low East*, to Hughes.

it is the reality of our time” (49-50).²⁴ In “Walk with De Mayor of Harlem” (13-15), Henderson perceives Harlem as “black land/ -of rhythm n/ blues” (20-22) capable of historicizing the “black mass” (19). Accordingly, he conceptualizes rhythm and blues as both actual experience and a collection of lived experiences expressed lyrically and musically in/on black terms.²⁵ The coded songs, the artistic impetus to represent black life on black terms, the continuously renewed affirmation of black pride, and the music’s incorporation of secular and sacred black idioms make rhythm and blues a cultural construct that mirrors the ways in which Hughes theorized blues and jazz in his poems.

In “The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music),” Amiri Baraka states, “R&B is straight on and from straight back out of traditional Black spirit feeling” (201).²⁶ As “[black] people’s only music” rhythm and blues defies rigid hegemonic categorization; for Umbra member Ronald Snellings (now Askia Touré), rhythm and blues encapsulates blackness:

We didn’t call [rhythm and blues] “culture,” didn’t call it “negro art,” it was just OUR music, OUR soul, like OUR girlfriends, OUR comrades, OUR families who didn’t understand. It, again, was OUR voice, OUR ritual, OUR understanding of those deep things far too complicated to put into words (448-449)²⁷

²⁴ From the poem “They Are Killing All the Young Men,” in *Felix of the Silent Forest*.

²⁵ Marcoux, Interview with David Henderson, 2008.

²⁶ Reproduced in *Black Music*.

²⁷ See n.14.

As such, rhythm and blues functions as working (coded) language shared by Blacks engaged, actively or peripherally, in the struggles for freedom and equality.

Furthermore, in Snellings's theorization, rhythm and blues "language" becomes – lyrically, thematically, and idiomatically – a pidgin of black liberation appropriated by "PRIEST-PHILOSOPHERS" (446). Snellings avers that "[t]his attitude of the Black musician and poet as priest-philosopher goes back to the indigenous African civilizations, where the artist-priest had a functional role as the keeper or guardian of the spirit of the nation" (446). Thus, rhythm and blues "PRIEST-PHILOSOPHERS" are essentially griots whose philological palette poeticizes politics in the music. Henderson, in his rhythm and blues poetics, performs the task of the griot of Harlem and calls Blacks to unite against mendacious representations of blackness. This is especially true of Henderson's poems on the Harlem Riot of 1964 (e.g. "Keep on Pushing") wherein the poet as griot and oral historian walks Harlem, sees its effervescence, and reports its urge for self-definition.

As self-proclaimed "griot" poet David Henderson, born and raised in Harlem, had already internalized the soon-to-come Barakian notion of Harlem as "home" to Black America.²⁸ For instance, poems like "So We Went to Harlem" depict the relational and dialogic dimension of Harlem as locus of black identification. Henderson also understood the social and racial meanings of the 1964 riots as a turning point in the northern struggles. Using Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions' "Keep on Pushing" as both title and motif for

²⁸ Terry Joseph Cole cites a 1972 interview; Baraka's "City of Harlem," in *Home: Social Essays*, 87-93.

his poem, Henderson conceptualizes the song's key refrain as Harlem's symbolic call for black unity and resistance against the police's oppressive presence:²⁹

I

Lenox Avenue is a big street
 The sidewalks are extra wide –three and four times
 the size of a regular Fifth Avenue or East 34th
 sidewalk –and must be so to contain the
 unemployed
 vigiling Negro males,
 and police barricades.

The Police Commissioner can
 muster five hundred cops in five minutes
 He can summon extra
 tear-gas bombs / guns / ammunition
 within a single call
 to a certain general alarm / (31, lines 1-13)

 a shot a cry a rumor
 can muster five hundred Negroes

²⁹ Accordingly, in *Higher Ground*, Craig Werner quotes activist Gordon Sellers who stated that Mayfield's rhythm and blues "was warrior music...It was music you listened to while you were preparing to go into battle. Curtis inspired us, but he also took us to task. He was writing at a time we were struggling. But he knew we were struggling for the right things" (66). In positing Mayfield's music as call to battle, Sellers prefigures a more radical conceptualization of rhythm and blues as expressive of impending black revolution, which is diachronically linked with an emerging cultural nationalism in the North, concentrated especially in the metonymical Harlem.

from idle and strategic street corners
 bars stoops hallways windows
Keep on pushing. (17-21)

Henderson's image of Harlem sidewalks being "three or four times / the size of Fifth Avenue or East 34th" sidewalks –at the intersection of both stands the symbolic Empire State Building –to make room for the unemployed black Harlemites not only echoes Hughes's dream deferred motif, it also reveals the socio-economic schism between second-class Africans Americans and privileged Euro-Americans who have historically ascribed such status on Blacks. Nevertheless, the balance of power is re-established when the threat of another riot looms. While the "Police Commissioner" can "muster five hundred cops," "bombs / guns / ammunition" in "a single call," Black Harlem, here personified and embodying a black united front, can also "muster five hundred Negroes" under the rallying "cry" to "*Keep on pushing.*"

The central placement of the "cry" invokes the communicating devices of slave culture, which transplanted Africans of the Diaspora ritualized as meaningful shared language.³⁰ Moreover, as Marshall Stearns points out, "[w]ith the exception of the rhythm, perhaps the most important single element in the blues is the cry or holler, which has come to characterize much of jazz. It is part and parcel of the blue note and blue tonality" (99).³¹ Stearns's analysis of the cry reveals also the aesthetic theorization of the black continuum,

³⁰ Samuel A. Floyd lists the variations of the cry as well as their main functions, 46-48.

³¹ For a discussion of the influence of cries and hollers in blues, see also Levine 218-221.

within which African heritage informs and shapes African American vernacular.³² In Henderson's poem, the cry is dialogically linked with the musical motif of the poem: both cry and song reproduce an antiphonal structure that sustains black resistance and voices the ethos to be transcended ritually. Henderson's internalization of an aesthetic continuum rooted in Africa and subsequent use of the cry confirm his griot status, which he remodels constantly in the poem.

For instance, in the second section of the poem, Henderson adopts the guise of the griot-chronicler as he walks the Harlem streets the day after the riots. "Walking" Harlem, Henderson maps the geography of white presence in the urban ghetto, symbolized by the disproportionate police occupation. Here, "walking" becomes a creative action; it implies "writing" and sounding on the events:

II

I walk Harlem
 I see police eight to a corner
 crude mathematics
 eight to one
 eight for one
 I see the white storeowners and the white keepers
 and I see the white police force
 The white police in the white helmets
 and the white proprietors in their white shirts
 talk together and

³² For Levine, "the [cries] were a form of self-expression, the cry of an individual attempting to verbalize, or, more properly, vocalize his feelings" (219).

look around. (22-32)

The repetition of “white” in the imagery confers the idea of white domination of the black metropolis –a working trope Henderson employs metonymically to depict the landscape of America’s race relations. Euro-Americans own the stores; they are both “keepers” and “proprietors” of Harlemites. Acting as wardens, these “whites” regiment the vicious stratification of the black masses and regulate their economic subjugation to a system ruled by Euro-Americans “in their white shirts” –a symbolic costume that makes “the keepers” a northern extension of the southern Klan.

The “crude mathematics” of police occupation further denotes an overt campaign to prevent Blacks from organizing resistance, similar to what the Klan was doing during the civil rights movement’s drive toward black enfranchisement in the South. Implicit in the crudity of “eight-to-one” racial equation is the “primitive” scientific delineation of the octoroon, who, presumably, has one eighth of black blood in his/her ancestry.³³ What is repressed in the white occupants of Black Harlem is the fact White America’s ancestral blood is tainted by a history of miscegenation. It is worth noting that the KKK was the self-appointed “police” force in the South that served to protect white purity and prevent interracial contact. In Henderson’s Harlem, the stain of blackness or of black ancestry in the narrative of white superiority can only be sublimated by projections of apprehension upon

³³ For definitions of the quadroon and the octoroon, see Sterling Brown’s “Negro Character as Seen by White Authors,” 169-173; for an analysis of the context that yielded negative representations of black women, see Hazel Carby’s *Reconstructing Womanhood*, especially chapter I: “Woman’s Era: Rethinking Black Feminist Theory,” pp. 3-19.

the black urban landscape –projections that restate and reenact the racialism and racism symbolized in the immoderate “eight-to-one” equation. Thus, in *Black Harlem*, white occupants look to the ascribed irrationality and uncontrollability of Blacks for the responsibility of the riot, oblivious to their own historical role in creating the conditions that catalyzed rebellion.³⁴

In the fifth movement, Henderson chronicles how Harlemites revert to culture as means of coping with racialism, economic inequality, and police oppression. As griot, Henderson understands how Blacks encode performance to signify upon those who enforce discriminating racial measures. Moreover, Henderson, by providing a black journalistic perspective on the riots’ aftermath, is able to counterbalance the degradingly stereotypical representations of black performance that evokes the minstrel tradition:

V

At night Harlem sings and dances
 And as the newspapers say:
 they also pour their whiskey on one another’s heads.
 They dog and slop in the bars
 The children monkey in front of Zero’s Record Chamber
 on 116th and Lenox
 They mash potatoes and madison at the Dawn Casino,

³⁴ Here, Henderson, as both griot and black journalist precedes the conclusions of the *The Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* which states that “[w]hat white Americans have never fully understood –but what [black Americans] can never forget –is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it” (1). For more on the Report, also known as *The Kerner Commission Report*, see De Jongh 143.

Renaissance Ballroom, Rockland Palace, and the Fifth
Avenue Armory
on 141st and the Harlem River. (88-97)

Euro-American newspapers perceive African American singing and dancing as primitive expressions of blackness that entertains white America –these cultural misunderstandings and misconceptions have been present since slavery.

What these journalists fail to grasp is that black performance has been used historically to exorcize the evils of discrimination and, most importantly, to signify upon unknowing white audiences. For instance, while black music is hedonistic for Euro-America, it has remained the cultural core of black American existence through which history –cultural and ontological –has been forwarded. Thus, the reenactment of cultural miscomprehension by the newspaper reports in the poem prompts Henderson’s call for Harlemites to “-*Come out of your windows*” (98) and respond, subversively, to these misrepresentations of blackness. Here Henderson correlates Hughes’s conclusion in the section “Cultural Exchange” in that culture has *never* been a “TWO-WAY STREET.”

Hence, Henderson re-appropriates the meaning of “dog” and “monkey” and re-employs them to signify upon the white intelligentsia. In his black philological redress, “monkey” is “The Signifying Monkey,” the quintessential trickster who one-ups the mighty lion, king of the jungle.³⁵ The toast of “The Signifying Monkey” is a powerful metaphor for African Americans, who see in it potentials for subversion and indirect insult which allows

³⁵ For the different versions of the toast, see Jemie, *Yo’ Mama*, 189-206; for a thorough study of the toast as trope for revisionism, see Gates’s *The Signifying Monkey*, chapters 1 and 2.

them to laugh in the face of unsuspecting oppressors. Through signification, black Americans perfect the art of insult through “verbal indirection” and of “put-downs” (Smitherman, *Talkin’*, 118-119). Similarly, the verb “dog” subverts connotations of laziness to mean, instead, insult and to criticize through ritualized dancing.³⁶ To dog, then, is to signify.

In the poem, Henderson conceptualizes both verbs as vernacular put-downs which perform signification and affirm blackness. Black performers ritualize their art to claim their identity and humanity; in the process, they resist the degrading stereotypes forced on them by white racialists. Here, “Monkey” and “Dog” morph into cultural agencies whose “double-talk” (Snellings 446) subverts stereotypes of a black leisure class:

dancehalls, bars, grills Monkey Dog in the street
 like Martha and the Vandellas
 Dog for NBC
The Daily News and *The New York Times*
 Dog for Andrew Lyndon Johnson
 and shimmy a bit
 for “the boys upstate”
 and the ones in Mississippi

Cause you got your soul
Everybody knows...
Keep on Pushin’ (99-109)

³⁶ See Smitherman, *Black Talk*, 111.

The mention of Martha and the Vandellas's "Dancing in the Street" exemplifies the ways in which black Americans understand and interpret their culture. While for Euro-American audiences, the song is purely entertainment ("Dog for NBC"), for Henderson, as well as for emerging cultural nationalists Amiri Baraka and Rolland Snellings, the rhythm and blues song is anthemic of the mood of the Freedom Summer and correlates the encoded activism and call for revolution of Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions' "Keep on Pushing." In "The Changing Same," Baraka writes that, "[t]he Impressions' 'Keep on Pushin'" or Martha and the Vandellas' 'Dancing in the Streets (especially re: summer riots, i.e., 'Summer's here...') provided a core of legitimate social feeling, though mainly metaphorical and allegorical for Black people" (208). Snellings's contention echoes Henderson's politics in the poem and anticipates the radical cultural nationalism of the Black Arts Movement. In "Keep on Pushin': Rhythm and Blues as a Weapon," he also affirms that "Dancing in the Streets" is a "Riot-song" that reflect "angry Black souls" (449) and, thus, posits rhythm and blues as the music of the impending black revolution.³⁷ By underlining the potential of rhythm and blues to unite the black masses, Snellings –like Henderson –conceptualizes music as the instrumentality through which the black collective consciousness can be redefined and empowered.

³⁷ Snelling further states that, "Somewhere along the line, the "Keep on Pushin'" in song, in Rhythm and Blues is merging with the Revolutionary Dynamism of COLTRANE of ERIC DOLPHY of BROTHER MALCOLM of YOUNG BLACK GUERRILLAS STRIKING DEEP INTO THE HEARTLAND OF THE WESTERN EMPIRE" (450).

Moreover, in Henderson's kaleidoscope of cultural heroes, artists and political activists intersect and inform one another. As such, Martha and the Vandellas's "Dancing in the Streets," while embedded in the vernacular tradition of signifying, also becomes another instance of Barakian "Unity Music" that catalyzes the "consciousness of social reevaluation and rise."³⁸ Harlemites therefore "dog" for institutions and power structures that have historically misrepresented and miscomprehended the function of black performance. By signifying upon "NBC/ *The Daily News* and *The New York Times*," Black Harlem regains a measure of self-definition against entertainment and informational hegemonies that have represented blackness as performed minstrelsy, and Blacks only as minstrels. More importantly, as symbols of white power structures whose "ownership" (Thomas, "The Shadow World," 60) of mediums of representation is a continuation of hegemonic politics, *The Daily News* and *The New York Times* in Henderson's political map manipulate and delineate blackness like "Modern men of the old Confederacy."³⁹

The signifying "dogging" also extends to political ineffectuality to uphold constitutional promises. "Andrew Lyndon Johnson" –Henderson's historical construct – refers to the devastating political failures that have prevented black Americans from experiencing the freedom promised by emancipation. In post-bellum America, the administration of Andrew Johnson allowed "Black Codes" (1865-1866) to be implemented in the South in order to maintain African Americans under the chafe of slavery, the status

³⁸ In "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)," 210.

³⁹ From "They Are Killing All the Young Men," line 266.

of Blacks barely different despite emancipation. Reconstruction also failed to grant Blacks full participation in the body politic, through disenfranchisement practices that involved intimidation and violence backed by the Ku Klux Klan. Fundamentally, Johnson's administration allowed white supremacists in the South to punish free Blacks for "the greatest crime of Reconstruction," equality, which had been constitutionally ratified (Bennett 201).

Similarly, Lyndon B. Johnson, whose commitment to the cause of black civil rights should be noted, and whose "Great Society" was concerned about black life, was nevertheless unable to enforce, completely and significantly, the civil rights bill he passed in the months after succeeding John F. Kennedy. Segregation, poverty and racial discrimination were still prevalent, and measures to ensure the socio-economic equality and vitality of African Americans were largely dismissed; this, in turn, led to the inevitable immurement of Blacks in ghettos which became the environment of dissatisfied rioters. Also, Lyndon B. Johnson ardently pursued Communists at home and abroad, which was evident by the way his administration fought Communist-infused ideologies in black revolutionary rhetoric or in any ideological dissent as well as by how he tried to repress communist advance or trespassing in Vietnam. In essence, neither Andrew nor Lyndon Johnson contributed to end the African American dream deferred; both were more concerned with maintaining the ideals of the Great American Way of Life, for which NBC, The Daily News and The New York Times are agents of promotion.

To signify upon these hegemonies, using the trope of rhythm and blues, becomes a political assertion of revolutionary blackness that speaks about and for Black America. Hence, the rhythm and blues of “Dancing in the Streets” and “Keep on Pushing,” with its encoded defiance, is also performed (“shimmy”) for the incarcerated black activists (“the boys upstate” is a moniker) in upstate New York and for the Southern freedom movement (“the ones in Mississippi”) whose members had to endure intimidation, beatings and degrading measures at the hands of white supremacists, in order to secure black enfranchisement and desegregation. Thus, the “Keep on Pushing” leitmotif encompasses this vectorial blackness within the collectively shared “*soul*” –the construct which contains the ontological assumption about blackness that “*Everybody knows*” (108) from experience.

Henderson crystallizes these assumptions in the final movement of the poem, which synthesizes the black struggle in a white-dominated society. Henderson, as griot-chronicler of the riot’s aftermath, sits in “Baron’s Fish & Chip Shack” (111) –a quintessentially Harlem locale –and reads “The *Journal-American*” (113) which exemplifies the exploitative and yellowed journalism of white information hegemonies:

headlines promise EXCLUSIVE BATTLE PHOTOS
by a daring young photographer they call Mel Finkelstein
through him they insure “The Face of Violence –The
Most Striking Close-ups” / (114-117).

Finkelstein, famous for his seemingly staged photos –after all, he did “shoot” a murdered woman whose head faced a billboard that said “All are welcome here” –typifies the distortions that plague representations of Black Harlem. In Finkelstein’s photos, Harlem’s

black mass is “The Face of Violence” and bears the responsibility of the riots, thus alleviating the imputability of the Euro-American socio-economic oppression that created the context that led to black uprisings. Henderson therefore opposes the New Thing that is rhythm and blues as cultural counter-argument against the photo’s erroneous portrayal of Black Harlem. The music’s “soul” authenticates the scope of its performativity.

In the same grain, WWRL, “the radio station that serves/ the Negro community” (118-119) by playing rhythm and blues, was, notwithstanding, owned by white radio magnate Egmont Sonderling who acquired it in January of 1964. Moreover, as riots began to erupt across urban Black America, these white owners of “soul stations” like Sonderling began to be “tagged as carpetbaggers, and [black] activists demanded that black radio reflect the community's surging desire for more control over their own news and entertainment.”⁴⁰ Sonderling’s commercialization of black music for capitalist purposes evokes an overt tradition of white co-optation of black culture whose hypocritical designs Henderson highlights. Appropriately, in Henderson’s poem, WWRL schedules a “lecture series on Democracy” (123) which propagandizes the agenda of political hegemonies and tries to assuage and, ultimately, thwart the revolutionary impulses of an angry black America.

⁴⁰ Taken from Marc Fisher’s “360 Degrees of Black Experience, the Ebony Lifestyle System, and Washington's Moment in Black Radio History.” Retrieved from the archives of the Washington Post at: http://voices.washingtonpost.com/rawfisher/2007/01/360_degrees_of_black_experienc.html. Fisher expands his arguments on WWRL in *Something in the Air: Radio, Rock, and the Revolution That Shaped a Generation*. New York: Random House, 2007. 204-206.

Moreover, Henderson re-invokes the “crude mathematics” of previous movements in order to link “the broadcaster” (124) of the lecture series –a mouthpiece for political galvanization of Euro-American supremacy –with both police forces that occupy Harlem and the U.S. military that occupies Korea, “(eight to one he’s white, representing management)” (125). This linkage is based primarily on Henderson’s aural ability to recognize “soul” in the voicing of the broadcaster who “doesn’t sound soulful” (124); it is the same antiphonal auralty that allows Henderson to decode in rhythm and blues portals to liberation. For Henderson, “soulessness” is a metaphor for Euro-American doctrinaires who enforce relentless oppression and racially discriminating politics, which the broadcaster, appropriating the black voice, expresses:

We Negroes are usually warned of the evils of Communism
 and the fruits of Democracy / but this evening [the series’s
 broadcaster] tells us
 that/ in this troubled time we must keep our heads
 and our Law
 and our Order (and he emphasizes order)
 he says violence only hurt (and he emphasizes hurts)
 the cause of freedom and dignity/ He urges the troubled
 restless residents of Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant to stay in
 their homes, mark an end to the tragic and senseless violence
 a pause
 then he concludes
 “Remember
 this is the land of the free”
 and a rousing mixed chorus ends with the majestic harmony of

“AND THE HOME OF THE BRAVE...” (126-140)

The broadcaster’s “lecture” is permeated with historical amnesia. When he concludes that the United States is “the land of the free,” the broadcaster (un-)consciously “forgets” that at the same time in the South, black voters’ registration is constantly threatened by racist resistance. In fact, when transposed onto the terrain of the Southern Freedom movement, the broadcaster’s advice could apply to white supremacists who employ violence and intimidation to prevent Blacks from being enfranchised and thus change social order. The “law and order” platform merely reinforces the rhetoric of power structures whose conceptualization of freedom entails control of dissidents from the Great American Way.

By underscoring the historical absurdity of the lecture series, whose patriotic rhetoric recurs “every hour on the hour” (142) in attempts to brainwash black Harlemites to the glory of democracy, Henderson gives ideological credence to revolutionary impulses encoded in rhythm and blues. Henderson further underpins the potential of rhythm and blues as chronicle of black struggles; when the lecture series ends and “Rhythm n Blues returns/ a flaming bottle bursts on Seventh Avenue/ and shimmies the fire across the white divider line” (143-145). The simultaneity and correspondence of returning music and renewed urban warfare again recall Snellings’s contention that black Americans “are a defiant, spirited people who have a history of over three hundred years of constant slave revolts, in which [black] music played a vital role” (447). Yet, as another riot seems about to hit the streets, police forces mobilize to undercut the rioters: “*there will be no Passover this night/* and then again the gunfire high” (154-155).

To counterbalance the oppressive police occupation, Henderson points to WWRL's Jocko Henderson, whose nighttime rhythm and blues programming provided an outlet for Blacks who wanted to reconnect with their roots in blackness: "zealous Jocko coos forward/ his baroque tongue" (167-168). Jocko's "baroque tongue" is a mixture of onomatopoeic sounding, rhyming, and bop scatting.⁴¹ Firmly grounded in the vernacular tradition, Jocko's "baroque tongue" is the language of the talking drums, a ritualized atavism David Henderson recognizes in a shared cultural memory.

In the poem "Jocko for Music and Dance" (58), Henderson analogously identifies Jocko as griot of African cultural history:

sometimes Jocko is the only person I know
the only person from my past who offers memory
without propaganda

let me speak of tribal ritual & dance
let me declare Jocko my atavistic purveyor of tribal tunes
and gossip –

the medicine man who strings the tendons of memory incarnate (9-15)

Henderson portrays Jocko as cultural hero who moonlights as trickster hustling "wine & compoz" (16) and shamanic "contraband from the ghetto" (22) "in front of Harlem Hospital" (18). Nevertheless, as "medicine man" for the black masses, Jocko's true remedy

is to play “James Brown back to back” (17). Again, Henderson restates the centrality of black music in the mapping of both blackness and cultural memory. For Henderson, Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions, Martha and the Vandellas, and James Brown all partake in the dialogic interlinkings between music and freedom movements.

Significantly, the closing refrain of “Keep on Pushing” reappraises the communality of the song: “*we can make it/ With just a little bit of soul*” (176-177). In the choice of the pronoun “we” in the poem’s closing refrain, Henderson gestures towards a nationalistic platform heralding black unity and resistance that employs soul as “signifier of blackness” (Maultsby, “Soul,” 272). Channeling the spirit of Curtis Mayfield’s politically-charged “People Get Ready,” Henderson calls for the Black Diaspora to come together and counter the ravaging publicity of the riots. This nation-building paradigm –black collective “soul” in action –operates dialogically with its cultural performativities. Whether it is through rhythm and blues or, as we shall see in the section, jazz, this paradigmatic soul always functions as an objective correlative to the black aesthetic.⁴²

III. Jazz Sounds and Decorations: Tone and Improvisation as Thematic and Structural Devices in Henderson’s Poetry.

⁴¹ William Barlow, in *Voice Over: The Making of Black Radio*, explains how “[t]he practice of rhyming, part of the black oral tradition, was especially appealing to [Jocko] Henderson’s African American audience” (143).

⁴² See n.6 for Van Deburg’s definition of “soul” in relation to its folk embeddings in the black aesthetic.

In “Jazz Prosodies: Orality and Textuality,” Meta Du Ewa Jones discusses the critical debate that has prevailed about the transposition of black speech and/or music on the page. Citing Brent Hayes Edwards’s question, “How does literature ‘write music’?” (66) as point of departure, Jones navigates the problematic of representing authentically black speech and black music in black poetry.⁴³ While she aligns herself with critics and poets who recognize “the intrinsic interconnection between orality and literacy as an essential element of a Black aesthetic” (66), Jones also elaborates a critical platform that focuses on “the *visual* performance of jazz-influenced texts as indicative of poets’ unique approaches to scripting African-American musical and verbal sound” (67). Later in the essay, she invokes the critical contributions of Stephen Henderson, Aldon Lynn Nielsen, and Fahamisha Brown in delineating an “approach to examining orthographic depictions of orality in African-American poetry” (70). For instance, Nielsen, drawing from Stephen Henderson’s contention that poetic language should be firmly anchored in black speech and black musical idioms, avers that New Black Poets like David Henderson were “intent upon locating a black aesthetic in traditions of black orality and musical improvisation” (9).⁴⁴ Brown, in *Performing the Word*, believes that African American poems are “written

⁴³ Edwards’s introductory essay provides the foundation of the special issue on jazz poetics of *Callaloo* 25.1 (2002).

⁴⁴ In *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic Reference*, Henderson states,

“[S]tructurally speaking, however, whenever Black poetry is most distinctly and effectively Black, it derives its form from two basic sources, Black speech and Black music. It follows, then, if this is correct, that any serious appreciation or understanding of it must rest upon a deep and sympathetic knowledge of Black music

analog[s]” to musical and speech performances. It is undeniable, like Stephen Henderson contends and David Henderson confirms, that the New Black Poetry that began with Umbra, is informed by the language of Black America. What have not received sufficient critical attention are the African retentions deeply embedded in both black speech and black musical performance, especially in jazz.

While the previous sections dealt with how Henderson infused his cultural nationalist poetry with rhythm and blues themes and idioms, the following sections will analyze Henderson’s use of jazz idioms –jazz being the “other” favored musical idiom of the New Black Poetry –in his poetry. By doing so, Henderson anticipates the Black Arts movement’s theorization of free jazz as the sound of Black Nationalism.

Henderson has mentioned that, unconsciously perhaps, his use of tonal language might be one of the retentions from African oral traditions.⁴⁵ Henderson’s involvement with language –which, he admits, derives primarily from Hughes’s development of a jazz-infused parlance –indicates how his poetry partakes in cultural explorations of African American linguistic traditions.⁴⁶ Tonal language in Henderson’s poems further suggests his understanding of the crucial intersections within the vernacular. Phonologically, poems like “Marcus Garvey Parade” for instance, employ the syncretism of African talking drums,

and Black speech and –let us be plain –the Black people who make the music and who make the speech” (30-34); see the first chapter of *Black Chant*, “The Calligraphy of Sound,” 3-37.

⁴⁵ Marcoux, Interview, 2008.

⁴⁶ Marcoux, Interview, 2008; see for instance Hughes’s use of scat phrases in *Montage of a Dream Deferred* or his exploration of the dozens as textual framework in *Ask Your Mama*.

especially the tonalities involved in the percussive performances of language. Let us go then to a stanza from “Marcus Garvey Parade”:

to realize by racial ancestry
 keen screaming genes & bloodcells
 that 400 years has little truck
 in the million years age span of man
 poor people yes
 black mass
 since first slave
 indeed african (37-44)

In this passage, alliterative interplays and tonal inflections between “s” and “n” consonant sounds suggest the thematic vocalization of the black experience in America; millions of Blacks have their ancestry in the devastating transplantation of masses of Africans who became slaves in America. The phonological connection between “million,” “man,” “african” affirms that the (black) “mass,” ever “since [the] first slave,” have been oppressively predetermined to remain “poor people yes.”

Structurally, the alternations between capitalized passages and passages in lower cases accentuate the tonal differentiations between the “BLACK & GOLD UNIFORMED BLACKS BLASTING/ DRUMS SOUND/ BLASTING” (6-8) and the Harlem onlookers who are “blasted” by the drums.⁴⁷ These tonal changes punctuate the poem as the Garveyites march on. Moreover, tonal changes enhance the polyrhythmic quality of the poem; both marchers and onlookers participate in an antiphonal ritual where each crowd is

sustained, rhythmically and thematically, by the another. Thus, the structural decrescendo at the end of the stanza provides a rhythmic counterpart to the thematic organization of the poem; here, Henderson's truncated lines end with an affirmation of racial identification.

Walter Ong, echoing the findings of Dr. John F. Carrington, notes that "talking drums...through Africa imitate words by imitating their tones" (414). Emphasizing the necessity of a tonal language for talking drums that "uses pitch to distinguish words," Ong also contends that drums not always "reproduce the tones of words, not the vowel or consonant sounds as such" (414). Cole cites an interview in which Henderson defines his music-infused poetry as "the language of the man of the moment; it's improvised; it's street language...African 'talking drums' –the basis of jazz –were one of the first mass communications systems. People related to those rhythms in a unified way" (169). In his poetry, Henderson reformulates African tonal language into tonal inflections that he uses to create different "soundings" of his poems. The opening lines of "poem" (117) for instance show how meaning can be multiplied when the pitch during a tone is placed on different words:

poem
 tone place poem
 about that blues bip bop
 upside my head (1-4)

or in "Big Red" (118):

tome tone tone

⁴⁷ For a brief definition of tonal differentiations, see Ong 415.

tone red fuzz of fire
 jackal head
 machine gun tongue
 hot words go upside
 yo head.
 big red now dead (1-7)

In the first case, “tone place poem” all converge their meanings –individual and collective – in the “blues.” The poem situates the birth of the blues in the South, “in the mist of Bessie Smith” (8) and in the spirit of “a marching band/ over the delta land” (25-26). The “poem” that emerges from Bessie Smith’s tonal quality, from her blues origins in the racist South, is a blues poem that serves as basis for all African American poetry. It is the poetic history that informs “bop,” thereby revealing how (be)bop reinstated the blue note that Smith perfected.

Additionally, through the tonal inflections of “tone place poem” whereby each word has a pitch of its own, Henderson suggests linguistically the idiomatic genesis of black American jazz in blues –music in this case becomes a natural extension of an encoded communicative language that “worries the line.”⁴⁸ Whether the pitch falls on the first, second or third word determines which tonal “decoration” Henderson draws from to convey

⁴⁸ Stephen Henderson defines “worrying the line” in these terms, “This is the folk expression for the device of altering the pitch of a note in a given passage or for other kinds of ornamentation often associated with melismatic singing in the Black tradition. A verbal parallel exists in which a word or phrase is broken up to allow affective or didactic comment” (33).

his meaning.⁴⁹ For example, if “tone” is emphasized, Henderson achieves a tonal “attack” or “scoop” which “consists of starting the sound near the tone’s pitch, going below it, and working back up to it before giving the tone its full duration” (Gridley 51). Or, if “place” and/or “poem” tonally work up into a crescendo, then Henderson creates a tonal decoration called “smear” which is achieved by “approaching the desired pitch from a pitch that is well below it, [and] then gradually rising to the desired pitch” (51). Finally, if “poem” is the only word emphasized tonally, the decoration becomes a “doit” which in “jazz instrumental practice is a rise in pitch at the end of a tone” (51). These examples show the realms of African-derived tonal languages that inform African American languages, both linguistically and musically.

In “Big Red,” Henderson employs tonal changes, alliterations and internal rhymes to convey the musicality of Malcolm X’s rhetoric.⁵⁰ While the opening line riffs on the sonority of the “tom-tom of revolt,” the “tone red fuzz of fire” transcends sonically the enjambment to qualify Malcolm X’s revolutionary words.⁵¹ The alliterative coalescence of “fuzz of fire” also serves to describe how Malcolm X’s “machine gun tongue” and “hot words” galvanized the black masses. Just like “blues bip bop” of “poem,” Malcolm X’s “hot words” “go upside” the “head” of Black Americans; both blues and revolutionary

⁴⁹ For definitions, graphics and applications, see the important *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis* 3rd ed., by Mark C. Gridley, 50-52.

⁵⁰ Larry Neal, in “On Malcolm” from *Visions of a Liberated Future*, discusses the musicality of Malcolm X’s “sense of poetry,” 125. I discuss this in more details in the last section of this chapter.

⁵¹ I refer to Hughes’s image of jazz in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.”

rhetoric are rooted in the black vernacular traditions, which black masses have used to transcend degradation and dehumanization. Henderson's recurrent use of hard consonants or stops (b, p, d) further evokes the correlation between the revolutionary rhetoric and the syncopated sounds of the New Music. Accordingly, Malcolm's rhetoric, deeply ingrained in the spirit of blues idioms like, for instance, Ornette Coleman or John Coltrane's free jazz, becomes:

sound waves [that] break sound barriers
 broke
 light years
 of fear (10-13)

Henderson also reverts to atypical stanzaic organization, irregular spacing, and recurrently uses diagonals or forward slashes within his lines in order to signal breaks, pauses, and/or tonal changes, thereby reproducing poetically the improvisational and syncopated nature of jazz.

In the cases of "Psychedelic Fireman" (27-30) and "by day harlem blue sky" (43) these poetic techniques help convey the theme of white America's socio-economic negligence of black masses. Henderson thus uses jazz idioms to refigure the themes of rhythm and blues poems, thereby gesturing towards the free jazz future envisioned by theorists of the black aesthetic. The last stanza of "Psychedelic Fireman" illustrates how Henderson deploys these techniques to show how cultural "others" have been relegated, historically, to the roles of subordinated nations *à la solde* of white hegemonies. Note

especially how the structure of the stanza evokes the chaos of these nations' regimented existence:

WHILE
 thru Harlem fire rages water cycles
 weekends of fun/ partying/ burning flesh
 this thanksgiving
 for the natives who hunt for the feast
 but do not partake/
 silent natives screaming
 thru western guns swords axes
 tall tenor saxophones
 blaring black trumpets/ pages of swords (91-100)

The contrastive imageries reveal Henderson's commentary about the meaning of Thanksgiving for both African Americans and Native Americans. Thanksgiving, in this case, celebrates Euro-America's material and spiritual superiority that was built on the backs and at the expense of those who "do not partake" in the celebration. As such, Henderson perceives the Harlem riots as another devastating proof of socio-economic exclusion. The disjointed stanzaic organization with the breaks, atypical enjambments, and irregular rhythms suggest Black American and Native American struggles to cope with such denial; their existence has been fragmented by a history of subjugations which Blacks, for instance, try to negotiate through performance ("tenor saxophones," "blaring black trumpets"). Such fragmented histories require substantial remembering processes that only culture –embodied by black musicians in the poem –can provide.

Similarly, with “by day harlem blue sky” Henderson probes white America’s historical devaluation of urban black life:

only the planes

high jettison smoke

high / mighty

possible public safety gesture

of administration / military / industry

cartel / to fly as much air

traffic over harlem

proper possible

in event of catastrophe

planes tumbling on welfare areas

the last perimeter

black mass dispensable / (5-16)

Diagonal slashes are used to mark sharp phonetic breaks that imitate breaks in jazz composition; the slashes strengthen the conjoining of the “high / mighty,” whose dominance reverberates in other important sectors (“administration / military / industry”). White America’s control of society is a “cartel,” whose power is dialectically opposed by the “welfare areas” it oppresses. Henderson’s use of enjambments further suggests white capitalists’ encroachment upon Black Harlem, “the last perimeter” for Black America. Therefore, it is possible to assert that Henderson employs punctuation, spacing, irregular lines, and alternating tonalities to enhance his thematic developments in a way that resembles the improvisational structures of jazz composition. His structural innovations,

like jazz improvisational composition, riff on established themes, which are rephrased and reformulated in an ongoing process of revision or Gatesian signifying.

For Henderson, improvisation is “a philosophy” and “a belief system” that can both innovate and create new meanings through an “exploration of the [black collective] unconscious.”⁵² “Purely exemplified by jazz,” improvisation exists beyond established rules for Henderson and, subsequently provides an important metaphor for coded expressions of dissidence from white orthodoxy.⁵³ That is not to say that improvisation is essentially a political act in Henderson’s poetry. From his explanations, one can deduce that he speaks about improvisation primarily in aesthetic terms. Like most New Black poets, Henderson was invested in free jazz and often politicized the meaning of the music in his poetry. He collaborated with Sun Ra and Ornette Coleman, two important avant-garde jazz musicians. He contributed the lyrics for “Love in Outer Space” for the former, and recited his free verse poetry on the latter’s “Science Fiction” from the 1971 CBS release of the same title.⁵⁴

Of the two, the Coleman collaboration is the most interesting. In his brief discussion of the collaboration, Nielsen notes how the construction of Henderson’s lyrics or “jazz-text” (186) follows Coleman’s aesthetics of harmolodic composition, which, according to bassist Charlie Haden, means “a constant modulation in the improvising that was taken from the direction of composition, and from the direction inside the musician, and from

⁵² See Marcoux, Interview with David Henderson, 2008.

⁵³ Ibid.

listening to each other” (qtd. in Neilsen 185). This rather incomplete definition –which Coleman never completed himself –nevertheless contains the dialogic framework within which composition *happens* as performance does. The synchronicity of writing and performing yields the poem in Henderson’s work; the poetic process seeks to reproduce through free verse the seemingly directionless compositional structure of free jazz improvisation.

Improvisation as a poetic technique is especially important to the structure and theme of the longer poems. Take for instance the poem “Walk with De Mayor of Harlem” (13-15). In order to demonstrate the cultural meaning of improvisation in Henderson’s poem, I subscribe to Ingrid Monson’s and Paul Berliner’s conceptualizations of jazz improvisation as conversation.⁵⁵ In jazz improvisation, interaction between musicians is crucial to composition. One musician will begin with a statement or posit a motif that the rest of the ensemble will pick up on and expand. This “trading of musical ideas,” Monson believes, stresses the “interpersonal, face-to-face quality of improvisation” (78). In the poem, the first line provides such motif: “enter harlem.” And, the subsequent conversation between the poet who has “entered” Harlem and “De Mayor” who represents it provides an example of “face-to-face” exchange that Henderson refracts when it enters the textual realm of the poem. Thus, by entering Harlem, the poet allows interactions with the Mayor and with Harlem to be portals to creation. The irregular line constructions and the different

⁵⁴ Anthologized on *The Singles*, 1996.

⁵⁵ See Monson, *Saying Something*, 73-96; Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, 348-386.

tones of the opening stanza suggest the unmediated impressions of the poet as he walks and see the immediacy of Harlem life. In that case, the poem becomes an impressionistic reflection of Harlem that resists mediation and literary embellishments. Thematically then, the way he infuses the structure and themes of his poems with improvisation suggest that he theorizes it as an assertion of inherent blackness.

The poet's desire to present Harlem in its immediacy can be compared to how improvisation achieves its fullest expression when composing *in the moment*:

please close the doors please
 before the madness of washington heights
 disembark / silent moot of black vectors
 to sunder this quarter
 thru

 black mass
 black land

 -of rhythm n
 blues & fish of jesus frying across the boardwalk
 snake dancers walk mojo along the bouevards
 sight for those
 who live away
 a new land! (14-26)

To re-create the experience of the train, Henderson includes the monotonic voice in the symbolic Ellingtonian “‘A’ train” (3) demanding to “*please close the doors please*” (14) and to “*disembark*” (16). Because these interjections are part of “entering” Harlem, their

suffusion in the poem is only normal; their intricacies sustain interactive exchanges between experience and composition (of the poem as textual representation). As such, these intricacies, like the “‘A’ train,” are conduits that lead to another realm of cultural conversation. In fact, as he synchronously notices that the “black land” (20) is “a new land!” (26), the poet also realizes that Harlem is a collection of “streets just like you” (30) with blackness working as unifier between geography and ontology. Moreover, in the synchronicity between racial identification and poetic composition lies Henderson’s aforementioned concept of improvisational exploration of the black collective unconscious. The poet’s racial (re)identification to Harlem occurs through an improvised journey –a journey that began with the motif “enter harlem” –in an environment that defeats all preconceived notions and images of the black metropolis as exemplified by the recurrence of “find no” (35, 52), “find only” (43) and “find not” (53).

What began then as a conversation between “De Mayor” and the poet not only becomes a conversation between the poet and Harlem –wherein poetic language and language of the “streets” (e.g. “asayin”) interact –but also a conversation between the poet and his African heritage, which returns him to the etymology of his own blackness:

talk to me talk to me
 tell me like it is
 the memory of sky watch
 sun dance drum chant body-ruba
 taut are the signals thru the skin
 thru bones
 hard as the forgotten legions

of
the giant bushmen (61-69)

While it is the “walk with de mayor of harlem” (51) that generates the spontaneous composition, it is the “talk” that elicits a cultural dialogue. The poet’s demands for conversation engender a ritualized response (“sun dance,” “drum chant”). In fact, the spacing and brevity of the terms of the ritual evoke the rhythms of both talking drums and jazz syncopation. Thus, when the poet clamors for “talk,” he conjures up the talking drums; the “taut signals” beaten on the skins of drums denote a communal language that affirms a common cultural heritage in Africa. Moreover, the rhythms of the drums become the “talk,” while black Harlem becomes a symbolic extension of Africa. It is therefore through improvisation –exploratory and conversational –that Henderson’s notion of the black collective unconscious is probed and racial identification re-inscribed.

Structurally and thematically, “Walk with De Mayor of Harlem” can be analyzed as a series of solo flights that take as point of departure the motific entry in Harlem. Tonally and rhythmically, the poem also elides any attempt at conventional scansion; it exists as a textual representation of experiential composition. The poem “Theolonius Monk Sphere” (104) provides another example. The opening stanza about Monk’s return “home” becomes a pretext for improvisational bebop composition that is dialogically paralleled by Henderson’s poetic rendition of the musician’s avant-gardism. Many of Henderson’s longer poems in *Felix of the Silent Forest* and *De Mayor of Harlem* possess the same improvisational qualities. Among them are: “They Are Killing All the Young Men,” “Bopping” (16-17), “So We Went to Harlem” (18-21), “Pope Arrives in New York City,

Broadway Hustlers go Wild” (22-24), “Psychedelic Fireman” (27-30), “Keep on Pushing” (31-36), “A Documentary on Airplane Glue” (49-50), “Elvin Jones Grestch Freak” (52-55), “Columbia University Rag” (87-89), and “Pentecostal Sunday / A Song of Power” (101-103).

IV. A Way through the Critical Mist: Polyrhythms in “Elvin Jones Grestch Freak”

The purpose of this section is to demonstrate that the rhythmic complexity of the long poems listed at the end of the previous section originates from Henderson’s (un)conscious use of polyrhythm. In “interweaving,” layering or juxtaposing often “contrasting rhythmic patterns,” Henderson is able to reproduce poetically the complex sounds of jazz –and through lineage of African drums.⁵⁶ Polyrhythm can be defined as “a several different rhythms sounding at the same time” (Gridley 404). Inherent in polyrhythmic performance is the notion of multiple strands of rhythms dialoguing, intersecting, contrasting and informing one another: such dialogic structures evoke antiphonal patterns. Polyrhythm is a dominant aspect of African music; its transposition is

⁵⁶ For technical examples of African polyrhythms and definitions, see <http://www.ancient-future.com/africa.html>. The site specializes in ethnomusicology and is recognized for teaching and trainings in world music.

black American jazz is a fundamental retention and constitutes a foundational aesthetic for jazz drummers and percussionists.⁵⁷

One poem that typifies Henderson's typographical approach to polyrhythm is "Elvin Jones Grestch Freak" (52-55). Henderson uses polyrhythm as poetic technique by juxtaposing various narrative strands with each having rhythmic significance in the general compositional organization of the poem. Allowing his narrator to perform polyvocalic lines, Henderson disengages with poetic conventions of meter, rhyme, and stanza. Instead, Henderson proposes a new typography that reproduces the immediacy of jazz performance as well as its reception by the audience. Like Hughes's narrator in "The Weary Blues," Henderson's narrator, as a member of the audience –a working metonymy for the black community –creates the poem from a visceral response; the words emerge out of and respond to the sounds of the musicians. It is through this call-and-response pattern, wherein typography is in continuous dialogue with musicality, that Henderson's black poem is written as the music is played. Analogous to both written and musical performances are the realms of black experiences that act as referents.⁵⁸

In the poem, Elvin Jones, the drummer of the John Coltrane Quartet, is the agency that links African drums and jazz percussive techniques. Henderson's prefatory note for the

⁵⁷ For more on African polyrhythm, see Simha Arom, *African Polyphony and Polyrhythm: Musical Structure and Methodology*. Cambridge UP, 1991; David Locke, *Drum Gahu: An Introduction to African Rhythm*. Tempe, AZ: White Cliffs Media, 1998.

⁵⁸ In *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, Stephen Henderson describes this polyphony of referents as "Soul-Field" or "the complex galaxy of personal, social, institutional, historical, religious, and mythical meanings that affect everything [Blacks] say or do as Black people sharing a common heritage" (41).

poem indicates that “GRETSCHE is outstanding on his bass drum that faces the audience.” Interestingly, Elvin Jones is nicknamed after his drums (Gretsch); he takes on the identity of *a* talking drum –his bass drum marks rhythm like African drums –thereby transfiguring the polyvocality of his jazz statements into his polyrhythmic drumming.⁵⁹ In thus presenting Jones, Henderson suggests a fusion of ways of speaking. As “the real inaugurator of new percussion playing” (Jost 61) and “polyrhythmic innovator” (Kofsky 201), Jones’s revolutionary drumming opens an evocative vista for the audience, symbolized in the poem by the narrator. Poetic and musical languages merge and interconnect to create an experiential language that conjures up the black (jazz) ethos subsumed in the trope of Harlem. For instance, Jones’s polyrhythmic drumming transforms the Half Note into an agency of vectorial jazz sound that travels from Greenwich Village back to Harlem:

The Half Note should be
 a basemen café like the “A” train
 Jazz/ drums of gretsch
 on the fastest and least stopping
 transportation scene in NYC
 subways are for gretsch
 “A” train long as a long city block
 the tenements of the underground rails

⁵⁹ Gretsch drums appeared in 1883 and became a staple of quality for generations of black drummers from Art Blakey to Max Roach and Elvin Jones. See the section “Great Gretsch Ambassadors” at <http://www.gretsch.com/newsletter/0701a.html>.

(lines 5-12)

Here, Jones's rhythmic postulation evokes the rhythms of the "A" train's engines. Symbolically, these polyrhythms –of the drums and of the train –that travel "the underground rails" back to Harlem, re-historicizes the Underground Railroad as conduit to black liberation. Once again, much like he did with the refrain in "Keep on Pushing," Henderson the griot employs jazz as a way to perform history.

The mention of the "A" train immediately also brings to mind the opening lines of "Walk with De Mayor of Harlem" in which the train provides access to the core of Harlem life ("enter harlem"). Thus, Jones's "Jazz/ drums of gretsch," like the mythical "A" train to Harlem's nexus, become a ritualized "transportation scene" that reaffirms the centrality of black music in effecting momentary transcendence. Moreover, the polyrhythms in the music and the engines converge in assertions of blackness; in the homophony of train and 'Trane, Henderson surmises cultural dialogues informed by the black urban experience.

Typographically, Henderson uses calculated spacing to reproduce the cadence of the train stopping at the various stations of the "A" line. In so doing, Henderson changes the rhythmic structure of the poem so that it parallels the train's circuit:

		west 4 th		
		34 th	42 nd	125 th
		farther down in the reverse		
				local at the west 4 th
waterfront	warehouse	truck / produce	vacant	
the half note	(13-18)			

Once again, both train and Trane's music –via the agency of Jones's drum –cross-fertilize and intersect rhythmically: “speeding cars noisy/ noiseless/ speeding gretsch” (25-26).⁶⁰ Moreover, in the dialectics of “noisy/ noiseless,” Henderson inscribes his poetic work.⁶¹ While the speeding train and the rhythmically frantic drums are “noisy” –their “noises” are in these cases creative and generative –Henderson's poem, which is informed by both, figuratively and evocatively, is a “noiseless” performance of noise performed. The poem then becomes a textual rendition of an improvised jazz composition. Benston's claim that Henderson wrote the poem in one “breathless take” and that it has remained “splendidly unrevised” supports this idea (152).

The trope of creative exchange between Coltrane and Jones, between the Quartet and its audience from “THE QUARTERS,” as well as between the aural and the textual, is further substantiated by Henderson's comparison of the jazz performance to sexual intercourse. Using the “‘jazzed body’ as medium of restless expressivity” (Benston 152), Henderson re-conceptualizes jazz ideation as a coded site analogous to sexual (pro)creation, which subverts preconceived notions of black sexuality:

Elvin Jones the man behind the pussy
 four men love on a stage
 the loud orgy
 gretsch trembles and titters
gretsch is love
gretsch is love

⁶⁰ Benston, *Performing Blackness*, 153.

⁶¹ See also Benston, who sees this dialectics as “antimeanings,” 152.

gretsch is love

Elvin's drum ensemble the aggressive cunt
 the feminine mystique
 cymbals tinny clitoris resounding
 lips snares flanked encircling
 thumping foot drum peter rabbit the fuck take
 this and take that (27-39)

Coltrane sane / cock the forceps
 the fox and the hare
 the chase
 screaming and thumping (44-47)

In these passages, sexual intercourse and musical interplay and interaction undergird compositional aesthetics.⁶² It is in the “take/ this and take take,” a musical dialogue between rhythm and melody, that the jazz piece gestates. The typography of these lines also implies the rhythm of the sexual intercourse in which bodies challenge each other in a ritual of creation. The compositional process or “the chase,” largely depends on the ideation and inspiration provided by “resounding,” “encircling,” “thumping,” and “screaming.” The orgasmic “screaming” then suggests the end of a movement and the beginning of another in the composition, thereby refashioning the vernacular cry into an affirmation of cultural continuity. At the same time, this vernacular cry, imbued in sexual connotations and reaffirming Coltrane’s and Jones’s respective manhood, reveals the black machismo in both language and imagery. Finally, Coltrane’s multiphonic “screaming” and Jones’s

polyrhythmic “thumping” provide the continuity via which bodies are transcended and creation is allowed to continue; what Benston considers as *jouissance* (153) is thus not an end in itself, but another point of entry into the cultural continuum wherein catharsis or orgasm are creative outlets that yield meaning and ontological significance.⁶³

Accordingly, Henderson shows that Coltrane and Jones’s “chase” can actually be applied to the entire black community:

Coltrane /	Jones	
riffing		face to face
instrument charge		
	stools to kneecap	
many faceted rhythm structure	to	tomahawk
gretsch rocks n rolls	gretsch rattles	(67-72)

For Henderson, the “fact-to-face” exchange between Coltrane and Jones transcends the immediacy of their performance and becomes a dialogue between idioms of the same vernacular. With “riffing” Henderson gestures towards Coltrane and Jones’s refiguration of the jazz tradition. Gates, in *The Signifying Monkey*, cites Jelly Roll Morton’s definition of the “riff” in black music in which he says that it is “a *figure*, musically speaking” that provides jazz ensembles with a “background” and a “foundation” (105 –emphasis

⁶² For another reading of these lines, see Benston, *Performing Blackness*, 152-154.

⁶³ Meta Du Ewa Jones points to Gridley’s term, 73. Gridley defines multiphonics as “sounds in which different frequencies [can] be heard simultaneously.” In Coltrane’s free jazz period, multiphonics sometimes sounded like “controlled screeches,” 281.

Morton's).⁶⁴ When applied to Henderson's poem, "riffing" becomes the poet's means of situating the performance within the revisionist black expressive tradition.

In fact, I argue that Jones's polyrhythmic drumming revises the percussive tradition of the Black Diaspora, especially that of the ring shout. In the poem, the polyrhythms in Jones's performance are subsequently compared to roaring ("gretsch/ roar") of "a 1939 Ford" (65) and of a "F-86 Sabre jet" (92), both "transportations," like the "A" Train. The respective rhythms of Harlem, of the train, of sexual intercourse, of the car, and of the jet are all superimposed and counterpointed; they work as corollaries to Jones's polyrhythmic drumming. Moreover, each rhythmic strand functions as metaphor for the creative –and antiphonal –exchange between the musicians on stage, concentrated between Coltrane and Jones. Yet it is Jones's "tom-tomming" (96) that truly "transports" the syncopated sound of black American jazz back to its roots in the ring shout ritual.

In the poem, bassist Peck Morrison (101-102) plays the role of historian and informs the poet "about a drum set/ with a central anchor / every drum connected" (103-104). Thus, Jones's diachronic "tom-tomming" catalyzes ancestral memories of antiphonal drum rituals in Africa symbolized by the ring shout. Gena Da Caponi explains that the "ring shout provided an organized venue for cultural continuity, and an explanation for the means by which African ideas about social organization" informed African America

⁶⁴ Gates's definition invokes Ellison's concept of "Signifying riff" exemplified in "On Bird, Bird-Watching and Jazz," in *Shadow and Act*, 221-232. By combining the two concepts, Gates reformulates the riff as "a synonym for troping and for revision" (105).

(16).⁶⁵ Infusing Jones’s polyrhythmic drumming, the inherent social organizational meanings of ring shout ritual transforms Jones’s sound into “the slashing sound of knives” (113) that

black elvin knows so well
 the knives of the *Daily News* displays along with the photo
 of a grinning award-winning cop
 the kind of knives elvin talks about
 downtown by the water
 and uptown
 near the park. (114-121)

Full commitment to musical exploration –which Henderson recognizes as one of the greatest attributes of Coltrane’s Quartet –thus becomes an aesthetic portal to social engagement.⁶⁶ Henderson suggests that Jones’s drumming functions as call for “violent resistance” (Benston 154), which is channeled musically in coded performances; the “sound” triggers black masses to unite against economic oppression and police brutality. Jones’s drummed artistry is another instance of “Keep on Pushing,” whose ritual is dialogically linked with a nationalist ethos. The tapestry of polyrhythms in the poem points to a new black aesthetic platform within which poetry and music become cultural counterpart to political revolution, meaning that Jones’s polyrhythmic sound *becomes* Black America’s pulsation. In essence, the Quartet’s ritual extends the ontological meaning

⁶⁵ See also Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*.

⁶⁶ Marcoux, Interview, 2008.

of the music to a socio-political dimension verbalized by black nationalists, especially Malcolm X.

V. From Coltrane to Malcolm X: Aesthetics and Politics as Nationalisms

While Benston includes “Elvin Jones Gretsch Freak” among “the Coltrane poems,” the poem is more a homage to the drummer than it is about Coltrane as cultural hero.⁶⁷ Henderson, though, recognizes the significance of Coltrane’s music in the formation of black cultural nationalism. In the poem “A Coltrane Memorial” (64-65), Henderson eulogizes the musician and reformulates his death as a call for black unity:

long caravan speeding thru alabama
 then georgia red clay
 black theatre of an Albany backwood church
 and then
 the long convoy stretch to new “o”
 to find coltrane dead
 amid the rubble
 of newark negroes (18-25)

Coltrane’s death (July 17th, 1967), five days after the beginning of the Newark Rebellion, brings together southern Blacks engaged in cultural and political struggles with

⁶⁷ *Performing Blackness*, 145-186.

revolutionary nationalists of the urban North in the commonality of their mourning which precludes a heightening in activism. For Henderson, and for them, Coltrane comes to embody “the medicine man/ of my ancestral journeys” (29-30). By identifying Coltrane as musical griot who, in *Africa/Brass* (1961) for instance, celebrates Africa as ancestral site, Henderson suggests that any potent avant-gardism in black art must be able to “journey back” to the cultural roots and draw from that continuum for its poetics.⁶⁸ This “cultural continuum” in Coltrane’s aesthetics becomes a cultural nationalist platform that affirms black pride and expresses black life in black idioms. For example, “Spiritual” from *Live at the Village Vanguard* (1961) or *A Love Supreme* (1964) can both be perceived as Coltrane’s claiming of the black sacred tradition of the spirituals that have, historically, restored black humanity. Moreover, Coltrane’s postulation of the black cultural continuum promotes an art form “separate” from the hegemony of white entertainment business.

For these reasons, Coltrane is often considered as a cultural revolutionary whose core values of black pride, Afrocentricity and artistic self-determinism articulate aesthetically what the Black Power Movement was publicizing in the streets. Richard Turner contends that “[w]hat Malcolm [X] verbalized, Coltrane tried to do with his music” (14). Moreover, the artistic freedom deployed in the extended solos as well as in the

⁶⁸ Here, Henderson anticipates Baraka’s statement about the jazz avant-garde in *Blues People*: “What these musicians have...is to restore to jazz its valid separation from, and anarchic disregard of, Western popular forms. They have used the music of the forties with its jagged, exciting rhythms as an initial reference and have restored the hegemony of blues as the most important basic for in Afro-American music.” Citing the same passage, Smethurst adds that, “Baraka is claiming, much as Hughes did before him, a cultural continuum” (62).

atypical compositional structures during the free jazz period (1965-1967) –the transitional years from the non-violent civil rights movement to the radicalism of the Black Power Movement –provided important metaphors for Blacks who theorized the interlinkings between art and politics.

For one, Ronald Snellings, in “Keep on Pushin’: Rhythm and Blues as a Weapon,” includes both Coltrane and Malcolm X within his concept of “Revolutionary Dynamism” (450). In “New Space/ The Growth of Black Consciousness in the Sixties,” Black Arts cultural critic Larry Neal praises Malcolm’s X’s “sense of poetry: his speech rhythms, and his cadences that seemed to spring from the universe of black music” especially from “that blues idiom music called jazz” (125).⁶⁹ Neal adds that “[h]e reminded many of us of the music of Charlie Parker and John Coltrane –a music that was a central force in the emerging ethos of the black artistic consciousness” (125). Frank Kofsky also establishes a dialogic link between Coltrane’s aestheticism and Malcolm X’s politics based on “shared experiences” (195) and on the profound sense of inherent knowledge of blackness that constitutes the basis of any form of black nationalism.⁷⁰ That both Coltrane and Malcolm X become intricate parts of the pantheon of black American cultural heroes is not surprising given that they, in their respective ways, advocated positive versions of black identity and black life that transcended a history of social, political, economic, and ontological dreams

⁶⁹ Reproduced in parts in *Visions of a Liberated Future*, 125-132,

⁷⁰ See chapters 5, 7, and 13 of *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music*. See especially pp. 195-197. Discussing Kofsky, Smethurst suggests that the critic perceives Coltrane’s aesthetic “integrity” can be seen as “a sort of objective correlative for the integrity of radical nationalist leaders, specifically Malcolm X” (75).

deferred.⁷¹ As such, they understood Black America to be a nation within a nation –to borrow Woodard’s title –whose resourceful vernacular heritage provides templates for negotiating the oppressor’s society.

For Henderson, Malcolm X epitomizes the black nationalist centralizer whose proximity to the black masses and cultural politics inform much of the poet’s cultural nationalistic poetry.⁷² Moreover, like many black artists in the 1960s, it is Malcolm X’s political legacy that left an invaluable mark on black cultural productions. As Van Deburg notes, the paradigm of Malcolm X was appropriated, reinterpreted, revised, and reformulated throughout the many strands of Black Power (1-10). In Henderson’s poetry, Malcolm X’s paradigmatic nationalism cannot be achieved without a “recapturing” of history. In “Anniversary (George Washington Birthday/ 1967)” (25), Henderson links Washington’s birthday, February 22nd, with the “birthday” of Malcolm X’s assassination, February 21st, thereby illuminating the fact that the American Revolution and the Black Power Revolution are historical manifestations of the discrepancies between the two emerging “nations.” While Washington fought for the independence of what would become the United States of America under the banner of core ideals of socio-political and economic self-determinism, freedom and democracy, Malcolm X has advocated black

⁷¹ Accordingly, Van Deburg conceptualizes Malcolm X as a “Black Power paradigm” that inspired “the collective thrust of [African American] activists toward racial pride, strength, and self-definition that came to be called the Black Power Movement” (2). Van Deburg’s contention also reveals that such paradigmatic construction is underpinned by black culture and history as “indispensable weapons in the black quest for freedom” (5). This definition is also used in the chapter on Sonia Sanchez.

⁷² Marcoux, Interview with David Henderson, 2008.

independence from institutionalized racism that has denied these very ideals of self-determinism, freedom and democracy to Black Americans.

So, instead of celebrating the man who fathered American Independence and oversaw the first Constitutional debates, Black Americans mourn the loss of Malcolm X through the echoes of his assassination re-enacted through memorialization. The impact of Malcolm X's death was felt through Black America; it gave renewed impetus to black activists –for one, Leroi Jones saw the event as catalyst; he moved to Harlem and became Imamu Amiri Baraka –in their quest to carry out Malcolm X's doctrines of self-defense and self-determinism. Subsumed under the image of “fusillades across the universe” (8), the urban warfare that ensued in 1966 with the apparition and crystallization of Black Power militancy and Black Panther organizations, mobilized many urban young blacks who saw themselves as heirs to Malcolm X.⁷³

Similarly, in “Saga of the Audubon Murder” (26), Henderson uses the same historical setting as in “Anniversary” to convey the necessity of re-appropriating black history. Appropriating the guise of the griot as exhorter, Henderson calls for historical reparation:

brothers and sisters
we are gathered here today
to commemorate
the assassination of malcolm x

⁷³ Henderson presumably conflates the Watts riots of 1966, the Detroit riot of 1967, and/ or the Newark riots of 1967; see Van Deburg 8-9.

our assassin historians
 have placed us here
 among the remnants
 of george washington's
 birthday party

*but somehow
 we cannot recall
 the revolution*

somehow
 all we can remember of american history
 is the clatter of gunfire
 in the audubon ballroom
 the chest-bared screams
 of malcolm of all of us
 over backwards in blood

*so much blood in this soil
 we all gonna turn red*

someday

In this poem, Henderson italicizes the passages that function as refrains-responses to the cultural call for historical redress. The presence of italics implies a typographical and thematic continuity with the refrains in “Keep on Pushing,” thereby further establishing aesthetic and political continuity between the “sounds” of cultural nationalism, rhythm and blues and free jazz. What this passage also means is that Henderson promulgates African American historicity –encapsulated in a re-appropriated history and performed through the cultural continuum –as essential to cultural survival. To “recommemorate” Malcolm X’s

death then becomes a ritual within which the dialogue between the mourners and the “many thousand gone” allows for the survival of cultural memory; Malcolm X’s death is ingrained in the collective memory (“all of us”) of white violence.

Henderson thus employs Malcolm X’s memorialization as a way to claim a historical continuum whose negation by Euro-American “assassin[s]” is transcended by the ritual. That Henderson imbricates Malcolm X’s death in the fabric of White America’s blood-soaked “soil” is important for it iterates the means through which Black Americans can be empowered through historical and cultural re-inscription. Moreover, Henderson’s use of antiphony as poetic structure reveals his internalization of Malcolm X’s politics of “cultural revolution.” In using the call and response pattern as weapon against historical erasure, Henderson maintains the dialogic tension between Malcolm X’s words and the communal “we” that acts out and performs them.

This dialogic tension between rhetoric and action is represented in the line and stanza organization of poems like “They Are Killing All the Young Men” and “Keep on Pushing.” While elsewhere in *De Mayor of Harlem*, Henderson resorts to this tension to reproduce poetically the sonic and rhythmic urgency of innovative jazz improvisers like Theolonius Monk and John Coltrane, the absence of regular lines, meter, rhyme scheme, and stanza structures in these poems, also suggest the bombarding presence of white media hegemony. In “They Are Killing All the Young Men,” for instance, the white(ned) media is

an extension of the “assassin historians” who threaten the authentication of black historiography.⁷⁴

Therefore, in “They Are Killing All the Young Men” the news of Malcolm X’s death becomes a meditation on the ways in which white media’s manipulation of historicity is an extension of Euro-American power structures’ racist culture, wherein, as Thomas aptly notes, “[t]he medium is the message” (60).⁷⁵ Thus, Henderson’s narrator chronicles how the biased conglomerate of “Television/ radio” (line 1) functions in conjunction to “report” the news of Malcolm X’s assassination:

BULLETIN:

CBS says an unidentified reporter phoned in an unverified report

(THIS IS A BULLETIN !!!!)

Malcolm X shot several times in Audubon Ballroom

(Don’t Negroes meet in the strangest places?)

WINS says Malcolm gunned down

By Negro with sawed off shotgun & two others

& then returns to their gay plastic restaurant music

raunchy as plastic bags (19-27)

In turn, this conflated imagery of white media hegemony becomes a commentary on the racist foundations of the Euro-American institutions. CBS and WINS’s alarming treatment of the news is only temporary; when the listener/viewer’s attention has been grabbed, both return to regular programming:

⁷⁴ In *Felix of the Silent Forest*.

Incredibly
 after the bulletin the TV eye carried me LIVE!
 to the Westminster Dog Show
 (a fine Anglo-Saxon Name) (52-55)

Terry Joseph Cole states that the “lack of coverage” is “indicative of a lack of respect” (168). Similarly, Henderson understands such insensitivity and blatant disregard of black audiences to be logical continuations of the racial politics afflicting the United States; those same politics led to the assassinations of “Young Men” who dared defend the black cause:

Assassination has become chic
 destruction with terrible weapons has
 become chic
 to the sophisticated Establishment *ipso-facto*
 of America
 the south and the north... (56-61)

In fact, that “Establishment” is a collection of conflated institutions that promote racialism. In the case of Malcolm’s assassination, CBS and WINS, “the New York Press and Police Corps” (72) work for

the sophisticated men of destruction
 who dress in modern uniform
 indulge in modern poisons
 and in florid elegance
 murder (75-79)

⁷⁵ In “The Shadow World.”

What Henderson's narrator denounces here is how modernization of the white-ruled media provides means to disguise racist politics. Broadcasting news is just a sublimated conduit to enforce fear of the cultural "other." The "modern poisons" that affect the black struggles are these conspiratorial agencies that undercut any potential advances of black activists or any rhetorical platform that questions white institutional domination.

Moreover, these "poisons" that modernize ways to thwart the efforts of race controversialists and infiltrate social consciousness use the airwaves to propagandize covertly the necessity of perpetuating segregation and inequality. These "poisons" also affect the delineations of black identity, which is why, structurally, the poem deploys the rhythmical asymmetries of free jazz to "redress" the definition of blackness. Here, free jazz functions as aesthetic gatekeeper of black cultural memory, whose ritualization generates resistance. Henderson further links this vicious infiltration of consciousness with the intentional inefficacy of security agencies to extend to Malcolm X the protection and freedom supposedly granted to all by the Constitution. Thus, recognizing that "Rank and file knowledge has the Black Muslims/ infiltrated by the FBI CIA G-Men Treasury agents" (98-99), Henderson's narrator wonders:

We have efficient Americans among us
 If the Statue of Liberty was so easy to protect
 why not the life of an innocent man
 (Malcolm Little, given name)
 why did not *all* the infiltrators go to their bosses
 with news of the plot
 Why did not J. Edgar Hoover

It moreover reasserts the centrality of ritualized artistry in the black cultural nationalism affirmed by Henderson in *De Mayor in Harlem*. Jazz as idiom and as conduit of social change represents an impudent (“SASS”) counter-language to that of hegemonic American institutions. Consequently, the “thin Times” (181):

today tells
of three black scrubwomen
put to work
on the blood

(just as the handymen of Harlem were put to work
after the riots –patching up)

3 scrubwomen
scrubbing up blood –their blood –in time
for a Brooklyn Social Club’s dance
that night

the Audubon must go on
the New York Times marches on... (182-193)

Like the obituary, the Audubon’s “unbreachable rental schedule” is another example of how “commercial enterprise” rules American life.⁷⁸ While the scrubwomen’s work illustrates the dehumanizing effects of commerce on the black community still in mourning, news agencies’ “marching on” conveys their barely veiled promotion of capitalist ideals, which are inaccessible to the black masses who, in order to survive, must metaphorically scrub the blood of violence and injustice off of their collective memories.

⁷⁸ Thomas, *Shadow World*, 61.

In the end, a reporter from the Con Edison company who also works for “the Daily News Television Station WPIX” (202-203) appears on television. Henderson cleverly doubles the role of the reporter to insinuate that like the Con Edison Company, white-dominated information media is a source of pollution (136-137) for the black community. By reducing Malcolm X’s legacy to “Big Red the cocaine sniffing jailbird” (210), the reporter discredits his contribution to black life. Moreover, the reporter recuperates the rhetoric of an elitist black leadership to further demonize Malcolm X: “the man ‘who preached/ and died by his own sword.’” (204-205). Such negative representation of the black leader is a form of historical pollution that is propagandized in the media and that affects black historicity. As a branch of the system that includes CBS, WINS, The New York Times, the FBI and CIA, and the Police Corps, the Con Edison/Daily News reporter is a servant (211-212) of the “Modern men of the old Confederacy” (215). Thus, Henderson’s narrator contends that white-ruled plutocracies are ideological continuations of the old antebellum plantocracy mentalities. In such context, Malcolm X and Nat Turner are interwoven in a tapestry of revolutionaries that White America could not tolerate, a tapestry awaiting the contributions of Amiri Baraka, black cultural nationalist.

Henderson envisions that such contribution will come in the form of an invitation to Blacks of Diaspora (see Baraka’s poem “SOS”) to unite in the struggle for freedom. Thus, in “Yarmuul Speaks of the Riots” (38) the speaker, a member of the larger Black Atlantic, decides to participate in the struggle because he shares a “*feeling*” (line 7), Henderson’s working corollary for soul/ blackness:

marcus garvey alive again (11-13)⁷⁹

The parade meaningfully gestures toward a redefinition of Harlem in “territorial” nationalist terms through which organizations like the neo-Garveyite African Nationalist Pioneer Movement sought to claim territorial authority in the hopes of creating a black state and repatriating it in Africa (Robinson 52-55):

is it proud? is it fun? is it serious? is it political?
 is it
 ALL OF HARLEM STRAINED OUT OF WINDOWS
 STANDING ON FIRESCAPES
 STANDING ON SIDEWALKS STANDING IN THE STREETS
 AS THE BUSES THE CABS THE TRAINS BOATS &
 PLANES HALT
 AS THE MARCHERS MARCH BACK TO AFRICA

once more

(52-59)

The typological denominations of nationalisms, outlined by Meier, Bracey and Rudwick in *Black Protest in the Sixties* and noted by Robinson, push for a nationalist initiative solidly grounded in cultural distinctiveness. In the poem, allusions to Garvey’s “Back to Africa” movement also anticipate the renewal of pan-Africanism whose politics Black Arts poets like Amiri Baraka sought to refine through black cultural nationalist revolution.⁸⁰ The

⁷⁹ It is worth noting that De Jongh discusses the poems “Keep on Pushing,” “Yarmul Speaks of the Riots,” and “Marcus Garvey Parade” as a trilogy. However, his analysis is both superficial and largely inconsequential since his work is more concerned with providing a general overview of the Harlem poems.

⁸⁰ See Woodard 171.

“political and cultural solidarity” (Woodard 170) that Baraka advocates, while echoing Henderson’s re-awakening of black consciousness and the awareness of the Diaspora, especially of third-world liberation movements in the poem “Third Eye/World,” also reveals the “unity-in-struggle” platform that black nationalist and anticolonialist politics illuminated.

In “RUCKUS POEM” (68-71), Henderson employs an episode of the Black Revolt, the 1967 uprisings in Newark, NJ, as a way to further signal a radical change in black consciousness and point to revolutionary nationalism in which black culture would be central. Once again, urban Black America seemed to be uniting to confront white violence head on.⁸¹ Sharpening his journalistic skills, Henderson, like he did in “Keep on Pushing,” chronicles how the rationale for military occupation was another enforcement of black subordination, a form of constraint that both political and cultural nationalisms sought to defeat. Henderson understands that the subordination of Newark Blacks meant the thwarting of emerging nationalist efforts (“CITY CIVIL WAR,” 21) to overturn and subvert a socio-political history of white racialism in the U.S.:

AIN'T NO BOMB FALLING FROM PLANES
NEVER NO FOREIGNERS CAUSING RUKUS ON OUR TURF
BUT O LORD WHERE DID THOSE NIGGERS COME FROM

⁸¹ The premises of how the Newark uprisings were ignited follow a common thread, that of black reaction to white police brutality. James Smith, a black taxi driver, was severely beaten by white police officers after a rather banal arrest for speeding. The rumor of the unnecessarily savage beating was quickly reported by witnesses and spread through black taxi radios. The backlash was inevitable; it carried the memories of the Harlem riots, and more recently, of the Watts riots. The white military were quick to appear in Newark.

O SAMBO THE MAN-EATER
 O SAMBO SO TERRIBLE SO TERRIBLE
 OUR CHILDREN WOULD HAVE BELIEVED HIM
 A BOY EATING WATERMELON IN THE GARDEN OF MYTH
 WITH SHANGO THE MAN-EATER
 SAMBO THE MAN-EATER
 SAMBO THE MAN-EATER
 THE KIND OF CRAZY NIGGER YOU CAN'T DO NOTHING WITH
 [HIM
 THE CRAZY NIGGER /O SHANGO! (27-38)

In shifting identities from Sambo, the passive and subordinate slave who accepts his inferior condition, to Shango, the symbol of resistance across the Diaspora, Henderson points to the end of passive civil rights struggles. Instead, the shift from Sambo to Shango indicates a reassessment of black ontology that claims self-determinism and self-definition. Such re-evaluation of blackness is dealt with using black folk traditions whose mythology encompasses both Shango and Sambo.

At the same time, Henderson looks to African liberation movements, subsumed under the Shango trope, for militant allies in Black America, which he finds in the nationalism –both revolutionary and cultural –of Amiri Baraka (then Leroi Jones).⁸² Baraka's active participation in the Newark riot makes him a legitimate heir to both Coltrane and Malcolm X in Henderson's poem:

THEY GOT ROI they got roi they got roi

⁸² See Woodard, 78-84.

stomped him good
 said he had two loaded 32s 2 32s
 roi wasnt ready roi wasnt ready (87-90)

The violence inflicted on Baraka (“stomped him good”) is but an extension of the brutality that has historically afflicted the black body:

NEGRO MEANS DEAD BODY
 NEGRO MEANS DEAD BODY
 NEGRO MEANS DEAD
 ETCHED IN SHANGO RED (75-78)

What “THE POLICE,” as embodiment of white power structures that substandardize Black American social status, attempts to defeat is the self-deterministic drive toward revolutionary nationalism. Instead, what is advocated is a social policy of integration that negates blackness and promotes racial disaffiliation, a recurrent Barakian trope. Failure to abide by such policy will result in physical and/or socio-economic annihilation at the hands of the Great White Way:

CREMATE SELF-DETERMINISM IN THE 20TH CENTURY
 LIKE A NATION LIKE ANY OTHER NATION ANY NOTION
 MAY AS WELL DO THIS OR THAT
 INTEGRATE OR SEGREBURN (39-42)

The interlinkings between the poems about black uprisings is paralleled by the dialogisms inherent in Henderson’s cosmology of important architects of black liberation. Henderson, by tracing the trajectory of this cosmology, answers the tenets of the Hughesian “task” of the black writer in that he uses black music, namely rhythm and blues and jazz, as

theme and idiom as a way to literalize the continuum. As griot, Henderson not only responds to *Ask Your Mama*'s historiography, he also provides a point of entry to discuss Sonia Sanchez's and Amiri Baraka's free jazz poetics and griotism. Hence, in Henderson's poems, both Coltrane and Malcolm X sustain Sanchez's and Baraka's cultural nationalism. As prefigured in these last sections, in the New Black Poetry of the 1960s and 1970s, references to Malcolm X's militant legacy are interlinked with the avant-garde explorations in jazz. The next chapters will attempt to map the presence and developments of free jazz themes and idioms in Black Arts poets Sonia Sanchez's and Amiri Baraka's poetic production. By doing so, I will show how both Sanchez's and Baraka's jazz-infused poetry continues the cultural work begun by Hughes and Henderson, and forwards the ideals of a cultural nationalism that constantly "journeys back" to its etymology in blues praxes.

Chapter III: “Sister in the Struggle: Sonia Sanchez, Jazz Agencies, and the Feminized Quest for a Communicative ‘Sound’ in *Home Coming* and *We A BaddDDD People*”

With this third chapter, the second part of the dissertation begins. While the two preceding chapters mapped the precursory poetic journeys of Langston Hughes and David Henderson and how each functioned as griot/ historians, this chapter, as well as the next on Amiri Baraka, deal with the transformation of the black jazz griot’s role during the Black Arts movement. Hughes and Henderson provide some of the aesthetic and political underpinnings of the Black Arts movement, especially in the ways in which they contextualized jazz as articulator of an emerging black aesthetic. This chapter is not overly concerned with delineating the contours of the Black Arts movement; critics like James Smethurst have already done extensive work in that area. What I wish to highlight with the next two chapters is how Black Arts griots Sonia Sanchez and Amiri Baraka continue the cultural work of Hughes and Umbra’s Henderson as well as how they engage in poetic dialogues with their ancestors’ musical sensibility and sensitivity. Sanchez and Baraka both respond, albeit in differing ways and through different means, to the call for the reclamation of Black History posited in *Ask Your Mama*. By using this antiphonal framework, I want to counter the misleading allegations of critics who contend that Black Arts poets wanted to break completely with their ancestors. If nothing else, the poetry of Sonia Sanchez and Amiri Baraka is proof of the contrary.

If Baraka is the griot/exhorter, the quintessential Black Arts militant agitator, Sanchez is the Black Arts movement's primary griot/teacher. The poems covered in this chapter are from her first two collections, *Home Coming* (1969) and *We A BaddDDD People* (1970); they constitute a potent survey of her ability to infuse the jazz gestalt in Black Arts poetics and Black Power politics. More importantly, while Baraka's poetry illustrates his use of key masculinist tropes sustained by recurrent allusions to Malcolm X and John Coltrane, Sanchez's poetry refashions these symbols of black manhood and thus opens a discursive –and poetic –space for black women to participate in the revolution of black consciousness. By opening this rhetorical space, Sanchez can assess the cultural work of her “brothers” in the struggle, and if unsatisfied, demand answers. In “blk/rhetoric” (*We A BaddDDD Poepole*, 15-16), Sanchez riffs upon Baraka's “S.O.S.” and asks: “who's gonna make all / that beautiful blk / rhetoric/ mean something” (lines 1-3). Openly criticizing the male hegemonies in the black liberation movements, Sanchez proposes an answer to the question.

In the same vein, this chapter discusses Sanchez's griotism in terms of its capacity to elicit a conscious change in relation to how blackness has been misrepresented by white agencies. This blackness is often feminized in Sanchez's early poetry; Sanchez re-inscribes black femininity as the site of cultural memory. This womanist approach to Black Arts poetics is never divorced from the poet's resolution to deploy black culture, and free jazz especially, against negative performances of blackness. Gender dynamics, racist politics and ethnic consciousness are all interlinked in a polyphonic griotism that seeks to redress

the historical wrongs done to the black body and the black mind. To do so, Black History must be claimed, and black unity must be reconceived.

For Sanchez then, “poetry is a subconscious conversation” with the black collective consciousness, as well as with black cultural traditions from the diaspora.¹ About the source of her poetics, Sanchez states, “[w]hen I write, I tune in to the collective consciousness, and there I hear voices, lines words, I hear music.”² The conditionality of this cultural conversation also affects the ways in which Sanchez perceives the interlinkings between historical consciousness and self-consciousness. To know one’s black self, in Sanchez’s new methodology for blackness, is always contingent upon being connected with and sustained by one’s black history or its gendered terminology “herstory.”³ Accordingly, Sanchez contends that “you cannot understand revolution unless you understand love.”⁴ What is implied in Sanchez’s rhetoric is that unless Blacks reclaim a sense of their own blackness, unless they begin to love themselves and embrace their blackness as empowering –a riff deployed extensively in “a/coltrane/poem” –the impending black revolution of the mind will never translate into a black nationalist revolution. In this

¹ From “The Poet as a Creator of Social Values,” in *Crisis and Culture: Two Speeches by Sonia Sanchez*, 2. This is also stated in “Reflections/Ruminations,” in *Black Women Writers 1950-1980*, 415. See also Joyce, 16-17.

² In Sanchez’s interview with Leibowitz, collected in *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez*, 15-16.

³ She tells Zala Highsmith-Taylor, “you cannot ‘be’ unless you understand your history.” The interview is collected in *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez*, 17. See also the first chapter of Walker’s Ph.D. dissertation.

⁴ In her interview with Claudia Tate, collected in *Black Women Writers at Home*, 143.

dialogic framework, free jazz becomes the syncretic music employed to revisit and revivify Black History. It is also the revolutionary aesthetic portal towards black self-definition.

In a very telling interview with Sascha Feinstein, Sonia Sanchez defines her jazz poetics; she says, “I do think that the people who *touch* on a jazz motif not only make poems about jazz but create jazz riffs. In other words, the composition of the poem is jazz, the delivery of the poem is jazz, and the juice, infusing it, is jazz” (164, emphasis Sanchez’s).⁵ Thus, in order to “infuse” her poems with jazz, Sanchez not only has to possess a measure of jazz literacy, but she must also be able to internalize the historical meaning of black music in and for black life.⁶ To develop a jazz literacy does not only mean to elaborate multiple theories on the revolutionary potential of music, what it means is to be able to use the music as experiential *and* historical language. Jazz literacy is expressed in terms of aesthetics of lineation and ideation that evoke the rhythmic structure of jazz –especially the arrhythmic compositional freedom of free jazz –and the revolutionary aesthetics of the New Music as metaphor for political liberation and basis for poetic exploration and extemporization.

To this end, this chapter analyzes how Sanchez, in the poems of *Home Coming* and *We A BaddDDD People*, conceptualizes the jazz gestalt as the vernacular intersection between poetry, politics, music, and historical (or ethnic) consciousness. My contention is

⁵ This interview is collected in *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez*, edited by Joyce A. Joyce, 155-176.

⁶ I use the term “literacy” out of a desire to expand on Cheryl Clarke’s brief mention of the importance of “black music literacy” as “a measure of one’s authentic blackness,” 62. Since she never goes beyond this contention, I aim to fully integrate it into my discussion of Sanchez’s jazz gestalt.

that the jazz literacy that emerges out of her conceptual gestalt reveals the intricate relationship between black poetry as textual history and black jazz as history revised and performed. Through a series of jazz syntactics, Sanchez tries to map the functionality of the music in raising the consciousness of the black masses in the revolutionary era of the 1960s in Black America. As such, jazz performativity carries a measure of political engagement.

I. *“Black Woman Freedomfighter”: Vernacular Ancestry and the Re-making of Tradition to tune of Free Jazz*

For Sanchez, as for many poets of the Black Arts Movement, jazz, especially free jazz, embodied a pure and “authentic” –and authenticating –representation of blackness as collective and experiential consciousness (C. Clarke 60-61). Of the functional, and sometimes symbiotic, relationship between free jazz musicians and Black Arts poets, Iain Anderson writes,

By linking free improvisation to an African past –real or imagined –[Black Arts poets] claimed jazz as the preserve of African American musicians and as speaking most directly and meaningfully to an African American audience. Thus they fused the two assaults on jazz music’s canonical identity. In their interpretation, free jazz represented both a defiance of European aesthetic discipline and a rejection of integrationist ideology. (98)

In different terms, free jazz architect Archie Shepp states similar principles of the New Music, “[t]he Negro musician is a reflection of the Negro people as a social phenomenon. His purpose ought to be to liberate America aesthetically and socially from its inhumanity...jazz is American reality –total reality” (qtd in Kofsky 9).

This notion of “total reality” parallels the way Sanchez conceptualizes free jazz as symbiotically entwined with the reunifying black collective consciousness. In essence, her poetry tends to adopt the definition of free jazz as “Unity Music” posited by Baraka in “The Changing Same.” Like Baraka, her early poems negotiate the dialectics between disaffiliation/destruction and re-inscription. That is, she uses the trope of free jazz as destroyer of white aesthetic hegemonies and as re-inscriptive performance of blackness as political and ontological tropology. Through this process, free jazz becomes an investigative music that reclaims the black cultural continuum while proposing new paradigms for a common future as a nation. Free jazz, as expressed in Sanchez’s lineation and ideation, is an act of defiance firmly grounded in the African American tradition of artistry as resistance. Not only does Sanchez’s free jazz poetics signify upon that very tradition, it also openly defies –or signifies upon –the oppressors through a radicalization of a performance-based blackness.⁷

Sanchez transposes both the inherent signifying politics and the sounds of free jazz into her poems. Like the free jazz musicians’ explorations of the potentialities of sound spaces, Sanchez experiments with lineation and spatial organization. More importantly, she

⁷ In this, I wish to extend the model proposed by Benston in *Performing Blackness*.

explores the possibilities of transposing sonic and vocal intentionality into words. Take for instance the poem “on seeing pharaoh sanders blowing” (*Home Coming* 23-25).⁸ The poem is divided in three “sets,” with each unleashing a verbal attack, encoded in the sound, upon a white audience that does not understand the codification of the music. The first set thus begins:

listen

listen

listen

to me

to me.

a

black

man

with

eyeballs

white.

staring

at your honky faces.

listen

listen

listen

hear

the

cowbells

ring out

⁸ Heretofore, all references to *Home Coming* will be designated by *HC*.

my hate.
 hear
 my
 sax
 burping
 your
 shit. death.
 it's black music/ magic
 u hear. yeah. i'm fucking
 u white whore.
 america. while
 i slit your throat. (2-34)

Free jazz innovator Pharaoh Sanders's voice, which Sanchez adopts, conceptualizes, and literalizes, and the way words are organized on the page are lyrical correlative to Sanders's sound; the voice's signifying intentionality is echoed in the spacing and content of the poem, which themselves are performances interlinked with that encoded in Sanders's free jazz performance. Sanchez's poem is thus an interpretative translation of Sanders's shrieking sound into words that bespeaks of the poet's ability to "get" the unspoken message in the sound.⁹ It is also a map for her audience's receptivity of the message in the poem which doubles that of the sound.

Thematically, the first set contains several instances of open defiance that the white audience fails to grasp. The musician's impudence, confronting the whiteness of the audience through the whiteness in his eyes, represents an important image that is enhanced

by the fact that he is “a/ black/ man.” By spacing these words on different lines, Sanchez emphasizes each word’s meaning. She does so in order to appropriate the machismo language in the poem, thereby using and subverting the misogynist gender tropes that affirm black manhood. Thus, while the music asserts his “black” signifying praxes, “man” confronts a history of black –male and female –dehumanization. This process of revivification –permitted by free jazz agency –defined in terms of its blackness “stares” at his white audience, thereby subverting the antebellum and post-bellum tradition of violence wherein when an African American dared to look at a Euro-American in the eyes, he could be lynched. Sanders and the music are conveyors of the new black paradigms of black pride and black assertiveness. Sanchez’s lineation and use of spacing create a disjointed reading experience that mirrors the aural experience of free jazz performance.

Through the repetitive invitation to “listen,” Sanchez –working as Sanders’s interpreter –denotes the Euro-American miscomprehensions of black culture. The spatial distantness of the thrice-repeated “listen” in typography (lines 2-4, left margin; 15-17, right margin) suggests a purposefully reverberating sonic landscape evocative of the black cultural memory. Imagined in Sanders’s sound are the signifying sounds of work songs, field hollers, blues and spirituals which all employed encoded lyrics as communicative device that the enslaver could not fathom. Black slaves also used that means of communication as a way to mock the oppressors and uphold their humanity. In the context of the 1960s where black music was more at the mercy of a white-ruled industry than ever,

⁹ See Anderson, 111-112.

this form of ritualized “talking back” is still very pertinent. Sanders’s refusal to adhere to white co-optation of the music (“hear/my/sax/burping/your/shit”) is an economic and aesthetic counterpart to the political struggles fought by the new black militancy.

Structurally, this passage with its one-word lines demand rhythmic attention; the abrupt line breaks evoke the fast runs Sanders often employed on albums like Coltrane’s *Ascension* (Jost 90). Moreover, each line beginning with “hear,” which modulates the motivic “listen,” resolves to affirm the potential of black-centered musical performativity (“my/sax” –emphasis mine) to reject (“burping”) racist and political hegemonies (“your/shit”) that affect blackness. In opposing “my/sax” to “your shit,” Sanchez further alludes to the subversive dimension of free jazz. Moreover, this dialectic becomes a motivic complement to the oral/aural demands to “listen.”

Similarly, Sanders riffs against White America’s hypocritical prostrating stance before jazz virtuosos (“u white whore./ america”) which has historically led to a capitalist appropriation and patronizing devaluation or a “bleeding” out of blackness in art. In the free jazz performativity of the poem, this process is reversed; artistry is used as an affirming weapon against White America. Filled with expletives, the declamatory tone of “fucking/ u white whore./ america” and “slit your honky throat” partakes in a revolutionary rhetoric that restores blackness as ethnic unifier. The threatening tone is also central in “set 2.” where the reclaimed “sax” is now “blood filled” (48). While the massacre might be aesthetic in the poem, it nevertheless points to the Euro-American deep-seated fear of black upheaval that could overturn the social order. Sanchez even invokes Sarah Josepha Hale’s

children poem, “Mary’s Lamb,” and subverts its didacticism in order to point to the unpredictability of the new black militancy:

mary
 had
 a
 little
 lamb.

until
 she
 got
 her throat
 cut.

see what i mean? (53-63)

The submissive lamb of Hale’s poem –an obvious symbol for black servitude –actually becomes a throat-cutting revolutionary in Sanchez’s new black poem, thereby hinting once more that Blacks will overthrow white racialists and claim their humanity “by any means necessary.” Stylistically, the lineation in this part seems to reproduce extemporizing techniques reminiscent of free jazz kinesic and tonal dissonance.¹⁰ The poem’s disrupted lineation and irregular spacing suggests that the New Black Poetry has a similar fate in mind as that of Sanders’s “murdering music” for the conventional Europeanized poetics. Furthermore, tonal dissonance is rephrased as both compositional aesthetic and as socio-

¹⁰ See Jost 90.

political metaphor. Sanchez's poems then, like the revolutionary rhetoric they contain, are "assassin poems" that destroy European aesthetics and build new black poetic templates.¹¹

In this framework, poetry and poeticizing of Sanders's sound all converge toward an outright expression of political dissatisfaction against the status quo that demands retaliation:

ah ah ah
 oh
 aah aah aah
 ooh
 aaah aaah aaah
 oooh.
 hee hee haa
 ho ho hee u white son of
 a bitch
 america
 u dead. (65-75)

The crescendo laughter and the verbal put-downs ("u white son of/ a bitch") are poetic transpositions of black oral forms of defiance that Sanchez finds encoded in her aural comprehension of Sanders's music as Black Arts material.¹²

In fact, free jazz, in Sanchez's poetry, is programmatic music; it elicits and catalyzes change. Sanchez advocates changes in all spheres of blackness. In "to blk/ record/ buyers" (*HC*, 26), Sanchez commands the black masses to listen to black music as

¹¹ Baraka, "Black Art," in *Black Magic*, 116, lines 19-20

¹² Sanders was invited to participate in BARTS activities, see Anderson 108.

to tar
 zan and other
 honky/ rappers. (2-5)¹⁴

In essence, Sanchez accuses The Supremes of willingly buying into a capitalist industry that has historically followed the precepts of racist misrepresentation as a way to perpetuate devaluation of blackness. Consequently, The Supremes have become irrelevant for the new black poetics and politics:

the supremes
 done gone
 and bleached out
 their blk/ness
 and all that is heard
 is
 me. tarzan
 I. jane
 and
 bwana.
 bwana.
 bwana. (14-25)

The Supremes's music sets the cause of black liberation back by almost one hundred years by reproducing primitivist tropes. Sanchez perceives in their cultural betrayal the same form of subordination that permeated the literary primitivism of Edgar Rice Burroughs published in the 1910s. The compliance of The Supremes is like that of the primitive exotic

Tarzan in Burroughs's tales, who addressed his European master as "bwana," meaning lord and often incorrectly understood as "master."¹⁵ Sanchez reinvests the incorrect meaning to suggest that what The Supremes are doing is another performance of slavery disguised as opportunism.

This attack against The Supremes as symbols of corrupted assimilationist behavior is reprised in "summer/ time T.V./ (is witer than ever)" (*WABP*, 30):

diana

blowen black the soft/ straight/ strains
of her pressed mind.

yeah.

and

baby love

remnants of
past/soulen
(so/long/gone)

harmonizes

in tune to where has diana's
blk/ soul gone to? (24-35)¹⁶

Here, Sanchez employs Ross's hairstyle, her conked hair ("straight"), as symbol of her cultural disaffiliation ("pressed mind"). Refusing the natural –the style Sanchez like many Black Arts and Black Power women wore as symbol of black pride and black beauty –

¹⁴ Since there are three poems entitled "Memorial" in *Home Coming*, I decided to use the line that follows the number as part of the title to avoid confusion and provide context.

¹⁵ See <http://www.statemaster.com/encyclopedia/Bwana>.

¹⁶ See also Joyce 75-76.

Ross's processed hairstyle is seen as a sign of negation of blackness.¹⁷ This ordeal is a form of cultural "ass/asi/nations" (78) of blackness. Joyce adds that,

assassination and death in the poem are associated with the lack of leadership in the Black community. The Black entertainers' loss of soul and commitment to the Black community is a kind of death that stifles the psychological liberation of Black Americans (78).

In Sanchez's poetic cosmology, these entertainers, like other black assimilationists and intergrationists, illustrate the fact that

there
are blk / puritans among us
who must be told that
WITE / AMURICA
is the
original sin. ("there are blk/ puritans," *WABP*, 17, 21-26)

Black assassination by white agencies is a recurrent jazz motif in Sanchez's nationalistic poetry. In her corrective poetics, she uses the form of her poems to reclaim blackness.

For example, the lineation of "summer/ time T.V." supposes a free jazz conceptual framework. The enjambments and sudden line breaks create an arrhythmic cadence that seems to challenge the theme of assimilation in the poem. In fact, it can be assumed that

Sanchez uses form and idiom as corrective theme in this poem. In “blk/ chant (to be sed everyday./ slowly)” (*WABP*, 33), Sanchez uses the slashes to generate a rhythmic fury that evokes free jazz percussive aesthetics:

we programmed of death/
die/en
each day the man /
boy
plans our death
with short / bread
for short / sighted / minds
with junk to paralyze our
blk/ limbs from leopen on the
wite / mutha / fucka /
laughen at us
from his wite / castles / of
respectability. (1-13)

Whether it is in the media, in the political arena, or in everyday life, dilutions of the black presence and disrespectful representations of blackness are like the drugs (“junk”) sold on the streets in that they numb the black mind and prevent Blacks from rebelling. The rapid succession of slashes conveys a staccato effect, whose brevity commands both attention and emphasis. Through paying attention to each syllable and in “hearing” the typographical rendition of each word, the intended black audience’s own aural memory is called upon.

¹⁷ In this, I agree with Joyce who affirms that “[t]hese lines, of course, call to mind the image of konked [sic] hair style popular in the forties and 1950s, which represents nay Blacks’ shame of their own coarse hair and

According to Sanchez, the solution resides within the community's ability to come together and unite under a shared cause. Before any revolutionary movement can actually take shape, Black Americans must learn "to know themselves, to be themselves, and to love themselves" (Joyce 79). Only then can they begin to love each other and operate in "com / mun / al ways." This notion is suggested in the way Sanchez organizes her lines. The fragmentation of words through enjambments ("may/ be," "some/ thing"), the improbable rhythms produced by slashes ("com / mun / al," "sat / ur / day") and the high-pitched "RE VO LU TION" all point to free jazz aesthetics of modulation, open voicing, and tonal dissonance.

Moreover, to initiate community, Sanchez borrows from free jazz the trope of unity, which is central to compositional aesthetics, especially in terms of collective improvisations where each musician carefully "listens" to one another and is thoroughly engaged in the production of a collective "sound."¹⁸ Transposed onto the terrain of black politics, the sounds of free jazz performed on the stage and infused in the New Black Poetry will be complementary enactments of the revolution. As Joyce mentions in the passage above, the notion of community cannot be divorced from a renewed interest in Black History and culture. Since free jazz is the "preserve" (Anderson 98) of that history and that culture, it serves as conceptual and thematic framework in Sanchez's poetry. For instance, in the aptly titled "To Fanon, culture meant only one thing –an environment shaped to help us & our children grow, shaped by ourselves in action against the system that enslaves" (*WABP*, 50-

¹⁸ This trope is fully developed by Baraka. See chapter 4.

51), Sanchez promotes the need for a new black consciousness using typographical renditions of free jazz pitch variations:

WE NEED.

WAR. DISCIPLINE. LEARNEN.

LAND. PLANNEN. LOVE. AND

POWER. POWER. blacker

than the smell of death

we the hunters need

to destroy

the BEAST

who enslaves us. (32-40)

Sanchez's poem is a motivic improvisation on Fanon's definition of culture in the title, which invokes Malcolm X's own contention regarding culture. For Malcolm X, "Afro-American history and culture were indispensable weapons in the black quest for freedom" (Van Deburg 5). The poet extrapolates on these definitions to outline the precepts that empower the new black consciousness. Each precept is given a similar pitch to underscore its cumulative significance. Suggestively, free jazz acts as a time-binder between Fanon and Malcolm X, between African liberation movements and Black American civil rights and Black Power movements, and fundamentally, between Africa the motherland and Black

As a poet who “must educate [black] people” and whose language must “infor[m]” and “[e]xhor[t],”—exhortation being an important task of the griot (Hale 40-45) —Sanchez’s griotism reverts to African aesthetics in order to convey her message.²¹ For instance, she “writes” in her poem a first section of incantatory vocal stylizations that culminate with high-pitched exclamations of the objectives of the revived blackness. In the second section, the stylized vocalizations reveal the names of the cultural workers who will galvanize the black masses and orchestrate “blk/ nation/ hood.”

These sung passages also illustrate how Sanchez borrows from the oral narrative traditions of chanting—which I discuss later in this chapter—in which one of the prominent themes is nationalistic love (Okpewho 138). This would be congruent with Sanchez’s didactic mission.²² Here, Sanchez best represents her version of the jazz gestalt; Malcolm X, Elijah Mohammed, and Imamu Amiri Baraka embody the intersecting points of cultural activity—the Black Power and Black Arts movements, the Nation of Islam—that will reform and redefine black consciousness. Their teachings, politics, and poetics are compared to “sonnnnnNNgs” of African tribal “chiefs,” thereby reiterating the centrality of song in effecting change in diasporic African ritualized artistry. The melismatic and tonal variations in “sonnnnnNNg” also suggest a musicality resembling free jazz’s instrumental imitation of speech. In so doing, free jazz, another form of “sonnnnnNNg” performed by chiefs like

²¹ Sanchez tells Leibowitz that these are the functions of the black poet. In *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez*, 15.

²² See Houston A. Baker, “Our Lady: Sonia Sanchez and the Writing of a Black Renaissance,” 182. He discusses how didacticism is one of the main themes in *Home Coming*.

Coltrane, Shepp, Sun Ra, and Ornette Coleman, takes on a political role that complements the achievements of Malcolm X and Baraka. Free jazz mentality and poetic infusibility enables a “journey back” to the etymology of blackness in Africa (“drums,” “chiefs”) that sustains the mobilization for black self-determinism, self-definition, and liberation in African America. By forwarding these ideals as jazzed motifs –historical reparations, instillation of black pride and self-love, restoration of ethnic consciousness, and re-affirmation of free jazz as vernacular memory –in her poetry, Sanchez performs a version of Black Arts griotism.

II. Feeling Herstory: Chanting, Griotism, and the Formulation of a Jazz Womanist Poetics

Sanchez uses chanting to summon a tradition of performance as identitive affirmation rooted in Africa. As Sesay writes, “It is the African in Sanchez that chants as she talks” (153).²³ Desirous to reproduce in Black America the African narrative framework wherein song and chants accompany everyday events (Okpewho 137), Sanchez theorizes the chant as an experiential –and often historiographical –expression of the life of black women in the 1960s. Obviously, this expression of black womanhood “must always

²³ Sesay’s prose is interspersed with excerpts from interviews with Sanchez. In *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez*, 144-154.

show the connections” with both African traditions and with the female ancestors that her poetic voice contains.²⁴ For instance, at the end of “we a baddDDD people” (*WABP*, 52-53) Sanchez engages in a ritualized form of chanting that claims the black creative self within the community of emerging nationalist artists:

aaa-ee-ooo-wah / wah
 aaa-ee-ooo-wah / wah
 aaa-ee-ooo-wah / wah
 aaa-ee-ooo-wah / wah

git em with yo bad self. don. rat now.
 go on & do it. dudley. rat now. yeah.
 run it on down. gwen. rat now. yeah. yeah.

aaa-ee-oooooooo. wah / wah
 aaa-ee-oooooooo. wah / wah
 we a BAAAADDD people

& we be getting
 BAAAADDER

every day. (54-66)

By interlacing chanting with praises for Haki Madhubuti (“don” L. Lee), Dudley Randall, Broadside Press owner and Sanchez’s first publisher, and Gwendolyn Brooks, Sanchez underlines the African rooting of the Black Arts Movement. As a “bringer of memories,” Sanchez understands that, in order to construct her poetic voice and reform the black

²⁴ In her interview with Highsmith-Taylor, collected in *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez*, 24.

consciousness, she must summon the ancestors of the homeland as well; she must summon “another sensibility, another way of looking at the world, another life force” defined in African terms.²⁵

In the poem, the typographical rendition of chanting conflates the conventions of African oral performances with vocal stylizations imitative of free jazz “screams.”²⁶ This “infiltration” of music in the poetic lines creates a poetics in which each poem “mak[es] the music happen.”²⁷ At the same time, the chant in Sanchez’s poetry is “a combination of what is ancient and what is modern;” it combines the “*cante jundo* –the deep song” of African ancestry as well as its most urban expression in Black America, jazz.²⁸ What this means in terms of poetics is that there exists a constant dialogic interplay between voice and text, wherein literalization of voice becomes a textual memorialization of a sonic and/or lyrical tradition of performance, which Sanchez uses for political purposes. As she often mentions in interviews, before the revolution can take place, Black Americans, and black women especially, need to reclaim their history/herstory.²⁹ By doing so, black women like Sanchez can restore their roles as “cultural worker[s]” and assert their fundamentality in catalyzing

²⁵ Madhubuti in Evans, 422; see the interview with Leibowitz, in *Conversation with Sonia Sanchez*, 16. This answer is in response to the interviewer’s demand to clarify the source of Africanisms in her poetry.

²⁶ According to Bratcher, “African singers often colored their melodies with moans, shouts, grunts, screams, and hollers,” 7.

²⁷ See the interview with Feinstein, in *Conversation with Sonia Sanchez*, 161.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 162.

²⁹ See for instance the interview with Bailey, in *Conversation with Sonia Sanchez*, 79.

the black revolution.³⁰ Since Sanchez's poetic voice speaks with the "collective 'I' of many women" and "the collective 'I' of a certain culture," it is an ideal conduit for the voicing of a new black consciousness sustained by the ancestral voices of the African diaspora.

The ability to "carry" and invoke "the ancestors" confers to Sanchez's poetics attributes of the African griotte.³¹ Thomas Hale, in *Griots and Griottes*, defines the function of the griotte as transmitter of a shared past. Citing Diawara's work, Hale states,

Two aspects of the transmission of the past need to be mentioned: first, "information of slave origin remains a female domain *par excellence*," and second, women who recount the past are often principal historians of their community "because they learn the private testimonies with care; and that ensures them some precedence over the men in this domain." (226)³²

³⁰ See Madhubuti, "Sonia Sanchez: The Bringer of Memories," in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980)*, 420.

³¹ In her interview with Bailey, collected in *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez*, 76; Joyce also discusses Sanchez as a "griot," 9-12. However, Joyce never distinguishes the particularities between griots and griottes, which I, following Hale's model, will attempt to in order to provide a more nuanced analysis of Sanchez's griotic work.

³² Hale refers to Diawara's "Women, Servitude, and History: The Oral Historical Traditions of Women of Servile Condition in the Kingdom of Jaara (Mali) From the Fifteenth to the Mid-Nineteenth Century." In Karin Barber and P.F. de Moraes Farias, eds., *Discourse and Its Disguises: The Interpretation of African Oral Texts*. University of Birmingham: Center of West African Studies, 1989. 109-137. The two quotes are from pages 109 and 113 respectively.

Hale further avers that the griotte is often a specialist in narrating “family genealogies” (226). The complementary abilities to transmit the past and narrate genealogies are key features of Sanchez’s womanist poetics.³³ For instance, she states,

I am the continuation of Black women who have gone before and who will come after me. I am Harriet Tubman, Fannie Lou Hamer, Queen Mother Moore, Margaret Walker, Assata Shakur, Gwendolyn Brooks, and all the unsung Black women who have worked in America’s kitchens. I am the sister who has been abused by men and loved by men. I am my stepmother, a Southern woman who was taught her place and as a consequence was never able to fulfill herself as a human being.³⁴

Similarly, Sanchez prefaces *We A BaddDDD People* with an extensive list of names of women who are “the only queens of the universe.” The list, like the quote above, includes names of poets, cultural workers, and political activists –all are interwoven in a tapestry of liberating voices.³⁵ Sanchez imbricates this tradition of black women’s voices within her own poetic voice as a way to chant and “feel” history/herstory.³⁶

³³ This chapter is not interested in dealing with Sanchez’s womanist poetics in details. First, because womanism as a term had not been formulated in the time Sanchez wrote *Home Coming* and *We A BaddDDD People*. Second, because other critics like Joyce have already done a superb analysis of her womanist poetics. I do want to mention the extraordinary contribution of Jamie Dannyyelle Walker’s “Evolution of a Poet: Remembering the Black Female Aesthetic and the Transformed Consciousness of Sonia Sanchez, Prophetic Voice of the Black Arts Movement.” Ph. D. Dissertation, Howard University, 2005.

³⁴ Taken from the back cover of *Crisis and Culture*.

³⁵ Here, I mean to echo the title of Gayl Jones’s edited collection of essays.

³⁶ In her interview with Highsmith-Taylor, collected in *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez*, 20.

Taking the poetic relay of these women, she engages in a dialogue with definitions of black womanhood through ritualized chanting of African “songs of advice and solidarity,” whose “performances constitute a kind of cultural back talk” (Hale 234). In Sanchez’s early work, these poeticized chants of advice and solidarity are performed in a counterstating discourse against racist and sexist hegemonies within and without Black America. Thus, in “nigger” (*HC*, 12), the female speaker, employing a central riff of rhythm and blues –think James Brown’s “Say it Loud: I’m Black and I’m Proud” –exclaims:

i know i am
black.
beautiful.
with meaning. (14-17)

By securing a space for black women within the “black is beautiful” rhetoric of the revolutionary 1960s, Sanchez sheds light on the masculinist debate regarding performances of blackness. Black women not only have “meaning,” they also “bear” black cultural memory. Andrea O’Reilly contends that “[i]n African American culture, women are the keepers of the tradition: they are the cultural bearers who mentor and model the African American values essential to the empowerment of black children and culture” (12). Sanchez’s womanist poetics are re-inscriptive performances of black womanhood; the poet re-historicizes the black woman’s central role in the community in reparative riffs/chants poems.

One central value that Sanchez urges black women to develop is self-love, a theme especially significant to black women empowerment in the 1960s.³⁷ Black women, Sanchez believes, must reclaim their identities and bodies; they must learn to repudiate the ascribed images of the black female body as a site of violence and socially corruptive behaviors. The de-programming of the black female mindset wherein her body is objectified is essential to new black paradigms, whether they are social, racial, or gendered. Consider the poem that follows the aforementioned list in *We A BaddDDD People* (6):³⁸

i am a blk/wooOOOOMAN
 my face.
 my brown
 bamboo/colored
 blk/berry/face
 will spread itself over
 this western hemisphere and
 be remembered.
 be sunnnnnNNGG.
 for i will be called
 QUEEN. &
 walk/move in
 blk/queenly ways.
 and the world
 shaken by

³⁷ For more on self-love as trope, see for instance Joyce, *Ijala*, 78-87; Clarke 73-80. See also the first two chapters of Walker's dissertation.

³⁸ Heretofore, all references to *We A BaddDDD People* will be designed by *WABP*.

my blkness
 will channnnNNGGEEEE
 colors. and be
 reborn
 blk. again.

In this poem, Sanchez riffs on patriarchal and masculinist perceptions –Black and Euro-American –of black women as a way to reclaim the black body as a site of celebrated aestheticism as well as of revolutionary agency.

By destroying stereotypes of beauty that inhere from doctrines such as the “Cult of True Womanhood” in the nineteenth century, Sanchez re-appropriates negative representations of black female pigmentation and regenerates its potential as revolutionary.³⁹ Moreover, not only is the black female body no longer the historical site of violence, it is now capable of overtaking the world (“spread itself over/ the western hemisphere”) of the oppressor in subversive song performances. Indeed, the black face’s remembering and “re-remembering” is interconnected with positive assertions of blackness to be sung.⁴⁰ This correlation can be found in the parallelism of elongated orthographies: “wooOOOOMAN,” “sunnnnnNNGG,” and “channnnNNGGEEEE” all “worry the line” by playing with tonal possibilities that calls up the reader’s own engagement with musical

³⁹ For more on the impact of the “Cult of True Womanhood,” see Walker, 70-72; Cheryl Clarke states that regeneration is a key trope for black female poets of the Black Arts movement. She claims that it is “as key a power in the poetry of black women as strength or fierceness during this time of political and artistic/cultural revolution,” 73.

⁴⁰ Here, I mean to echo Walker’s use of the term throughout her dissertation.

technique such as the melismatic sounds of blues and jazz vocal stylizations.⁴¹ Thematically, the sonic connection between these words suggests the centrality of the music's agency in effecting change in terms of how renewed black womanhood can contribute to black nationhood. In the same vein, the "black is beautiful" riff encoded in the poem is extended to the entire black world. As such, it reaffirms a postulation already made in "poem (for dcs 8th graders –1966-1967)" (*HC*, 22-23): "we are black/ beautiful and our black/ ness sings out" (20-22).

The incantatory singing deployed in "i am a blk/wooOOOoMAN" also implies the black woman's instrumentality to the revolutionary struggles. Her self-determinism –her assertive blackness –will not only "shake" the foundations of white hegemonies, it will also redefine her role in terms of the masculinist tropes that are used to affirm black manhood within both Black Power and Black Arts movements.⁴² The recurrent trope of movement in the poem ("walk/move in," "shaken") defeats the image of the black queen whose only roles are to birth the new generation of black warriors, while glorifying and constantly re-

⁴¹ Clarke talks about "melismatic sounding," 75.

⁴² For more on the problematic role of black women during the Black Power movement, see Kimberley Springer's "Black Feminists Respond to Black Power Masculinism." In *The Black Power Movement*. Peniel E. Joseph, ed., 79-104; Farah Jasmine Griffin, "'Ironies of the Saint: Malcolm X, Black Women, and the Price of Protection.'" In *Sisters in the Struggle*. Bettye Collier Thomas and V.P. Franklin, eds, 214-229. For more on the problematic role of black women during the Black Arts movements, see Cherise A. Pollard, "Sexual Subversions, Political Inversions: Women's Poetry and the Politics of the Black Arts Movement." In *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*. Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford, eds., 173-186; chapter 3 of Ajun Maria Mance's *Inventing Black Women*, 95-120.

affirming the manhood of their black partners.⁴³ In “blk / woocommerce chant” (*WABP*, 45), Sanchez exhorts her male counterparts in the struggle to reconsider the gender bias existing among 1960s black consciousness movements:

blk/ mennnnnNN
do you SEEEEEEE us? HEARRRRRR us? KNOWWWW us?
Black/ mennnnNNN/ we bes here.
waiten. waiten. WAITEN. WAITENNNNNNN
A long AMURICAN wait.
hurrreeehurrreeehurrreeeeeeeeeeee
blackKKKKKKKKKKKmennnnnnnnnn/
warriors
of black electricity
move
mooooovvVVE
mooooovvVVVVVEON
to us
yo/hi/voltage/
woocomenNNN (19-33)

In this poem, chanting involves a vast array of vocal stylizations that includes multiple pitch changes, melisma, and various instances of tonal shading. For instance, the typographical renditions of the high-pitched “SEE,” “HEAR,” and “KNOW” provide a new prescriptive paradigm for gender dynamics in 1960s Black America. The elongated “r” sound in “HEAR” infers the revolutionary fervor shared by women. Likewise, the extended

⁴³ See Mance 99; Clarke 17-18; F. Brown, 96.

“W” in “KNOW” creates a repetitive sound “WO” which is connected to the extended “n” in both “men” and “waiten,” thereby establishing an alliterative continuity that constantly echoes phonetically “women.” Indeed, to emphasize the thematic exhortation to “move,” Sanchez repeats the “o” in “women” and thus doubles the meaning; both men and women are called to “move,” the former by accepting women in the liberation movements, the latter by claiming their voices and contribute their “hi/voltage” to the struggles.

The assertion of the black female voice marks an important political stance and is but another example of what Sanchez means when she affirms that the “personal is political.”⁴⁴ That is, the reclamation of the individual singing voice of the black woman represents her revolutionary potential and her desire to partake, on equal footing, in the struggle for liberation. By claiming a space for black women in the struggles, Sanchez follows the trajectory of artists like Nina Simone, who re-conceptualized the function of their art to respond to the demands of the new paradigms of blackness during the civil rights era (C. Clarke 63). Moreover, Simone’s music and lyrics divests black womanhood of the passivity enforced by the new black (male) militants. Instead, Simone re-energizes the black woman’s role and redefines her as an essential agent of change.

Many of the songs collected on Simone’s *Protest Anthology* reveal the singer’s profound engagement in black political activism.⁴⁵ Titles like “Revolution,” “Mississippi Goddamn,” written after the Birmingham, Alabama, Baptist church bombing that killed

⁴⁴ In her interview with Leibowitz, collected in *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez*, 12.

⁴⁵ I refer to the album released on Andy Stroud Inc., 2007.

four innocent black girls, “Four Women,” “I Wish I Knew How it Would Feel to Be Free,” “Old Jim Crow,” and the famous anti-lynching protest song “Strange Fruit,” map a thorough history of black struggles in song.⁴⁶ Opening the album is an interview aptly titled “By Any Means Necessary,” which alludes to Malcolm X’s famous revolutionary words. At the same time, it contains the essence of his rhetoric, which greatly influenced Simone’s musical and political radicalization (Simone and Cleary, 100-110). She affirms her griotism:

My job is somehow make them curious enough or persuade them...to get them more aware of themselves and where they came from, and what they are into and what’s already there, and just to bring it out. This is what compels me to compel them and I will do it by whatever means necessary.⁴⁷

Wanting to instill “that black/ness, that Black Power, that black pushing them to identify with black culture” in African Americans, Simone wants her music to “clean the [black] brain” from the rhetorical “pollution”⁴⁸ of the white political apparatus. Simone’s musical work in the early 1960s mirrors what Sanchez is doing in poetry; both artists create forms of ritualized artistry that employ jazz as transmitter of womanist and/or nationalistic values. Like Sanchez’s poetic persona in “i am a blk/wooOOOOMAN,” Simone’s jazz proposes a

⁴⁶ For more on the meaning and content of some of Simone’s lyrics, see also Bratcher, 119-132.

⁴⁷ Ibid. Track 1.

⁴⁸ Ibid. In the interview, Simone emphasizes the last syllable of “blackness” for dramatic effect. The pulsating sound that emerges is then echoed in “Black Power;” the allusion to “pollution” comes from the lyrics to “Revolution.” Track 2.

pathway to a re-historicized black womanhood.⁴⁹ Privileging an educational platform whereby blackness structures personal and communal life, Sanchez sheds the representational stratagems that affect the revolution of the black feminine mind. To this end, Sanchez, like Simone with her music, posits the female voice as a sort of nurturing agency of liberation. Therefore, it is possible to assume that Sanchez includes Simone in her trope of the “poet as creator of social values.”⁵⁰

Significantly, in “–a poem for nina simone to put some music to and blow our nigguh/ minds –” (*WABP*, 60), Sanchez, as contemporary Black Arts griotte, uses the agency of vernacular ancestry to summon jazz signer Nina Simone’s activism in order to radicalize her own griotic poems of advice and racial solidarity. Like Simone’s music, Sanchez wants her poetry to educate and elevate the black social consciousness. While the poet never openly mentions this acknowledgement of Simone’s griotic influence, it is implied in the approbatory interjections that open the poem:

yeh yeh. yeh. yeh. yeh. yeh. yeh. yeh. yeh. yeh.

taught them to wear big naturals
told them they wuz to be blk / & proud
now they bees ready.

now they bees ready.

to be mo pretty than loud.

⁴⁹ Since this poem does not have a title, I use the first line for references.

⁵⁰ Title of the first speech in *Crises and Culture*. This trope is also defined in “Ruminations/ Reflections,” collected in *Black Women Writers 1950-1980*, 415.

Garvey taught the black masses that they were “Black” and “Africans” in the U.S.⁵¹ By alluding to these two political figures, Sanchez also points to the two most important influences for the writers of the Harlem Renaissance (Garvey) and the Black Arts Movement (Malcolm X). By doing so, Sanchez gestures toward an affirmation of the gestalt, wherein any engagement in vernacular performativity is interlocked with a political –and in the case of Black Arts poets like Sanchez and Baraka, ethnic –consciousness. Fundamentally then, both Sanchez and Simone fashion the political, historical and ethnic consciousnesses of the next generation of black activists, male *and* female, not only to assure continuity in struggle, but also to ensure that cultural legacies and artistries are constantly reinvested and re-invoked as ritualized resistance. This Sanchez evokes in the second series of interjections (yeh.) (17). The spacing between the two sets of five “yeh.” once again creates a call-response structure. The repetitive periods after each “yeh” punctuates the rhythm of the line in a way that demands positive responses to calls for Black Power.

The griotic exhortation to prepare the new generations of black activists and to make them “ready” and “badder” than Simone and Sanchez is echoed in “we a baddDDD people” (*WABP*, 52-53), which is dedicated to Gwendolyn Brooks, “a fo real bad one.”⁵² Like Simone, Brooks radicalized her poetics in the wake of the black nationalist project in

⁵¹ Sanchez states the importance of Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey in her interview with Zala Chandler, collected in *Wild Women in the Whirlwind*, edited by Joanne M. Braxton and Andrée Nicola McLaughlin, 357-358.

⁵² Subtitle of the poem.

This gendered call and response dynamic, in which the caller is Sanchez, suggests the re-inscriptive role of black women in the revolutionary struggles. Accordingly, the responsive “doooen,” with its elongated “o” sound, infers chanting voices of social action; “dance,” “walk,” “rap,” and “love” are all measures of blackness that affirm the “we” of community.⁵⁵ Essentially, this “communal chant performance” is a lyrical/oral complement to free jazz –whose spirit inhabits the form of the poem –as unitary music.⁵⁶ The “BAADDD/ thots and actions” only serve to actuate the efforts that griottes like Simone, Brooks and Sanchez have put in black nation building. Badness, in this constructive framework, becomes a galvanizer of black “thots and actions,” reformulated as the Black Aesthetic and Black Power ideology.

To achieve black nationhood, Sanchez, interpolating Simone and Brooks, proposes a revolutionary asceticism that not only defeats the tropes of the black woman as social corrupter and of the counter-revolutionary ahistorical black woman, but also re-historicizes the validity of black woman performing “community mothering.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Jennings writes about this technique, “[b]y transforming the orthography of [words] Sanchez causes her listeners and reader to enter a textured relationship with the sign’s denotation, connotation, and sound,” 125.

⁵⁶ David Williams. “The Poetry of Sonia Sanchez.” In *Black Women Writers 1950-1980*. Mari Evans, ed. 436.

⁵⁷ For more on the trope of black female sexual deviancy, see Sander L. Gilman. “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature.” *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (1985): 204-242; on the “ahistorical black woman,” see the interview Sanchez gave to Finch, in *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez*, 27-28; for more on “community mothering,” see Andrea O’Reilly. *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004. O’Reilly cites Njoki Nathani Wane who explains how “community mothers...take care of the community. These women are typically past their bearing years” (5). Using Arlene Edwards’ and

Sanchez establishes free jazz as the idiomatic template that Black Arts poets should try to emulate in their art.

III. "You're a Singer, but You Have Not Listened to the Songs:" Billie Holiday as Griotte and Blues Recuperations

Through Nina Simone's jazz politics and Gwendolyn Brooks's poetics, Sanchez is also able to reclaim the tradition of blues women like Billie Holliday whose performativity created "blues spaces" (Hill Collins 108) for discussing black women's affairs. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins defines the meaning of blues for black women. She writes:

Blues has occupied a special place in Black women's music as a site of the expression of Black women's self-definitions. The blues singer strives to create an atmosphere in which analysis can take place, and yet this atmosphere is intensely personal and individualistic. When Black women sing the blues, [they] sing [their] own personalized, individualistic blues while simultaneously expressing the collective blues of African-American women. (106)

Like Black Arts poet and aesthetician Larry Neal, Collins understands blues to be the repository of black cultural memory.⁵⁹ For black women, blues is the vernacular performance of their shared ethos.

As Farah Jasmine Griffin highlights in her superb *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery*, Billie Holiday has been the subject of poems and prose pieces of a predominately masculine crop of black writers (119-139). Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray, Stanley Crouch, Leon Forrest, Robert O'Meally, and Amiri Baraka have all written about her in elegiac ways, often glorifying her singing and the cultural meanings of her performativity. Of all these writers, Baraka is perhaps the one to ascribe to Holiday a cultural relevance that derives directly from her music.⁶⁰ Griffin truly captures the breadth of Baraka's "Billie" as griotte of "deep blue-black history."⁶¹

Baraka's Lady Day emerges as a black poet of longing who expresses the collective desire of black people. She is both an artist in the tradition of black culture and a spokesperson in the tradition of black struggle. She carries tradition in her art and her person; she also shapes and helps to create that tradition. Because black music is so deeply rooted in black experience for Baraka, Holiday as woman and artist comes to be representative of the

⁵⁹ See particularly "The Ethos of the Blues," in *Visions of a Liberated Future*, 107-117. See also Joyce, *Ijala*, 74.

⁶⁰ See also Griffin's "Baraka's Billie Holiday as a Blues Poet of Black Longing." *African American Review* 37.2/3 (2003): 313-320.

⁶¹ From Baraka's incomplete "Billie" in *The Music*, 285.

experiences, needs and thwarted of black desire in this land called America.

Baraka's Lady does not transcend history; she is mired in it, carries the weight of it in her voice and her being. (126)

Griffin's assessment of Baraka's Billie Holiday is significant for two reasons: first, because Baraka's Billie Holiday poems and prose invoke a black womanist meta-culture he did not always understand; and second, because the tradition he reclaims in *The Music* had already been claimed by Sanchez in the 1960s.

Nevertheless, Sanchez's Billie Holiday remains dialogically linked with what Griffin sees in Baraka's work. In fact, what Griffin sees in Baraka's Billie Holiday, Sanchez had already seen and processed. The point I wish to emphasize is that Sanchez's Billie Holiday is the quintessential jazz griotte who opened the pathway for later jazz activists like Nina Simone. Before Billie Holiday became "the foremother to such black women writers as Toni Morrison and Gayl Jones" (128), she was one of the griottes informing the cultural productions of black poetesses like Sonia Sanchez, and later, Ntozake Shange, whose representation of Holiday as ancestress Griffin subscribes to (129). For Sanchez, Billie Holiday's politics and poetics exist at the crossroads of Bessie Smith's blues ancestry and Nina Simone's Black Power(ed) jazz.⁶² Through these intersecting voices, Sanchez is able to map a continuum of "blue-black" women who employ the agency of blues and, later, jazz, as a way to assert both race *and* gender. The feminization

of the “blue-black” motif –a central one in African American blues and jazz poetry – tends to re-inscribe black women within the rhetoric of liberation, and thus, reinstates the centrality of black women in the affairs of the community. Similarly, such feminization of the motif gestures towards a radicalization of black female voices that has its cultural underpinnings in Ma Rainey’s and Bessie Smith’s subversively resistant blues and in Billie Holiday’s political jazz pieces like “Strange Fruit.”⁶³ The tradition that these black singers forge is the same Sanchez instills in her poems.

Therefore, Sanchez, a poet who is constantly in conversation with ancestors and cultural traditions, cannot help but understand the centrality of women’s blues to the historiography of black womanhood. Sanchez herself confirms the presence of the blues as an underlying idiom in *We A BaddDDD People*.⁶⁴ For this reason, this writer finds it rather puzzling that critics have contended that in poems like “liberation/ poem” (*WABP* 54), Sanchez “repudiates” the blues.⁶⁵ What Sanchez repudiates in this poem is the oppressive situations depicted in the blues which are no longer acceptable in the context of the 1960s.

⁶² In her play *I’m Black When I’m Signing, I’m Blue When I Ain’t*, Sanchez stages three women in the music industry who “might be” Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, and Nina Simone. See the interview with Joyce, in *Conversation with Sonia Sanchez*, 203-204.

⁶³ For more on the political dimension of “Strange Fruit,” see Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 181-197.

⁶⁴ See the interview with Finch, in *Conversation with Sonia Sanchez*. In it, she states that the blues have “always been there,” 33.

⁶⁵ See for instance Joyce, *Ijala*, 73-74; Gussow, “If Bessie Smith Had Killed White People: Racial Legacies, the Blues Revival, and the Black Arts Movement,” in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, 231; Clarke, 65-66, although Clarke understands that the critique might be subversive.

white motha / fucka

soc / king it to us (1-13)

At first glance, the poem seems to misuse the slash; however, its recurrent usage provides an arrhythmic structure that is supplemented by sharp line breaks. The result is a disjointed approach to lineation that seeks to reproduce the unconventional compositional aesthetics of free jazz. The use of signifying language and verbal aggressivity (“white motha / fucka”) also suggests the musical onslaught on the industry’s white establishment brought on by free jazz.

Strikingly, critics have generally missed the irony deployed in this poem. While the blues do voice “struggle,” their very performance defies any “strangulation.” Blues not only transcend the limitations imposed on Blacks, they also subvert any attempt to silence the black voice. Likewise, the poem is a literalized complement to the blues voice; as such, both poem and blues song are creative outlets used to oppose the “strangulation” of Black Americans. Sanchez’s clever use of “strangulation” also evokes the violence of lynching, and thus brings to mind Holiday’s “Strange Fruit,” whose politics inform Sanchez’s denunciation of white political ineffectiveness. The streams of Holiday’s politics pour in Sanchez’s own activism in the same way as Holiday’s blues-jazz channels Rainey and Smith, while sustaining Simone, Abby Lincoln, and the likes.

Holiday’s presence is not in name only in “liberation/poem.” For the poem, as everywhere else in *We A BaddDDD People*, Sanchez resorts to Black English in order to develop a blue-black parlance reminiscent of Holiday’s codified transformation of

English.⁶⁷ The manipulation and encoding of English becomes Holiday's means of challenging the political status quo; the way she encodes language is a continuation of how African Americans reconceived language as an intra-racial means of communication. Sanchez thus conceives her poetic language as one instance of Holiday-inspired "musicalization of speech" which "ar[ises] as both aesthetic impulse and political impulse, incorporating African customs and expressing emancipatory yearnings" (A. Davis 167). Indeed, Sanchez theorizes Holiday's blues as the vernacular axis delimiting an African past and a free jazz future. In Holiday's voice, Sanchez hears the entire history of the African diaspora's negotiation of European oppression. Simultaneously, Sanchez can hear the musical foundations of free jazz in that "musicalization of speech" was a favorite technique performed by free jazz saxophonists like Pharaoh Sanders, Archie Shepp, and, of course, John Coltrane.

Moreover, it is through Holiday's voice that this history of "strangulation" is cathartically released for the next generation of black singer/poets. Sanchez, like free jazz architects, sought to escape the structural limitations and constricting aesthetics theorized by Europeans. By shrouding Holiday's voice in myth from both Africa and African America, Sanchez can summon her as chanting black griotte and enabler of a free jazz activism. The second part of the poem affirms this continuum of voices:

but. now.

when i hear billie's soft

⁶⁷ For more on Sanchez's use of Black English, see Joyce, *Ijala*, 70-71.

soul / ful / sighs
 of “am i blue”
 i say
 no. sweet / billie.
 no mo.
 no mo
 blue / trains running on this track
 they all been de / railed
 am i blue?
 sweet / baby / blue /
 billie.
 no. i’m blk/
 & ready. (14-28)

By engaging in a direct dialogue with her griotte ancestress, Sanchez claims her voice and demands reparation, which both form and content provide. Because they suggest free jazz compositional aesthetics, form and content bespeaks of a desire to shatter the conventional cadres regimenting aesthetics and politics of Euro-America.

The second part of “liberation/poem” cannot be read without an understanding of Sanchez’s other Billie Holiday poem, “for our lady” (*WABP*, 41).⁶⁸ For Sanchez, Holiday remained “blue” because she lacked self-love and reciprocal love:⁶⁹

yeh. billie.
 if some blk / man
 had reallee

⁶⁸ For brief interpretations of this poem, see Joyce, *Ijala*, 73-74; Clarke, 65-66.

⁶⁹ See also Walker, 33-36.

made u feel
 permanentlee warm.
 ain't no tellen
 where the jazz of yo/songs.
 wud have led us. (12-19)

What Sanchez underlines here is the political potential of Holiday's "jazz" to galvanize the black masses. Unfortunately, that potential is never allowed to flower because of solitude and a lack of love; that is, her blues are never allowed to transcend their limitations and become full-fledged revolutionary "free jazz," although her "Strange Fruit" certainly begins the work. Sanchez, whose measure of self-knowledge and self-love is contained in her tropological "phd in soniasanchezism," becomes a logical candidate to take the poetic relay of Holiday's griotic mission.⁷⁰

If Holiday is the enabler, then Sanchez is the perpetuator of tradition whose embrace of the new blackness and readiness to catalyze black liberation is paralleled by free jazz's new aesthetic postulations. To the question/call "am i blue?," Sanchez offers the twined responses "no mo" and "no. i'm blk/ & ready," thereby pointing to a "new racial consciousness" (Joyce, *Ijala*, 74) that could not exist or be formulated without its blues ancestry. In fact, Sanchez's following collection of mature poems, *Blues Book for the Blue Black Magical Women* (1974) employs a blue-black "journey back" to the etymology of black womanhood. Blues and its continuity in jazz are central motifs of that collection. For these reasons, it is almost impossible to affirm that Sanchez "repudiated" the blues. Instead,

⁷⁰ From the poem "a/needed/poem for my salvation," (*WABP*, 49-50), line 26.

she employed their inherent ontological significance as a transformative agency of liberation. And when she speaks of “culture,” she means “revolutionary culture,” whose attitude of change derives from a profound understanding of what needs to be done in order to achieve black freedom.⁷¹ By formulating a *black* aesthetic based on the premises of refusal of the status quo –“no mo” and “no” are both repeated twice in the poem –Sanchez as griot/ teacher deploys a revolutionary consciousness that transmutes blues resistance into a fiery free jazz activism. Holiday’s blue-black voice becomes an agency of liberation that Sanchez will internalize to affirm her black female voice as well as that of all black women. In so doing, Sanchez restates the need to defeat the exclusionary gender politics in many of the black liberation movements. That way, black women can claim Billie Holiday, Nina Simone *and* John Coltrane as interpreters of blackness. In fact, Sanchez’s feminization of the Coltrane poem offers, once again, a series of examples in terms of black women’s abilities to re-historicize blackness and contribute to the new black revolutionary rhetoric.

IV. A Synthesis in Black Arts Spirit Music: Reading “a/coltrane/poem”

⁷¹ Here, I refer to Etheridge Knight’s words in the interview granted to Charles Rowell. *Callaloo* 19.4 (1996), 979-980. Knight defines culture in terms that resemble Sanchez’s definition, he states, “Culture, ultimately, to me, is not the vehicle that teaches a people to accommodate; it is a vehicle that teaches people to move for some kind of change toward their freedom. No longer do you just stand pat, but rather you take some kind of action. That is what I think is happening in that poem.”

In the previous chapter, I analyzed how David Henderson's Coltrane poems not only eulogizes Coltrane, but also how his music –working as a corollary to Malcolm X's politics –informed the new black consciousness emerging in the 1960s. Similarly, Baraka's poem, "AM/TRAK," traces the biographical and aesthetic developments of the musician and, in the process, re-historicizes the function of free jazz for his own poetics. Although published in 1979 after the end of the Black Arts Movement, "AM/TRAK" remains another contribution –and a significant one –in the canon of the "Coltrane Poems," which Benston and Feinstein consider to be a genre that also includes Haki Madhubuti (formerly Don L. Lee), Larry Neal, Askia Touré (Ronald Snellings), A.B. Spellman, and Michael Harper among others.⁷² These poets see in Coltrane's music a form of commitment (Lacey 20) that correlates that of the black consciousness movements emerging across the black nation. Feinstein notes how for one, "Baraka interprets Coltrane's music in this light, [he links] the direct, aggressive sound of Coltrane's tenor with the political temperament of the time" (120).

In the poems of these Umbra and Black Arts poets, the "aggressive sound of Coltrane's tenor" is often symbolized by the scream. In "AM\TRAK," Baraka recurrently employs modified versions (e.g. lines 6, 14, 18-19, 45-47) of a central riff, "History Love

⁷² For more Benston's contention, see chapter 4 of *Performing Blackness*, 145-186; see also Saul 244; for Feinstein's notes about the genre, see Chapter 6 of *Jazz Poetry: From the 1920s to the Present*, 115-142; see also Feinstein's "From 'Alabama' to 'A Love Supreme': The Evolution of the John Coltrane Poem," originally published in *The Southern Review* 32.2, 1996. Retrieved at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb3549/is_n2_v32/ai_n28668079.

Scream” (line 3).⁷³ In conflating the scream as sonic evocation of both history (individual, communal, racial) and love (again, self-love leads to new consciousness of self and community, and thus paves the way to nationhood), Baraka infuses the scream with black ontology. Similarly, Lindsay Barrett, in “The Tide Inside, It Rages!,” collected in *Black Fire*, affirms that the use of the scream in free jazz includes “the screams of a thousand lost and living voices whose existence has begun to demand the release of the soul’s existence” (149). Therefore, Coltrane’s scream encompasses the revolutionary screams of dissatisfaction with the slow advances and timid gains of the civil rights era. At the same time, the scream reverts back to the shouts and the blues, thus to a tradition of counterpointing voices of the black experience.⁷⁴ Baraka is right when he avers that Coltrane’s sound is at the intersection of “[t]he vectors from all sources” (120); that is, Black History runs “through him/ AS SOUND!” (123-124). For Baraka, this free screaming sound claims freedom for the masses and for the new poetry.

Side by side with Umbra and Black Arts poets like Henderson and Baraka stands Sonia Sanchez, perhaps the poet who has the most masterfully negotiated the cultural interlinkings between black poetry and Coltrane’s music. Discussing her use of musical allusions in terms of both content and form, she adds, “when you truly are a jazz poet, you don’t have to mention Coltrane; people will hear it. I carry the improvisational part of him into what I do...The music is in the beat, in the repetition” (169). As a poet immersed in the

⁷³ Here, I refer to the version published in *Transbluency*, 187-195.

black vernacular tradition, Sanchez reifies the common association between coded speech and coded song. In fact, her early jazz poems tend to follow Benston's "notion that black language leads *towards* music," thereby positing black "music as the ultimate lexicon [so that] language, when truly apprehended, aspires to the condition of music and is brought, by the poet's articulation of black vocality, to the threshold of that condition."⁷⁵ Sanchez agrees with these aesthetic principles. She tells Feinstein, "[Black musicians like Coltrane] cause you to make the word respond to the music until it becomes music" (174). Through this dialogic framework where musical aesthetics, especially jazz improvisation, inform typographical performativity, Sanchez is able to approximate the oral/ aural performances of free jazz musicians like Coltrane.⁷⁶

Like Henderson and Baraka, Sanchez has thoroughly assimilated the trope of Coltrane's sound as history or sound as narrative recorded on *A Love Supreme* (1964). In so doing, the poem not only accounts for its revolutionary rhetoric, but also for its potentialities as a didactic conversion narrative.⁷⁷ In Sanchez's "a/coltrane/poem" (*WABP*, 69-72), John Coltrane's personal story of spiritual conversion (around 1957) after years of

⁷⁴ Saul, paraphrasing Barrett's essay, adds that the "screams in jazz are not just musical notes...[they are] the screams of history urging a fair accounting, a liberation from pain," 245.

⁷⁵ In "Late Coltrane: A Re-membering of Orpheus." *The Massachusetts Review* (1977), 772-773; see also Feinstein 118.

⁷⁶ For more on typography and performance, see Nielsen's *Black Chant*, 8-10.

⁷⁷ Saul notes that Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*, like Malcolm X's *Autobiography*, is among "the most resonant conversion narratives of the 1960s, stories in words and music about the pursuit of spiritual perfection...testifying in its own way to the rewards of a straight life and to a global vision of black culture and liberation," 248.

substance abuse becomes the agency for conversion into blackness.⁷⁸ Thematically, Sanchez's "a/coltrane/poem" captures the multi-layered sensitivities contained in Coltrane's sound, especially that explored in *A Love Supreme*.⁷⁹ To this end, Sanchez never provides biographical information like Baraka does in "AM/TRAK," instead, Coltrane's personal story and music become working metonymies for the black consciousness that function as subtext throughout the poem. Not only do the themes of *A Love Supreme* inform Sanchez's poem, but the four-part structure of Coltrane's suite are also reproduced in Sanchez's poem. In this section of the chapter, I plan to analyze the thematic and structural correlations between the poem and the suite.

A Love Supreme is divided in four sections: section I is titled "Acknowledgement," II is titled "Resolution," III is titled "Pursuance," and IV is titled "Psalm." Together, they form a suite that suggests "a kind of pilgrim's progress, in which the pilgrim acknowledges the divine, resolves to pursue it, searches it, and eventually, celebrates what has been attained in song" (Porter 232). In Sanchez's poem, these four sections are also present, each triggered by a variation on Coltrane's aesthetics. In dealing with the poem, I associate lines with sections of Coltrane's suite; for instance, lines 1 to 25 correlate the section "Acknowledgment," lines 26 to 57 form the section correlating Coltrane's "Resolution," lines 58 to 83 form a correlative to the "Pursuance" section, and finally, lines 84 to 128

⁷⁸ For varying interpretation of the poem, see Benston, *Performing Blackness*, 154-159; Clarke, 62-63; DuEwa Jones, "Jazz Prosodies," 72-75; Feinstein, *Jazz Poetry*, 123-124.

⁷⁹ *A Love Supreme* (1964) is Coltrane's most spiritually engaging work, and, perhaps, the most evocative for Black Arts poets. See Feinstein, *Jazz Poetry*, 128-129; Baraka, "The Changing Same," 193.

constitute the section evoking the “Psalm.” By reproducing this structure in her poem, Sanchez extends the scope of Coltrane’s own spiritual “pilgrimage” to include all African Americans who, in the path toward nationhood, must undergo a similar process of conversion to blackness. Hence, personal and collective stories become dialogically interwoven, thereby suggesting the dialogic interplay inherent in free jazz composition.

In the section correlating “Acknowledgment,” Sanchez deifies Coltrane, and is thus able to invoke him as both spiritual guide for the masses and muse for the griot. Such practice of invoking Coltrane the muse was common in Black Arts poetry. In the epigraph to *Black Music*, Baraka christens him “the heaviest spirit.” Importantly, Sanchez herself saw Coltrane as a jazz deity, a spiritual leader for the black masses. She confesses to Annie Finch that “[w]hen people asked did you pray, you’d say yes, I play Coltrane” (36).⁸⁰ In the poem, Sanchez’s “acknowledgment” opens with a motivic statement that provides the “head” for the next stanzas:

my favorite things
 is u/ blowen
 yo/ favorite things.
 stretchen the mind
 till its bursts past the con/fines of
 solo/en melodies
 to the many solos
 of the
 mind/spirit. (1-9)

⁸⁰ This interview is collection in *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez*, 27-46.

Sanchez's acknowledgement of the divine in Coltrane's sound and her invocation of his spirit as muse also conjures up another of Coltrane's signifying performances, "My Favorite Things."

It is significant that the poet chose to include the signifying dimension of Coltrane's version of the Rodgers and Hammerstein standard as "head" of the pilgrimage to reclaim blackness.⁸¹ Coltrane's complete revision and reinvention of the standard through modal improvisation constitutes one instance of his ability "[t]o do away with weak Western forms."⁸² Recuperating Baraka's statement, Harris adds,

Coltrane takes a weak western form, a popular song, and murders it; that is, he mutilates it and disembowels this shallow but bouncy tune [here Harris refers to "Nature Boy," but it could easily apply to "My Favorite Things" as well] using discordant and aggressive sounds to attack and destroy the melody line. (14)

By "destroying" through exploratory and innovative improvisational patterns the standardized motif central to *The Sound of Music*, Coltrane refashions it into a sound that is essentially Afrocentric. Moreover, the musical explorations and innovation are firmly grounded in the ethos of the vernacular tradition. As such, Coltrane's "My Favorite Things" becomes a counterstating performance against the musical hegemonies and a white-owned

⁸¹ See Gates's *The Signifying Monkey*, in which he discusses Coltrane's version as a primary example of his theory of tropological revision termed "signifyin'," 64, 104.

⁸² Baraka, "New Black Music," in *Black Music*, 174.

musical industry that have appropriated and commodified black musical forms. It is a signifying example of reversals that Sanchez constantly uses in her poem.⁸³

What Sanchez “acknowledges” in this section is the potential that Coltrane’s politicizing of the music –although Coltrane was often apolitical, his take on music was often interpreted in political terms –can mean for the poet.⁸⁴ Sanchez understood the political dimension of Coltrane’s music, but those politics are reflected more in terms of her poetics in “a/coltrane/poem.”⁸⁵ The conjoined uses of lower cases, Black English (“u/blowen,” “yo/favorite), and irregular syntax “murder” the conventional Euro-American poetic standards of grammar, stanzaic organization and lineation. By intergrating black vernacular English into the poem, Sanchez also wants her poem to enter the realm of speech (Melhem 78), thereby enhancing the notion that this first section is an incantatory prayer to the divine Coltrane. Similarly, the conversational tone that vernacular speech allows becomes an aesthetic correlative to both the conversation at work in Coltrane’s revision of the standard, and the dialogue between Coltrane and his own tradition, which is metaphorical for what Sanchez is doing in her acknowledgement.

Moreover, her use of the diagonal slash creates rhythmic and tonal effects that tend to reproduce poetically and sonically the many rhythmic breaks in the music. According to

⁸³ See also DuEwa Jones, 72-73 for more on Coltrane’s “My Favorite Things” and its meaning for Sanchez’s poem.

⁸⁴ See for instance Kofsky’s Marxist interpretation of Coltrane’s music in *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music*, chapter 7 and the interview (chapter 12) with Coltrane where Kofsky tries to make Coltrane commit to the political battle.

⁸⁵ See interview with Feinstein in *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez*, 169.

Like she does with “My Favorite Things,” Sanchez includes a musical allusion in order to refashion its meaning. Here, the French “Frère Jacques” serves as a motif that is accompanied by notes in the margins, “(to be/ sung/ softly”). This time, it is the poet, using vernacular language, who becomes the reviser and innovator of standards. In so doing, Sanchez proves that she has internalized in both verse and voice the dialogism inherent in Coltrane’s music; that is, Sanchez’s ability to re-invent the song derives from her learning from Coltrane, the muse. Sanchez converts the nursery melody into an invocation to a jazz deity in vernacular.⁸⁷ Likewise, Sanchez shows her improvisatory skills inherited from Coltrane through her irregularly spaced lineation punctuated by “rests” and rather free stanza structure.

The rationale for the invocation is doubled in this first section. As mentioned earlier, Sanchez acknowledges Coltrane’s ontologically-charged sound as capable of galvanizing the efforts of black consciousness movements. Taking Coltrane’s own spiritual pilgrimage as both symbol of and metaphor for the new black consciousness, Sanchez presents the musician’s conversion as the ur-narrative of black liberation from the historical shackles of whiteness. Also, Coltrane’s music is invoked in order to help heal the black masses’ wounds of “the quiet aftermath of [the] assassinations” of Malcolm X, the Kennedys, and Martin Luther King. Coltrane’s “free” music serves to repudiate another kind of death, that of black music at the hands of white capitalism and imperialism. In that sense, “the

⁸⁶ See also Benston’s interpretation of these lines, 155.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 156.

massacre/ of all blk/ musicians” is a metaphor for the dilution and denaturalization of black music by white musicians and composers –like those of Tin Pan Alley for instance. In response to seemingly inescapable (“planned. in advance.”) racial and economic forms of oppression, Sanchez posits Coltrane, whose sound emerged out of a desire to break free from pre-established compositional patterns. Once again, this is a case of “the personal [being] political” in that one artist’s aesthetics becomes a generation’s poetics and politics.

The last part of the section correlating “Acknowledgment” in Sanchez’s poem confirms Coltrane’s status as jazz griot/exemplar in terms similar to Bird Parker in Hughes’s *Ask Your Mama*:

yrs befo u blew away our passsst
 and showed us our futureeeeeee
 screech screech screeeeech screeech
 a/love/supreme. a lovesupreme a lovesupreme. (22-25)

By extending both typographically and sonically the “s” of “past” and “e” of “future,” Sanchez proposes a melismatic approach to sound that derives from the black church, whose music Coltrane was certainly interested in.⁸⁸ Phonetically, the melismatic “s” and “e” reiterate the vocal motif “supreme” and restore the altissimo sound of the silent “e” in “future;” this process of restoring sound –and ultimately, voice –only enhances the thematic quest for self-discovery of the poem. At the same time, the melismatic “s” and “e”

prefigure their accentuation in the tonal variations of “screech.” Here, the screech, a typical feature of Coltrane’s sound after 1961 (Gridley 281), becomes impregnated with the voices of the masses that still endure the dream deferred. In the poem, the screech, while variant, is controlled as in Coltrane (DuEwa Jones 73). It is only fitting that it is so, since the “acknowledgment” ends with a direct musical quotation from the first song of *A Love Supreme*. On the record, Coltrane’s grave voice repeats “a love supreme” while seemingly following a particular chant-like cadence. In the poem, the repetitions are varied in terms of their typography, but the tone remains the same, almost following the drone-like sound of the pedal point technique Coltrane often employed in the 1960s.⁸⁹ By doing so, Sanchez ends her chanted “acknowledgment” of the divine Coltrane by building a sonic tension that will explode at the beginning of the second section, “Resolution.” This tension is a phonic consequence of Coltrane’s ability to “stretch[en] the mind/ till it bursts.”

After having acknowledged the divine, as well as the oppressive socio-political and economic landscapes of White America, Sanchez understands that, in order to claim Coltrane’s spiritual agency and fully realize the potential affixed to their blackness, Black Americans must resolve to affirm their own sense of ethnic consciousness, and, by the same token, eliminate the sources of cultural corruption. Essentially, in order to elevate

⁸⁸ DuEwa Jones prefers the term “multiphonemics,” which would be analogous to Coltrane’s use of multiphonics, 73. Coltrane, however, used multiphonics primarily in his later work, such as in *Ascension* and *Meditation*.

⁸⁹ Gridley defines pedal point as “low-pitched, repeated, and/or sustained tone. It usually retains its pitch despite changes in chords and improvisations occurring around it,” 403.

black consciousness, and eventually build the black nation, Sanchez argues that Blacks must follow Coltrane's lead and "do away with weak Western" politics that have constantly devalued black identity and black culture; they must do at the political and ontological levels what Coltrane did with "My Favorite Things." Once again, Sanchez summons Coltrane for both thematic development and idiomatic framework.

Coltrane's "Resolution," the second part of *A Love Supreme*, is marked by its dissonance (Porter 234). Accordingly, the poem's second section recuperates the rhythm of the ostantino that accompanies Coltrane's vocalization of the motif and re-introduces it with significant tonal variations:

A LOVE SUPREME

scrEEEcCHHHHHH screeeeEEECCHHHHHHHH
 sCRreeEEECCHHHHHHH SCREEEECCCHHHHH
 SCREEEEEEEECCCHHHHHHHHHHHHHH
 a lovesupremealovesupremealovesupreme for our blk
 people. (26-31)

By capitalizing the motif, Sanchez not only modifies its pitch in performance, but also alters its meaning on the page. The reader, who bears Coltrane's vocalization in his mind, can see that the capitalized motif signals a different approach to representing Coltrane's voice on the page. The previously repeated "a love supreme" becomes a screaming "A LOVE SUPREME," whose tonal inflection supports the theme of racial frustrations that the poem's griot wishes to exorcize. Similarly, the melismatic sound of "screech" in the first section undergoes tonal inflections that support this theme. Sanchez alternates high and low pitches within the same word, but in different places, in order to create a dissonance

reminiscent of Coltrane's sound. To represent tonal inflections on the page, Sanchez alternates upper and lower cases. The resulting visual effect is indissociable from its imagined aural performativity. This is one instance where the reader can actually hear Coltrane while reading; the poem thus attempts to sustain a call and response dynamic with the reader/audience's musical memory. This antiphonal agency will be reinvested into the larger dialogue about reforming black consciousness and bringing about a regenerative commitment to blackness.

Sanchez's quest for commitment is implied in the thematic coalescence of "alovesupremealovesupremealovesupreme" which evokes Coltrane's use of legato stylizations.⁹⁰ Thematically, this commitment to discover one's purified self underlies a desire to rediscover one's ethnic consciousness, a common theme in Black Arts poetry.⁹¹ The intertwined themes of self-discovery through the agency of "a love supreme," and the necessary destruction of white identitive tropes contained in the tense tonality of "screech" generate a political call to arms that Black Power and Black Arts theorists and artists often interpreted in Coltrane's music (Feinstein 124):

BRING IN THE WITE/MOTHA/fuckas
ALL THE MILLIONAIRES/BANKERS/ol
MAIN/LINE/ASS/RISTOCRATS (ALL
THEM SO-CALLED BEAUTIFUL

⁹⁰ Gridley defines legato as, "a style of playing in which the notes are smoothly connected with no silences between them," 403.

⁹¹ See Cheryl Clarke, *After Mecca*, 74

PEOPLE)
 WHO HAVE KILLED
 WILL CONTINUE TO
 KILL US WITH
 THEY CAPITALISM/18% OWNERSHIP
 OF THE WORLD.
 YEH. U RIGHT
 THERE. U ROCKEFELLERS. MELLONS
 VANDERBILTS
 FORDS.
 yeh. (32-46)

In her resolution to sensitize the black masses to the urgency of changing their predicament, Sanchez employs capitalized words almost exclusively, thereby suggesting typographically a form of “loud talking,” whose literalized voice contains both the ebullient revolutionary rhetoric of Malcolm X as well as the correlative dissonant sounds of Coltrane’s music.⁹²

Significantly, the directive to “BRING IN” the oppressors suggests that the political battlefield has been dislodged from its white historical symbolism and transposed onto the new spherical terrain of the new blackness. On such terrain, Sanchez’s corrective blackness for “our blk/ people” intends to attack the historical roots of the African American dream deferred. By invoking the great American tradition of the “Captains of Industry” and by

⁹² Here I mean to echo Feinstein’s excellent analogy. He cites Sanchez who wrote, “[y]ou see, what [Malcolm X] said out loud is what African-American people had been saying out loud forever behind closed doors.” He then goes on to equate Malcolm X’s rhetoric with Coltrane’s music “played ‘out loud,’” 124-125. The Sanchez quote is originally from Hampton and Fayer’s *Voices of Freedom: On Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s*. New York: Bantam, 1990. 254.

underlining that their success at realizing the Dream was at the expense of the economic oppression of the black masses, Sanchez debunks the myth of the Great (White) American Way. In her new black cosmology, the “ROCKEFELLERS,” “VANDERBILTS,” and “FORDS” are not examples of upward mobility, they are “killers” of black socio-economic possibilities and opportunities. Sanchez’s task as griot/exhorter is to deconstruct the prestige ascribed to these people and to deprogram the black mind from thinking that the ways of these “BEAUTIFUL/ PEOPLE” should be mimicked. In essence, Sanchez performs an act of identitive exorcism –or revisionism –similar to Coltrane’s aesthetic revision of “My Favorite Things” and spiritual conversion in *A Love Supreme*.

To this end, Sanchez verbally attacks the oppressors by renaming them, thereby reversing the trope of the slave master naming his slaves and appropriating their identity. Because of the presence of the adjective “WITE,” “MOTHA/fuckas” obviously has a negative meaning. Likewise, “ASS/RISTOCRATS” infers a moniker born out of Sanchez’s vernacular hermeneutics. The use of the slash to separate “ASS” from “RISTOCRATS” highlights the new terminology’s signifying potential. The rhythmic accentuation produced by the presence of the slash demands attention; it supports the ideation process behind its usage. That is, the accented “ASS” prefigures retributive actions.⁹³ Correspondingly, the defiant tone of address (“U RIGHT/ THERE.”) that Sanchez uses in this section not only indicates a lack of respect for the oppressors –this lack of respect is signifying retribution for centuries of abuse – it also further deflates the egos of “BEAUTIFUL/PEOPLE” whose

⁹³ See Smitherman, *Black Talk*, 56-57.

“OWNERSHIP/OF THE WORLD” should provide enough evidence for the black nation to revolt. Stylistically, the enjambment (“U RIGHT/THERE”) conveys a sort of rhythmic challenge to stop, which is reminiscent of police –or Black Power –parlance. This authorial parlance, which takes after Coltrane’s commanding sound, is a “calling out” of the oppressive economic forces in both the music industry (“i saw yo/ murder/ the massacre of all blk/ musicians”) and in white-ruled society (“WHO HAVE KILLED/ WILL CONTINUE TO/ KILL US”).

Because these forces have continuously undermined black life and, as such, have contributed to a history of repressions rooted in racialism and violence, Sanchez advocates a new systemic trope of inversion –rhetorical and contextual –wherein verbal signifying translates into open physical threats:

GITem.

PUSHem/PUNCHem/STOMPem. THEN

LIGHT A FIRE TO

THEY pilgrim asses.

TEAROUT they eyes.

STRETCH they necks

till no mo

raunchy sounds of MURDER/

POVERTY/ STARVATION

come from they

throats.

(46-57)

What is interesting in this last part of the second section in the capitalization of action verbs (“GIT/PUSH/PUNCH/STOMP/TEAROUT/STRETCH”) at the expense of pronouns “em”

“they” (i.e., Whites). This is a good example of Sanchez grasping Coltrane’s tonal work in order to support her thematic development. Indeed, the proactive, revolutionary call to action is imbued with physical aggression and threats of social rebellion –through the signifying prism of repeated inversion –that are rendered typographically by weakly accented “em” and “they.” Only in “THEY pilgrim asses” can one find a high-pitched or accented “THEY” which seems to be Sanchez’s way to isolate the enemies by linking them –the connection is provided by the repetition of “asses” –with the previously capitalized “BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE.”

In her violent rhetoric, Sanchez once again evokes the potential of “poems that kill,” the Barakan “assassins poems.”⁹⁴ Like Baraka, Sanchez locates in Coltrane’s music a murderous impulse to destroy those who exploit black culture. One finds in this last part a double resolution that restates the thematic core of the entire section. Sanchez avers that only by “STRETCH[ing] [Whites’] necks” and thus silencing their “raunchy sounds of MURDER/ POVERTY/ STARVATION” can African Americans begin to “stretch” their collective “mind.” The parallelism created by the doubling and cross-referencing of “stretch” is significant because the pathway to spiritual –and social –liberation provided by Coltrane’s musical agency is at the expense of the patriarchal voice of “THEY,” the imperialists and capitalists whose rhetoric and practices lead to “POVERTY” and “STARVATION” for the black (musical) community. Moreover, their commodification and co-optation of black culture –a theme recurrent in the two previous chapters and a

⁹⁴ See n.11.

central one for black consciousness movements in the 1960s –is a form of “MURDER” that must be resolved if Blacks are to gain self-determination. The predatory dimension of the white-ruled music industry is often held responsible for the descent into substance abuse and/or the inevitable demise of many black musicians, such as Charlie Parker.⁹⁵

Thus, against the “massacre/ of all blk/musicians” by the “raunchy sounds of MURDER/POVERTY/ STARVATION,” Sanchez posits Coltrane’s sound and her own poetic voice. The fissures in the socio-economic fabric of Black America demand reparation, which both music and poem attempt to do by (re)converting the black masses to their ontological blackness. For that, Coltrane’s explosive and expansive approach to improvisatory ideation is matched by Sanchez’s typographical landscape of irregular meter, arrhythmic structure, line breaks, and enjambments, which are complimented by alternations between lower and upper cases to mimic, as mentioned earlier, Coltrane’s tonal inflections. Like Coltrane whose improvisation in “Resolution” “derives from the theme and relies similarly on...dissonance” (Porter 234), Sanchez develops her lineation according to the motif (“A LOVE SUPREME”) as well as from the thematic “screech” that evolves into a dissonant –and violent –poetics of retaliation.

Still, the intensity deployed in Coltrane’s “Resolution” is accentuated in the third part, “Pursuance.” Characterized by its “increasingly dissonant solo” (Porter 236), “Pursuance” continues Coltrane’s spiritual journey by conjuring up a musical aestheticism

from the African homeland. This part of the suite opens with a long drum solo performed by Elvin Jones until Coltrane joins in for his solo improvisation. Together, Coltrane and Jones interweave the dissonance of the saxophone with the evocative drumming patterns to create a polyphony of creative energy that can be interpreted as trope of black artistry as resistance. Jones’s drumming solo signifies upon a percussive tradition rooted in African drums, and in so doing, he proposes an improvisatory space of dialogue firmly anchored in black-centered discourse.

Of particular interest is also the fact that “Pursuance” “reintroduces ‘Acknowledgement’’s melodic cell, but in a disguised form” (Saul 258). What this means in terms of thematic potential is that Coltrane’s ability to re-evolve the core motif of the suite, albeit in an “out of joint” (258) improvisational exploration, enhances the theme of a spiritual pursuit, while continuing to “narrate” the journey to conversion. In Sanchez’s poetic third section correlating Coltrane’s “Pursuance,” the theme does indeed recuperate a central idea of the first section. Sanchez encapsulates the unleashed frenzy of “the revolution of the mind” –assumably present in Coltrane’s sound in “Pursuance” –in the reiterated “screech.” Despite the fact that Jones’s introductory drum solo is not perceptible on the page, its exaltation is connected to Coltrane’s “screeching” sound; that is, both drum and saxophone “utter” a cross-fertilizing blackness:

screeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeCHHHHHHHHHHHH

⁹⁵ Sanchez already alludes to this in relation to Coltrane in the first section (“i saw yo/murder...planned./ in advance.”) –although Coltrane died of liver cancer, which many defenders have linked to his years of alcohol and drug abuse.

SCREEEEEEEEEEEECHHHHHHHHHH
 screeEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEECCCHHHHHHHH
 SCREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE
 EEEEECHHHHHHHHHH (58-62)

Once again, pitch variations are suggested in this transcription of Coltrane’s sound. At the same time, the “screech” with its expressive vibrato, conveyed by alternating lower and upper cases, captures in both sound and typography the extent of black frustrations. Thus, what is pursued in Sanchez’s third section is a ritualization and transformation of those frustrations into an empowering rhetoric of black pride.

For the cleansing and conversion of the black consciousness to be completed then, Sanchez contends that African Americans must sever any ties with Euro-American “LIBERALS” who have used the black cause for their own political agendas instead of following through with their political promises and truly effect black liberation. Actually, Sanchez argues that Blacks must pursue those –principally Euro-Americans –who have deliberately allowed for the “assassinations” of black political leaders and could not prevent “the massacre/ of all blk musicians” despite promises of civil rights. This immediate dissociation from the White Liberal agenda on race is a logical continuation of the violent rhetoric deployed in the previous section; both imperialists/capitalists and liberals have caused serious damage to the black mind. As such, both must suffer the consequences:

BRING IN THE WITE/LIBERALS ON THE SOLO SOUND
 OF YO/FIGHT IS MY FIGHT
 SAXOPHONE.
 TORTURE

THEM FIRST AS THEY HAVE
 TORTURED US WITH
 PROMISES/
 PROMISES. IN WITE/AMURICA. WHEN
 ALL THEY WUZ DOEN
 WAS HAVEN FUN WITH THEY
 ORGIASTIC DREAM OF BLKNESS.
 (JUST SOME MO
 CRACKERS FUCKEN OVER OUR MINDS.)
 MAKE THEM
 SCREEEEEEEM
 FORGIVE ME. IN SWAHILI.
 DON'T ACCEPT NO MEA CULPAS.
 DON'T WANT TO HEAR
 BOUT NO EUROPEAN FOR/GIVE/NESS.
 DEADDYINDEADYINDEADYINWITWESTERN
 SHITTTTTT (63-83)

What Sanchez attacks here –once again appropriating machismo language –is the ineffectual patronizing discourse about race matters that Liberals promulgate. As in the previous section, they are “brought in” for judgment and retribution. In destroying the rhetoric of these “friends” of the black masses, Sanchez highlights the fact that these politicians embrace the cause, not the people.

When they do embrace the people, it is out of a libidinous desire for the exotic other (“ORGIASTIC DREAM OF BLKNESS”), thus revealing a history of sexual fantasies projected upon the black body that dates back to antebellum America. In the same vein, the

endless “PROMISES” of freedom remain elusive for the black masses, which only increases the certainty that the “YO/FIGHT IS MY FIGHT” rhetoric of White Liberals, from the Garrisonian abolitionists to Lyndon B. Johnson’s thwarted efforts, has yielded little in the way of civil rights, but has garnered political praises and high positions for those Euro-Americans who uttered it. This hypocrisy demands “TORTURE” through the agency of Coltrane’s “SAXOPHONE,” which plays an uncorrupted and purely black music.

Another consequence for this form of political hypocrisy is the colonization of the white mind that reverses the process via which slaves were coerced into abandoning their African culture and language and adopting those of the enslaver. In Sanchez’s revolutionary conversion to blackness, Euro-Americans, threatened by the explosive jazz language of resistance developed by Coltrane, will be forced (“MAKE THEM/ SCREEEEEEEM”) to admit their historical guilt in “SWAHILI.” The rhythmic pattern created by the slashes in “FOR/GIVE/NESS” enhances the notion that the language of the new black consciousness is deeply rooted in African orality, where pronunciation and phonetic performativity confer meaning to words. For Sanchez, the Europeanized language is “DEADDYINWITWESTERN/ SHITTTTTT;” that is, it can no longer be the language of the new black consciousness. If African Americans are to reclaim the totality of their black selves, they must embrace Black English, a vernacular parlance (“WHITE/AMURICA,” “WUZ DOEN”) of which jazz as cultural memory is a primary articulator.

poem, a technique he sometimes used.⁹⁷ Interestingly, Porter theorizes that a “comparison of the poem with Coltrane’s improvisation reveals that his saxophone solo is a wordless ‘recitation,’ if you will, of the words of the poem” (244). In her own last section, Sanchez actually reverses Coltrane’s compositional process; her poem is a “soundless” literalization of Coltrane’s music. Sanchez’s approach is important because it accounts for music as poetic material. The recitative tone of Coltrane’s “Psalm” thus becomes a chant-like prayer in Sanchez’s poem.

Likewise, Sanchez’s scat performance is encoded with a tradition of ritualized artistry aimed at reclaiming black cultural identity. In partaking in that orally transmitted tradition, Sanchez confirms Coltrane’s belief that “Words, sounds, speech, men, memory, thoughts,/ fears and emotion –time –all related” (8, 17-18). The conflation of sounds, voices –musical and poetic –and memory in Coltrane’s poem is also present in Sanchez’s griotic chant in the last section. She collapses the barriers between poetic –or speaking – voice and chanting voice in order for her chant/scat to contain the black cultural memory rooted in Africa essential to ontological survival.⁹⁸ In doing so, Sanchez’s last section follows the recitation technique of Coltrane’s “Psalm.”

While Coltrane’s poem is often interjected by “Thank you God,” Sanchez’s poem interpolates the recitative mood with a free jazz spirit that acknowledges –or thanks – Coltrane’s counterstating approach to music-making. In essence, the patterned journey

⁹⁷ Porter cites an interview in which Coltrane admits that he “sometimes proceed[s] in this manner because it’s a good approach to musical composition,” 247.

towards self-love and self-knowledge punctuated by Coltrane’s rejection of whiteness is reproduced in Sanchez’s interpolation and infusion of “My Favorite Things” as signifying jazz praxis in the conversion narrative of *A Love Supreme*. Like Coltrane’s “Psalm,” Sanchez’s recitative last section indicates the pathway to self-achievement:

(to be	rise up/ blk people
sung	de dum da da da da
slowly	move straight in yo/ blkness
to tune	da dum da da da da
of my	step over the wite/ness
favorite	that is yesssss terrrrr day
things.)	weeeeeeee are toooooooday. (95-101)

In these lines, Sanchez includes a dialogue between “My Favorite Things,” which cross-fertilization, she believes, will regenerate the commitment to blackness.

The musical direction in the margin might suggest the tone of the section, however, it is the interplay between the two compositions, constantly revising each other, that makes this a black nationalist chant –to borrow Nielsen’s expression. While “My Favorite Things” provides the motive to “do away with weak Western forms” (“step over the wite/ness/ that is yesssss terrrrr day”), the intentionality of “Psalm” yields the acumen to affirm both black identity and black nationhood (“weeeeeee are toooooooday”). The melismatic typography of “we” and “today” further connotes the chant-like dimension of Sanchez’s – via Coltrane’s jazz as black diasporic cultural memory –consciousness-raising project.

⁹⁸ For more on the African chant or recitation, see Okpewho 131.

The creative and spiritual energies generated by these dialogisms form the flux of experience from which the black masses can draw to erase the last vestiges of whiteness, complete their conversion to blackness, and form a self-determined and consciously Afrocentric nation:

(f da dum
a da da da (stomp, stomp) da da da
s da dum
t da da da (stomp, stomp) da da da
e da dum
r) da da da (stomp) da da da dum (stomp)
 weeeeeeeee (stomp)
 areeeeeeeee (stomp)
 areeeeeeeee (stomp, stomp)
 tooooooday (stomp.
 day stomp.
 day stomp.
 day stomp.
 day stomp!)

(102-115)

The succession of rhythmic punctuation (“stomp”) and typographical chanting (“weeeeeeeee”) culminates in a reaffirmation of the inherent signifying meaning of “My Favorite Things.” The stomping on white values –or punctuation of rhythm –and cultural mimicry result in a postulation of “we-ness” that demands social action.⁹⁹ The recurrence of

⁹⁹ See also Benston, 158.

“stomp” at the end of each line of this passage also marks a rhythmic pattern that evokes the black nation’s assertive marching towards their freedom. Moreover, “stomp” might also allude to the jazz dance, which, along with the chanting of “tooooooday” would accentuate the communality of the ritual at work. What Sanchez further suggests in the fragmented musical direction (“faster”) is the rhythmic interplay between the monosyllabic “day” and “stomp” –an interplay between speech and bodily performativity, which implies that the black mind and the black body urgently need to be reformed into accepting their empowering blackness.¹⁰⁰

This urgency is repeated at the close of the chant-like prayer to Coltrane as jazz deity:

(soft rise up blk/people. rise up blk/people
chant) RISE. & BE. what u can.
 MUST BE.BE.BE.BE.BE.BE.BE.-E-E-E-E-E-
 BE-E-E-E-E-E-E-
 yeh. john coltrane.
my favorite things is u.
 shown us life/
 liven. (116-123)

Sanchez cleverly establishes a rhythmic continuity between “(stomp, stomp)” and “rise up” that restates the fact that any conversion to blackness is inextricably linked with a “stomping” of white aesthetic and political hegemonies. It is in this last part that Sanchez

¹⁰⁰ Benston offers an interesting approach, he says, “[e]ach syllable signifies *as* enactment, the meaning of which inheres in the voice’s ‘movement to blackness,’” 158.

borrowed the most from Coltrane's poem, not for content, but more in terms of tone. The counterpointing tonalities of the "soft chant" with the capitalized "RISE" and the elongated "BE" create modulations that infer metaphors of change.

The psalm created by Sanchez therefore becomes a sacred poem dedicated to Coltrane's performance as jazz didacticism. It enacts a poetic vista for Black Arts poets and the black masses to reassess their own sense of blackness in both aesthetic and social realms. This cultural vista is vital to the new black consciousness and Sanchez makes sure to mention it in her "coda":¹⁰¹

a love supreme.
 for each other
 if we just
 lissssssSSSTEN. (124-127)

By restating the poem's –and the suite's –motif, Sanchez once again re-invokes her poetic muse. This time, however, she offers her stance on the way to build the black nation. She believes that by re-inscribing blackness as beautiful and empowering, the black masses will converge towards the new consciousness as brothers and sisters in the struggle. She employs the trope of creative exchange between musicians especially prevalent in *A Love Supreme* as a proscriptive framework for social organization. Like the free jazz musicians who "listen" to each other during improvisatory composition, so should African Americans listen to and love one another as they "compose" new black social and aesthetic paradigms.

¹⁰¹ Benston actually contends that the coda begins on line 120.

In this case, to “listen” to Coltrane’s music encompasses the interlocked abilities to read the black poem and to reinterpret it in a constant dialogue with the black traditions in art and politics. “a/coltrane/poem” is Sanchez’s love chant to both Coltrane and the black musical traditions he embodies. Like Coltrane, Sanchez is deeply invested in the dual performativity of black culture as ontological re-inscription and ritualized resistance. Her use of the black chant as framework is congruent with this notion. Of chanting she says that it “calls up the history of Black chanters and simultaneously has the historical effect of old chants: it inspires *action* and *harmony*.”¹⁰² In the last line of “a/coltrane/poem,” the typographical representation of a crescendo sound adheres to the same idea; the griotic chant indicates the direction for black nationhood; that is, she points to revolution. At the same time, it interpellates and challenges Baraka...calling...calling.

¹⁰² From “Ruminations/ Reflections,” collected in *Black Women Writers 1950-1980*, edited by Mary Evans, 416. The emphasis is Sanchez’s.

Chapter IV: “Birth of a Free Jazz Nation: Amiri Baraka’s Jazz Historiography of Black Nationalism from *Black Magic* to *Wise Why’s Y’s*.”

By the end of *Ask Your Mama*, Langston Hughes hints that Ornette Coleman’s free jazz will incarnate the spirit of an emergent African American activist community. Hughes’s postulation of free jazz as the music capable of galvanizing the revolutionary impulses of Blacks from the metonymical “QUARTERS” of Harlem –a metonymy that arcs back to the slave quarters –anticipates James T. Stewart, who, in the seminal cultural nationalist essay “The Development of the Black Revolutionary Artist,” also identifies Coleman’s “non-matrixed” (5) music as revolutionary.¹ In thus aligning free jazz, Harlem as locus of black cultural politics, and the symbolic “QUARTERS” as site of black cultural memory where tradition and history are imbricated, Hughes underscores the potential of the music to affirm and actualize black aesthetic traditions, thereby re-historicizing the cultural continuum that Baraka will employ as theoretical framework in many of his poems and essays. For Hughes, Coleman’s free jazz exists in constant dialogue with the tradition, from the shouts to Parker’s bebop via Blind Lemon Jefferson, Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington. In such kaleidoscope of black artistry Hughes’s griotic poem becomes a corollary historiographical enactment of tradition, one that seeks to assert through poetic language what free jazz aestheticisms reflect.

¹ Originally published in *Black Dialogue* in 1966, the essay is the first to appear in *Black Fire*, which Baraka edited in 1968, pp. 3-11.

Similarly, in *De Mayor of Harlem*, especially in poems like “Keep on Pushing,” David Henderson recuperates Hughes’s image of “THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES” “SUDDENLY CATCHING FIRE/ FROM THE TIP A MATCH TIP/ ON THE BREATH OF ORNETTE COLEMAN.” Henderson, in “Keep on Pushing,” reports the revolution Hughes had anticipated in *Black Harlem*. It is not only the story of the “NEGROES FROM THE QUARTER” rioting that Henderson reports, it is another chapter in a tradition of black refusals to be further oppressed and discriminated against, one that dates back to slave rebellions. It is also the postulation of cultural nationalism, which Baraka will expand upon. In essence, Henderson’s rhythm and blues motif in *De Mayor of Harlem* –a music whose aesthetic values cultural theorists like Ronald Snellings and Amiri Baraka link to free jazz –provides a musical commentary on the struggles of Black Harlemites to claim their place in a racist society. In so doing, Henderson employs Harlem as site of political and cultural effervescence for Black America’s active engagement in the actualization and re-figuration of the Hughesian blues/jazz encyclopedic memory. Henderson’s revisionist poetic journalism links rhythm and blues and free jazz with a Hughesian map of urban black life; the music comments on the poetry, and, in turn, the poem is textual performance of a collective history. In Sonia Sanchez’s hands, music is also archival; it serves to re-convert “blk people” to their blackness. Like Hughes and Henderson, Sanchez therefore refashions poetic language through the prism of musical language in order to perpetuate oral and aural traditions of encoded sounds. These poets theorize music in socio-political

terms and, as such, suggests Amiri Baraka's conceptualization of free jazz composition as black historiography.

Significantly, Baraka's move to Harlem and development of cultural nationalist poetics politicize, polemicize, and actualize the latent revolution in Hughes's coded allusions to Charlie Parker's bebop and Ornette Coleman's free jazz, and performed in the "Keep on Pushing" motif ingrained in Henderson's rhythm and blues poetry. In many ways, Baraka theorizes Harlem in griotic terms similar to Hughes and Henderson. Like Sanchez, his desires to take the poetry to the masses and adopt (albeit briefly) Harlem as "home" and cultural center of Black America are dialogically linked with his reliance on the oral tradition and jazz as poetic reservoirs.

Accordingly, in many of the poems published in *Black Art* (1967) and *It's Nation Time* (1970), his core nationalist production, Baraka recuperates and enacts the brewing revolutionary impulses contained in Hughes's "WON'T LET GO TILL IT THUNDERS" and the aforementioned "Keep on Pushing" of David Henderson's *De Mayor of Harlem* and "rise up/ blk people" of Sanchez's *We A BadddDDD People*. Developing a free jazz parlance imbued with politics, Baraka writes poems that perform, like the music that inspired the lyric(s), Black American History. For Baraka, free jazz is a re-inscriptive music that allows the poet to reassess and reinvestigate black cultural genealogies, what he terms "the changing same." While his cultural nationalist poetic production seeks to affirm the black nation-forming paradigm, his later Marxist-Leninist poetry still deploys a free jazz framework as a way to assert African American History. In essence, this chapter will

discuss the ways in which free jazz, in Baraka's poetry, is griot music, in that it restates the fundamentality of blues and bebop; in so doing Baraka, especially in "In the Tradition" and the syncretic *Wise Why's Y's*, claims a poetic lineage with Langston Hughes's *Ask Your Mama*. From blues to bebop, from bebop to rhythm and blues, from rhythm and blues to free jazz, the cultural continuum. From Hughes to Henderson, from Henderson to Sanchez and Baraka, the changing same.

Critics have often linked free jazz to radical black movements like Black Power. Curiously, only a few of them, notably William J. Harris and Kimberley Benston, have attempted to analyze the ways in which Baraka transposes free jazz aesthetics into poetic language. While Harris contends that Baraka's jazz poetry emerges out of his revision, critique and/or rejection of white avant-garde poetics, I intend to discuss how Baraka, instead of refashioning white poetics, draws from the deep well of African American oral and musical traditions for his jazz-infused poems. Instead of responding to a tradition that has traditionally alienated Blacks, Baraka, I argue, responds to the demands, thematic and political, of his poetic forefather, Langston Hughes, by using free jazz agency to reaffirm the tradition.

This chapter thus proposes to study how free jazz, not only its historical development or its social significance, but also, and perhaps more importantly, its aesthetic innovations have informed how Baraka integrates free jazz in the construction –structural and thematic –of his poems. My approach will reveal how, for Baraka, free jazz embodies a distinctively ethnocentric tradition that constantly performs, revises and rewrites black

history. Moreover, my contention is that Baraka's use of free jazz transcends his work during the Black Arts Movement to underlie also the work produced during his Marxist period. Consequently, the long poem "In the Tradition" and the volume *Wise Why's Y's* will be analyzed as historiographical extensions of his Black Arts poetry. These two works are grounded in the free jazz poetics of the sixties –a poetic foundation that Baraka builds upon with the same social and historical consciousness that Hughes, Henderson, and Sanchez had already displayed respectively in *Ask Your Mama*, *De Mayor of Harlem*, and *We BaddDDD People*. Therefore, Baraka's free jazz poetics are an actualization of Hughes's blues and bebop poetry, and of Henderson's rhythm and blues-infused verse. In that sense, Baraka's free jazz aestheticism, like Sanchez's, is a construct of past idioms, constantly evolving in the flux of "the changing same."

While this chapter deals with Baraka's understanding of Black History in musical terms, it is not interested with mapping the poet's own "history" of ideological shifts, breaks, inconsistencies and repudiations. Instead, I prefer to look at Baraka's black nationalist and Marxist works as one continuous thread of his gestating idea of "the motion of history," which resists compartmentalizing and fragmentation.² My rationale for these choices is the fact that, fundamentally, Baraka's literary and political quest remains the same regardless of ideological transformations: his art is a continuity of the ur-theme of Black American Literature in that it attempts to catalyze black liberation. During the

nationalist period, it is liberation from white racism and oppression manifested in cultural, political, and ontological measures, while in the Marxist period, Baraka wants to effect liberation from capitalist and imperialist hegemonies that regiment and regulate black proletarian life. While the targets are different, the core theme remains the same. As a matter of fact, it is this writer's opinion that the debate over whether to analyze Baraka as poet or polemicist is inconsequential. Since the centripetal theme of Black American literature is, as mentioned above, liberation, then any black literary text will challenge, sometimes in coded ways, the institutions that have historically enslaved Blacks. In this context, the black text becomes an occasion to revisit history and reaffirm the African American tradition of resistance, which leads this writer to conclude that the majority of black texts are, by the very nature of their existence and survival despite white historical amnesia, political. Therefore, the debate should not be about polarizing Baraka's art *and* his politics, but should concentrate, and this is what I propose to do here, on Baraka's art as an objective correlative *to* his politics.³ Let us turn then to Baraka's own rhetoric for proof of this.

In "The Need for a Cultural Base for Civil Rites and Bpower Mooment [sic]," he contends that, "the socio-political must be wedded with the cultural. The socio-political

² For another reading of the trope of "motion of history," see Benston, *Performing Blackness*, 193-194; like Nathaniel McKay, I think that the ideological and political shifts do not affect his understanding of black vernacular music.

³ In that sense, I agree with Meta DeEwa Jones's approach in which she proposes to look at Baraka's art as politics. See "Politics, Process and (Jazz) Performance," 245.

must be a righteous extension of the cultural” (43). Taking Maulana Karenga’s US organization as a recurring example, Baraka avers that culture, sociology and politics “should all be one thing. Blackness” (47). Thus, like Meta DuEwa Jones, I believe that “the political can inform and enrich the poetic, and vice versa” (246).⁴ To that dialogism, I will later add the trope of the New Music, especially free jazz, whose performativity on the page further informs both poems and politics. In “New Music/New Poetry,” Baraka writes that “[P]oetry...was and still must be a musical form.⁵ It is speech *musicked*” (243 –emphasis Baraka’s), an aesthetic proposition restated in “Griot/Djeli” (“Poetry is music!” 7).

Since this chapter is also concerned with Baraka’s infusion of free jazz into his poetics –and, as discussed earlier free jazz is for Baraka the most politically-significant musical idiom to emerge from the jazz continuum –it is important to bear in mind that music has historically provided African Americans with cathartic transcendence, a ritualized form of momentary spiritual liberation. Such form of ritualized liberation is always in conversation with the text’s, or poem’s own purpose. Together, these cultural expressions of a similar black aesthetic seek to reflect the political struggles of the Black Consciousness and Black Power movements.

Briefly then, the meaning of free jazz is threefold in Baraka’s poetic production. First, at the idiomatic level, free jazz provides an aesthetic template that stands completely outside of Euro-American forms and aesthetic demands for the poem. Free jazz is the “non-

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Reprinted in “The Music,” 243-245.

matrixed” art form that writers should use to express the emerging nation. Second, at the thematic level, free jazz, because it is ingrained in the cultural continuum, allows Baraka to revisit the blues ancestry of black music and to re-map the cultural –and literary –history of African Americans through the trope of musicological performativity transposed in poetry.⁶ With this, Baraka confirms Lorenzo Thomas’s belief that Black Arts poets perceived free jazz musicians as griots (“Ascension” 128). Moreover, because it is “free,” free jazz provides a central metaphor for the political and economic freedom Black Power and Black Consciousness movements were demanding.⁷ Finally, at the sociological and ontological levels, free jazz, as Nathaniel Mackey notes, suggested a “model social order” that affirmed both individual –or solo “impulses” –and community –or, in Baraka’s stance, black nation –within an antiphonal framework (368). In the cultural nationalist poems and even beyond that period, all three levels often operate dialogically within the jazz gestalt; that is,

⁶ This is important since Baraka reclaims the black literary tradition, which he had previously criticized. For instance, in “The Myth of a Negro Literature,” he chastises black writers like Charles Chesnutt for their middle-class “mediocrity” cultivated to prove “that they were not who they really were, i.e. *Negroes*” (106). Furthermore, like Hughes, Baraka understands that blues and jazz ritualized and stylized expressivity is the portal to convey black ontology and identifies similar Hughesian griots as conveyors of blackness, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong and, most important, Charlie Parker (107). And in the Hughesian tradition of “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Baraka’s theorization of blues and jazz griots is in direct opposition to middle-class black artists whose bourgeois desires for (white) “sophistication” and upward mobility affect his literary portrayals of black life (107). Therefore, Baraka’s early griotism employs “the entire spectrum of the American experience from the point of view of the emotional history of the black man in [America]: as its victims and its chronicler” (111-112). Significantly, Baraka’s “chronicling” is never divorced from his cultural embeddings in the testimonial agencies of black music. Later, in “Philistinism and the Negro Writer,” Baraka reclaims the previously chastised writers for they constitute the cultural continuum he wishes to represent in his poems.

⁷ For more on the relationship between the New Music and Black Power politics, see Baskerville, *The Impact of Black Nationalist ideology on American Jazz Music of the 1960s and 1970s*, especially chapters 4 and 5.

Baraka's poetic production after 1965 often deploys free jazz structures, free jazz ethos and compositional process in order to have a point of entry into the tradition.

I. After Malcolm: Cultural Nationalism or Griotism in the Making?

Leroi Jones became Amiri Baraka after the assassination of Malcolm X. The tragedy prompted the bohemian Greenwich Village poet to move uptown, to Harlem the "black metropolis," and form the Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School (BARTS). While this chapter does not intend to repeat what has already been written about the meaning of Baraka's move, I would still like to highlight the fact that Baraka's early griotism emerges out of Malcolm X's legacy.⁸ In fact, his early griotism, which will reach full maturity in "In the Tradition" and *Wise Why's Y's*, is invariably connected to a remodeled version of black culture that was born in Harlem's cultural loci. Establishing Harlem as home of an effervescent nationalist revolution –especially after the riots of 1964 –Baraka conjures up the memory of Malcolm X's death as a constant reminder for the black masses of the daily threat posed by white power structures.

Fundamentally then, Baraka's BARTS and cultural nationalist postulations follow Malcolm X's revolutionary rhetoric and Frantz Fanon's demands for a "revolution of the

⁸ Obviously, *The Autobiography* and "The Legacy of Malcolm X, and the Coming of the Black Nation" (*Home* 238-250) provide first-hand accounts of this impact. See also, the first chapter of Woodard's study, 1-48; Harris's introduction to *The Reader*, xxiv-xxviii; Sollors, 180-221.

mind.” More importantly perhaps is the fact that Baraka himself had to undergo such “revolution of the mind” and forsake his ties to white bohemia and avant-garde praxes – especially his Black Mountain literary friendships –in order to grasp the extent of the poetic and political mission he had just inherited after Malcolm’s death. Baraka had to reclaim his own black history before he could restore that of the black nation. That brought him to reconsider Harlem no longer as “the capitol city of the black bourgeoisie” (Sollors 72), but as the “capital of Black America” (*Home* 87). This shift from Beat/bohemian rejection of bourgeoisie to griotic nationalism is key to understanding Baraka’s redefinition of the black aesthetic. While in Harlem, Baraka theorizes a form of cultural nationalism, with a functional and operational black aesthetic at its core, as essential counterpart to the politicized struggles. Baraka concludes that what is needed is a Black Cultural Consciousness movement (“Legacy,” 244), thereby establishing the function of black culture as a re-historicizing trope of blackness.

Baraka’s cultural nationalism is profoundly affected by Malcolm X’s rhetoric. In “Statement of the Basic Aims and Objectives of the Organization of Afro-American Unity,” Malcolm X contends that,

Our history and our culture were completely destroyed when we were forcibly brought to America in chains... We must recapture our heritage and our identity if we are ever to liberate ourselves from the bonds of white supremacy. We must launch a cultural revolution to unbrainwash [sic] an entire people... This cultural revolution will be the journey to the rediscovery

of ourselves. History is a people's memory...Armed with the past , we can with confidence charter a course for our future. Culture is an indispensable weapon in the freedom struggle. We must take hold of it and forge the future with the past. (427).⁹

The objectives of Malcolm X's program become clearly outlined in the "theme" of the Black Arts Movement, which according to Lorenzo Thomas, could be seen as "a program of reclamation" (*Don't Deny*, 116). The vibrancy of this program is especially central to Baraka's early nationalist poetics and definition of what the black artist should embody. To reclaim history for Baraka means that black art and black consciousness need to operate dialogically at all times. Thus, in "The Legacy of Malcolm X, and the Coming of the Black Nation," Baraka affirms that "We must be *conscious*. And to be conscious is to be *cultured*, processed in specific virtues and genius" (244).¹⁰ Baraka repeats this dictum in the more radical "The Need for a Cultural Base to Civil Rites and Bpower Mooments" collected in the black cultural nationalist *Raise, Race, Rays, Raze*: "no [black] man can be 'cultured' without being *consciously* black" (44 –emphasis Baraka's). By correlating black consciousness with black cultural expression Baraka suggests that stylized elements of his black aesthetic provide the hoped-for black response for a nationalist –and later, a Third-World Marxist –platform of liberation.

⁹ Reprinted in *Black Nationalism in America*, 421-427.

¹⁰ In *Home*, 234-250.

What this entails is that black art is an anthropological agency of historical, cultural, and ontological recuperation which is self-determined and self-contained, and which aims to negate Euro-American attempts to “control” historiography. Black art must reflect the cultural expressivity and processuality of Black Americans. More pointedly, black art must empower the people to rediscover their history and their identity in the hopes that with a renewed sense of self –not one imposed by White America –African Americans can begin to forge new paradigms of blackness that will lead to the formation of a self-determined black nation. In that sense, the function of black art, according to Baraka and following Malcolm X’s rhetoric, must be didactic.¹¹ For Baraka, “Black Power cannot be complete unless it is the total reflection of black people. Black Power must be spiritually, emotionally, and historically in tune with black people, as well as serving their economic and political ends” (“Need,” 42). In this nation-forming paradigm, the function of “Black art” is similar to what Sanchez expounded in the previous chapter; for both of them, black art is “[t]he re-creation of our lives, as black...to inspire, educate, delight and move black people” (“Need,” 46). Black art, then, is Baraka’s operational call-and-response aggregate deployed to revivify black unity and black consciousness. In turn, the duty of the nationalist poet is to tell the story of his country to its people in the tradition of the griot.

As Baraka further argues in “Nationalism Vs Pimpart,” “[t]he Black Artist strives to be the raised consciousness of a people” (128).¹² To raise consciousness, in this nationalist

¹¹ See for instance, his “Work Notes -66” in *Raise, Race, Rays, Raze*, 11-16; see also Sollors, 193.

¹² In *Raise, Race, Rays, Raze*, 125-133.

framework, means to propose new ways to gain a “sense of the wholeness of history and experience” (L. Brown 52). In Baraka’s essays, this sense of historical “wholeness” is rephrased as “total” history, a trope which bespeaks Baraka’s awareness of an antiphonal griotism, whereby his role as griot demands that he posit the new politics of blackness. These politics imply that black ontology includes the Diaspora, and by extension, the history of Africa as motherland and ancestral site of Black America. The reclamation of a diasporic history is a core objective of Malcolm X’s “Statement;” he fervently advocates that any attempt to “forge the future” is dialogically linked with a profound engagement with the African Diaspora (427).¹³ This, Baraka clearly expresses in “S.O.S.” (115), the first poem of *Black Art*, the poet’s first thoroughly nationalist collection of poems:

Calling black people
 Calling all black people, man woman child
 Wherever you are, calling you, urgent, come in
 Black People, come in, wherever you are, urgent, calling
 you, calling all black people
 calling all black people, come in, black people, come
 on in.

The statement, with its series of enjambments and repeated motifs characteristic of jazz composition, represents Baraka’s aesthetic and political invitation to “come in” Harlem’s Mecca, to enter the “Ka ‘Ba” crowded with “beautiful people/ with african imaginations/ full of masks and dances and swelling chants” (146, 9-11). Essentially, this is an invitation

¹³ Originally taken from George Breitman, *The Last Year of Malcolm X: The Evolution of a Revolutionary*. New York: Merit Publishers, 1967. 105-111. Reproduced in *Black Nationalism in America*, 421-427.

to claim one's blackness and contemplate its cultural and social potentialities. Blackness, in my understanding of Baraka's poetics, is thus the working trope for the "roots," and a marker for all black etymologies. It assumes the cultural and historical "wholeness" Baraka wishes to represent in his poems.

In that sense, any black aesthetic –one which seeks to express the trope of blackness –cannot be circumscribed by ideology only since it tends to express the African American antiphonal way of life; that is, Baraka's black aesthetic is framed in terms of how black artists, like blues griots, respond creatively to the conditions of the black experience. While the responses can convey ideology, they remain viscerally evocative of black conditions. In "The Fire Must Be Permitted to Burn Full Up," which is subtitled "Black 'Aesthetic,'" Baraka attests that "a way of feeling (or the description of the process of) is what an aesthetic sd [sic] be" (117).¹⁴ Therefore, Baraka's black aesthetic is more concerned with conveying how black feeling becomes poetic material or how black feeling is infused in poetic processuality, thereby making its procedural expression a significant –and not only a signifying –contribution in the flux of "the changing same."

In the same grain, Baraka, sharing the concerns of Black Arts poets like Sanchez, believes that "the purpose of [black] writing is to create a nation" (*Raise* 121). What he is positing, essentially, is that parallel and complementary acts of creation –the poem, the nation –result in the creation of *an*-other chapter in the master narrative of Black American liberation. Once again invoking the notion of historical wholeness, Baraka mentions, "[i]n

¹⁴ In *Raise, Race, Rays, Raze*, 117-123.

this grand creation is all creation” (121). If creative expressivity and prosody lead to nationalism, then the poem’s function once again upholds the inherent purpose of the New Music: to unify. As such, the Barakan black poem becomes a literalized version of the (jazz) gestalt within which all black poems enter in conversations with the African American cultural traditions.

II. Mountains, Dilemmas, Crises, and/or Destruction?: Theorizing Free Jazz in Baraka’s Black Arts Poetry

The eulogistic poem “A Poem for Black Hearts,” which closes *Target Study* and significantly marks the end of Baraka’s political ambivalence, contains a paradigmatic statement demanding the awakening of an Afrocentric consciousness in the wake of Malcolm’s assassination:

For all of him, and all of yourself, look up,
 black man, quit stuttering and shuffling, look up,
 black man, quit whining and stooping, for all of him,
 For Great Malcolm a prince of the earth, let nothing in us rest

until we avenge ourselves of his death (112, lines 21-25)¹⁵

In identifying the antagonist and in thus polarizing his racial politics, Baraka completely refashions the poetic paradigm. The poem to heal the “Black Hearts” becomes a poem postulating “Black Art(s)” as a way to galvanize nationalistic impulses within the culture. Significantly, the poem for “Black Art(s)” necessitates an important exercise of historical re-appropriation and revisionism. The alternate repetitions of the motivic “look up/black man” and “For him” suggest a call-response framework within which memory will catalyze social action. In order for black “Hearts” to generate black “Art,” they must shed the pathos of cultural minstrelsy and uncle-tomming (“stuttering and shuffling”), and compliant assimilation (“stooping”). To get “revenge” for Malcolm X’s death –which, like in Henderson’s and Sanchez’s Malcolm X poems, will be used as metaphor for the treatment of the black masses –therefore means that the poetic and the political must be interwoven in a new tapestry of cultural nationalism.

This new tapestry is clearly outlined in “STATE/MEANT,” which, while echoing Malcolm X’s “Statement,” indicates the direction the black artist must take if he/she is to represent black life after Malcolm X’s death:

The Black Artist’s role in America is to aid in the destruction of America as he knows it. His role is to report and reflect so precisely the nature of the society, and of himself in that society, that other men will be moved by the

exactness of his rendering, and if they are black men, grow strong though this moving...The Black Artist must draw out of his soul the correct image of the world. (251)¹⁶

Here, Baraka, entering his cultural nationalist phase, embodies the characteristics of the griot as exhorter. What Baraka demands is a re-interpretive aesthetic platform that will apply the empowering politics of self-determinism to the terrain of black art and will catalyze a cultural revolution. As such, Baraka's metaphor of destruction foreshadows Ron (Maulana) Karenga's definition in "Black Cultural Nationalism:" "Black art, like everything else in the community, must respond positively to the reality of the revolution...Black art must expose the enemy, praise the [black] people and support the revolution" (31-32).¹⁷

Therefore, Baraka's notion of a black aesthetic, while foregrounding the "Imperatives" of the Black Aestheticians like Ron Wellburn, exists at the dialogical crossroads between Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" and James T. Stewart's "The Development of the Revolutionary Artist." Despite being separated by almost forty years, both manifestoes urge black artists to stop imitating "white models" (Stewart 3) and construct new black cultural paradigms capable of galvanizing

¹⁵ *Target Study* is the second volume of poetry in *Black Magic*. The first one is *Sabotage* and the third is *Black Art*. Henceforth, all poems cited in the text will be from *Black Magic (BM)*, except where specific reference is needed.

¹⁶ In *Home*, 251-252. Harris, in *The Poetics and Politics of Amiri Baraka*, claims that "STATE/MEANT" is "a doctrinaire cultural nationalist manifesto for black art," 102.

¹⁷ In *The Black Aesthetic*, Addison Gayle, ed., 31-37.

revolutionary impulses for the formation of the black nation, which Hughes anticipated when he spoke of building the “temples for tomorrow.” Similarly, when Stewart says that “we must know that we are building the stones for the New Era” (6), he seems to be answering Hughes’s notion that once “free within [them]selves,” that is, once rid of the shackles of white paradigms, the black writers can finally adopt the guise of griots. Thus, according to Stewart,

[t]he purpose of writing is to enforce the sense we have of the future. The purpose of writing is to enforce the sense we have of responsibility of understanding our role in the shaping of a new world. After all, experience is development; and development is destruction. (7)

Stewart’s definition of the new black writing is fundamental for two reasons. First, it draws on Malcolm X’s notion that in order to write the future, the black writer must be actively pursuing a shared past –his responsibility is to probe cultural traditions and thus refigure the gestalt. Second, the new “methodology” (6) of representing blackness that Stewart proposes is best exemplified by jazz, which further interlinks Stewart’s black aesthetic with Hughes’s. For Hughes, only the syncopated sounds of pure black jazz can interweave the many threads of black life and black resistance: “the eternal beating of the tom-tom in the Negro soul –the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world.” Stewart even identifies the revolutionary or “non-matrixed” free jazz of Ornette Coleman as the “most meaningful music created today”(5), especially since free jazz is firmly grounded in the black vernacular tradition.

While this chapter does not intend to repeat what critics like Smethurst, Woodard, Baskerville and Benston –and what I discussed in the previous chapter –have already said about the dialogisms jazz and black cultural nationalism, suffice it to say that the central position that free jazz occupies in the cultural history of the 1960s in Black America is crucial to any understanding of Baraka’s cultural nationalist poetry. Aesthetically, free jazz, while expanding significantly the bebop mentality, sheds all previously internalized compositional patterns, especially regarding melody. This refusal to abide by the aesthetic standards of past idioms does not mean that the ethos of the music was not preserved. What it means for Baraka instead is that both the form and the content of black music were affected by this new “free” approach.

In “The Changing Same,” Baraka avers that, “Form and content are both mutually expressive of the whole. And they are both equally expressive...each have an identifying place and direction” (185). Therefore, a poem like “Form is Emptiness” (155) from “Black Art” signifies upon compositional orthodoxies:

The word Raaa
in all its per

mutations:

Raaaaa

aaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

Allaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh

Dam

Ballaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh (1-8)

Dam
Baaahhhllaaahhh

is not

words

is no lines

no meanings

Raaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhh the unchanging, (11-16)

Obviously, this chant/poem is not comprised only of words, its lines are neither metered nor do they follow conventional regularity and caesura. More importantly, for the uninitiated, it is meaningless and “empty” of signification. However, these syncopated lines with their invocation of free jazz prophet Sun Ra, whose own spirit, despite “mutations,” conjures up African-derived Damballah, partake in the mapping of African American vernacular tradition, the “unchanging” cultural continuum, or the “changing same.” In this poem, the content informs the form; both are presented as chants. The textual rendition of an oral performance is contingent upon the audience’s understanding of cultural codes (coded “meanings”). Here, the apparent formlessness of the poem is anything but “empty” in terms of meaning. It is in fact this negotiation of space on the page that confers its meaning to the poem. Lines are intentionally uninformative and melismatic unless they are taken as coded free jazz allusions, in which case, the free jazz chant becomes simultaneously an extension of the tradition (black) it signifies upon and a subverter of the tradition (white) it seeks to destroy.

The rejection and destruction of Eurocentric aesthetics respond to a dissatisfaction in the black community with the ways in which blackness is both represented and considered by white power structures. For that reason, the poems Baraka wishes to write are “poems that kill”/ “Assassin Poems” (“Black Art, 116, lines 19-20). Both formally and in terms of content, the new black poems should seek to destroy (“STATE/MEANT”), avenge (e.g. Malcolm X’s assassination), and purge the black nation of all forms of whiteness.¹⁸ These “Assassin Poems” would perform the same task as free jazz. In both *Blues People* (228) and in “Sonny Rollins” (55), performers of the New Thing or free jazz are considered to be “assassins” of aesthetics and conventions.¹⁹ The radicalization of free jazz is *in tune* with the demands of the emerging Black Aestheticians, in the sense that black art should “commit” African Americans to the impending revolution (Karenga 35). This revolution, already present in the aesthetics and politics of free jazz, parallels the political and cultural imperatives of black cultural nationalism. In his *Autobiography*, Baraka claims that, “[t]he fact of music was the black poet’s basis for creation. And those of us in the BAM were drenched in black music and wanted our poetry to be black music.

¹⁸ Harris contends that, “Free jazz allowed Baraka into the world of idealized blackness, a world stripped of whiteness...Here the black voice is purged of whiteness,” in “How You Sound??”: Amiri Baraka Writes Free Jazz,” in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, 317.

¹⁹ “Sonny Rollins” is reprinted in *Black Music*, 52-55; on musicians as “assassins,” see also Mackay, 362 and n.13; Sollors, 192-193.

Not only that, we wanted our poetry to be armed with the spirit of the revolution” (237).²⁰ To use free jazz as theme and idiom therefore authenticates Baraka’s griotic desires to write the black nation and radicalize the new black poem.²¹

As mentioned in the previous chapter, free jazz, for Baraka is “*Unity Music*”²² whose griotic function is to reclaim cultural African American history as foundational and “unitary myth” (Neal). Thus, free jazz becomes culturally re-inscriptive in the sense that its performativity allows Baraka to reclaim the “wholeness” of tradition, and especially return to the centrality of the blues ethos. Free jazz, like blues and bebop, in Baraka’s poetry encompasses black cultural memory. In *Blues People*, Baraka subsumes this under the trope of “*total area*,” a compositional awareness of the cultural continuum out of which free jazz, as the most actualized idiom of the “changing same,” emerges. He writes: “[Free jazz] depends for its form on the same references as primitive blues forms. It considers the *total area* of its existence as a means to evolve, to move, as an intelligently shaped musical concept, from its beginning to its end” (226 –emphasis Baraka’s). Similarly, in “Blues, Poetry, and the New Music,” he affirms,

²⁰ For a supplementary reading of this quote, see Sherry Brennan’s “On the Sound of Water: Amiri Baraka’s ‘Black Art’,” 308-310. Brennan analyses the link between poetry and music in Baraka’s work, albeit using a different approach than mine.

²¹ Even though Jemie’s definition of jazz was written in reference to Hughes’s poetry, it seems more accurate to use it in regards to Baraka. Jemie writes: “Jazz is process-music, a dynamic force developing, moving, its impulse is recalcitrant, rebellious, revolutionary. Jazz carries within it the vision of an alternative mode of life; and just as continued black existence in circumstances of deprecation is a reproach to American democracy, so is jazz ... a rival and subverter of the mainstream culture” (22)

²² In “The Changing Same,” 210, the emphasis is Baraka’s.

[t]he new music is always rooted in historical certainty...it *uses* history, it is not paralyzed by it!...The new music reinforces the most valuable memories of a people but at the same time creates new forms, new modes of expression, to more precisely reflect contemporary experience! (266-267).²³

Transposed into Baraka's poetics, this experiential –and experimental –music becomes a functional creative flux which is matrixed primarily by the communicative predicament of shared blackness.

Contained in free jazz are a people's history ("unitary myth") and, more importantly perhaps, the ritualized and re-stylized means ("new forms," "new modes of expression") through which that people has relentlessly negotiated that history in the hostile environment of the U.S. For Baraka, this certainty about the sociologically representational function of black music had been in place ever since *Blues People*: "[t]he most expressive Negro music of any given period will be an exact reflection of what the Negro himself is. It will be a portrait of the Negro in America at that particular time" (137).²⁴ Baraka's contention certainly holds in the cultural nationalist context.²⁵ Consequently, as critics such as Harris have underlined, free jazz is, despite its apparent chaotic sound, a syncretized form of black music; it encompasses the sounds and ethos of blues, gospel, and bebop.²⁶ By incorporating

²³ In *The Music*, 262-267.

²⁴ For more on music as representation of black life, see Mackay, 359-365.

²⁵ In "Philistinism and the Negro Writer," he states that, "the Negro's formal attempt at "high art" was found in his music," quoted in Mackay 364. See also n.16.

²⁶ See Harris's brief but pertinent "'How You Sound?': Amiri Baraka Writes Free Jazz," 312-325.

free jazz as theme and idiom in his poetry, Baraka responds to the Black Arts demands for aesthetic syntheses that restores the “integral unity of culture, politics and art” (Neal) and therefore provides new templates for representing blackness. The agency of Baraka’s storytelling is to be found in the musical syncretism of free jazz.

Like Hughes, Henderson and Sanchez, Baraka constantly reaffirms the jazz gestalt in which political engagement necessitates aesthetic engagement with musicological exploration and expansion –or improvisation. Baraka’s understanding of black music as the ideal representation of blackness subtends that the meaning of the poem, especially the process of literalization, needs to be constantly reassessed. If the free jazz poem is an instance of historiographical performativity, then the literalized poetic voice must follow the demands of the music, not those of preconceived Euro-American poetics, especially since Baraka believes that black music is Black American History as evidenced in *Blues People*, for instance (L. Brown 53).

The most striking example of the inextricable cultural interlinkings between musical, poetic, and political demands in the seminal poem “Black Art” (116-117), which not only defines the aesthetics of both free jazz and Black Arts movement, but also responds poetically to the antiphonal call of “S.O.S.”²⁷ With its irregular lines, inconsistent punctuation, absence of rhyme scheme, scat-like onomatopoeia (“rrrrrrrrrrrrrr...tuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuh,” line 26), black vernacular signifying language (“whities ass,” 28) and occasional paratactic structure, “Black Art” is certainly

²⁷ For another reading of “Black Art,” see Sollors, 198-199.

“free” from accepted Euro-American poetic conventions, and closely resembles the seemingly chaotic compositional structure of free jazz. The crux of the poem, however, resides in the stanza at the end of poem, which functions like a jazz coda:

We want a black poem. And a
 Black World.
 Let the world be a Black Poem
 And Let All Black People Speak This Poem
 Silently
 or LOUD (51-56)

This coda is Baraka’s transposition of the textual into the oral. Its presentation on the page suggests the tonal inflections that should be reproduced vocally, or musically. Sonically, the rhythmic irregularity created by capitalized words confers to the line a declamatory tonality akin to free jazz drumming. Moreover, the rhythmic continuity of monosyllable word offers new possible vehicles for conveying the same meaning. For instance, “We Want a /Black World/Let the world be Black/Let All Blacks Speak This\LOUD” conveys the essential tenets of self-determinism and black pride in black cultural nationalism.

Yet this monosyllabic continuity is interfered with by “Poem” and “People,” whose polysyllabic sound becomes an oral vehicle for Black Art functionality. In the syllabic and alliterative continuity between “Poem” and “People” lies one of the central aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement, which considers “The Black Nation as Poem” (Neal). There is a dialogically interactive relationship between “Poem” and “People,” wherein both converge to scream “LOUD” the coming of the black nation. This scream –I will analyze its ideophonic function in more details in a later section –is a distinctive element free jazz

musicians tried to imitate or recreate through their instrument. The fact that Baraka considers the cross-fertilizing potential of a black poem for black people only confirms that “Black Art” follows the theme and idiom of free jazz. Since free jazz, through its griotic musical approach, invokes the black musical tradition (Harris, “‘How You Sound’,” 312-313) and provides “a connection with Baraka’s [own] ethnic past” (317), its infusion in “Black Art” provides an investigative point of (re-)entry into “the changing same” as processual cultural history.

III. Griot Singing/Singing Soul: Free Jazz Aesthetics as Poetics

Among the free jazz techniques that Baraka deploys in “Black Art,” perhaps the most important one is found in the idiomatic transposition of collective improvisation, which for Baraka translates in the use of the pronoun “we.”²⁸ Evoking the sociological “we-ness” of Umbra discussed in a previous chapter of this dissertation as well as Don Lee’s definition of the black poet, Baraka suggests the collective approach to compositional improvisation that characterizes free jazz ensembles.²⁹ In free jazz, the usual rhythmic continuity creating the alternation between thematic phrasing and solo is obliterated to

²⁸ In *The Poetics and Politics of Amiri Baraka*, Harris terms this process, “jazzification,” 99.

²⁹ In “Black Poetry: Which Direction,” Lee theorizes that “black poets will deal with themselves as ‘individuals’ first and then will move toward a concept of ‘peoplehood;’ better yet, they will move from the *I* to the *we* to the *us* to the *our*.” In *Negro Digest*, (October 1969): 27. Also quoted in Joyce’s *Ijala*, 64.

favor improvisational autonomy among the musicians.³⁰ That way, the necessary distinction between soloist and the musicians who provide accompaniment (bass, drum) ultimately disappears and each member of the group becomes a soloist.³¹ The composition is thus built upon the cross-fertilizing parallelism of solos, and more specifically, through its antiphonal or call-response dynamic. In such an environment, each soloist is allowed to work freely without a predetermined set of chords or pre-established melodic structure, thereby foregoing any attempt at what was before known as group cohesiveness. Each solo morphs into one another and seems to abide by its own structural and rhythmic rules. Obviously, in this compositional framework, “the soloist no longer stands out, and the group conversation takes precedence” (Hersch 112). Finally, out of the apparent unstructured “sound” of free jazz comes what Hersch calls “group coherence,” which Baraka rephrases into “unity music.”

The metaphor of group conversation in collective improvisation within which each soloist achieves a musical form of freedom of expression was appealing to Baraka. This aesthetic construct where black individual freedoms are expressed without the constraints of technical orthodoxy could easily be transferred onto the terrain of Baraka’s poetics and politics.³² Baraka configures the pronoun “we” as a linguistic counterpart to the group; each cultural nationalist poem that uses the “we” is the result of an amalgamation of black voices

³⁰ This comes from my own translation of free jazz characteristics that Jacques Aboucaya and Jean-Pierre Peyrelle detail in *Du Bebop au Free Jazz*, 140-141.

³¹ Ibid, 140.

³² Ibid, 140.

similar to collective improvisation. In that sense, the “we” is polyphonic and multivocalic; it encompasses both individual identities and voices so that any evocation of the “we” will imply the black nation. Such process closely resembles traditional African antiphonal ritual, which Baraka, through the agency of free jazz, re-stylizes.³³ As a result, it can be inferred that this new black poetic “we” seems dialogically linked with Ornette Coleman’s theory of “Harmolodics.” Coleman theorizes that musical ideation is shared among the musicians whose roles are doubled as composers “in the moment;” this, in turn, creates a dynamic wherein each musician experiences total freedom since he doesn’t have to follow, accompany or, even, imitate anyone.³⁴ This harmolodic process is evidently ontologically and politically significant.

For those reasons, I tend to disagree with critics like Harris, who contends that Baraka’s “conversion to cultural nationalism” necessitates “a rejection of the personal lyric—the ‘I’ song” (*Poetics*, 105). It is not a rejection that occurs, but more a transmutation that follows the aesthetic guidelines he had set out for the black poet. Ironically, in an interview with Harris, Baraka defines his role: “the poet’s function is an interpreter of society and as a reflector of society” (177). If the poet is to reflect his society in his art, he must be an intricate part of it and be able to interpret the ways in which black aesthetic feelings are

³³ As quoted in the introduction, Lawrence Levine contends that in such antiphonal rituals, the individual is placed “in continual dialogue with his community, allowing him...to preserve his voice as a distinct entity and to blend it with those of his fellows” (33).

³⁴ Translated from Aboucaya and Peyrelle, 143. For more on Coleman’s often confusing and incomplete theory, see John Litweiler’s *Ornette Coleman: A Harmolodic Life*. New York: William & Morrow, 1993.

expressed. A poet rejecting the “I” thus rejects the possibility of the self within the community and certainly cannot perform his griotic function. Instead, the Barakan expressive “I” is transferred into the black consciousness –and collective –“we” so that the poet/griot’s “*Ujima*,” his “Collective work and Responsibility” should strive to achieve “oneness,” which seeks to reproduce what Ornette Coleman was trying to do with ensemble work.³⁵ This “oneness” –a trope for free jazz compositional *and* for nation-forming paradigms –is developed out of the poet’s desire to reaffirm the unitary myth of blackness. “Oneness” is but another term for “coherence” and “unity” in order to “nationfy” (“IT’S NATION TIME,” *SP*, 199, 50)

Equally puzzling for critics has also been Baraka’s succinct definition of free jazz in “New Black Music: A Concert in Benefit of The Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School” (1965). He closes his speech/essay with these words: “New Black Music is this: Find the self, then kill it” (176). While this formulation is congruent with Baraka’s “destructive alchemy” (Benston, *Performing*, 193) mapped in “STATE/MEANT” and “Black Art,” his postulation of “self” gestures toward reclamation of blackness. To “kill the self” is to annihilate the assimilationist impulses that prevent the purest expression of “the pure heart, the pumping black heart.”³⁶ Similarly, for the polyphonic “we” to exist, all these ethnically unconscious “selves” must be destroyed: the self that sought self-improvement through cultural mimicry, the self that sought to benefit from the tenets of individualism and self-

³⁵ In “7 Principles of US: Maulana Karenga & The Need for a Black Value System,” reprinted in *Raise, Race, Rays, Raze*, 135-36.

reliance which are at the foundation of white America's Manifest Destiny, the creative black self that has been enslaved by white-regulated aesthetic conventions. Just like free jazz, Baraka's "we" is purged of all traces of cultural whiteness. In so doing, musical and poetic emancipation from orthodoxies and hegemonies will be able to reverberate at the socio-political level.

For example, in "Sacred Chant for the Return of Black Spirit and Power" (*BM*, 192), Baraka gathers griots –poets and musicians –in a ritual of exorcism:

Ohhh break love with white things

Ohhh, Ohhh break break break let it roll down

Let it kill, let it kill, let the thing you are destroy (1-3)

MMMMMMMMMMMM

MMMMMMMMMMMM...OOOOOOOOOO...Death fiddle

Claw life from space

Time

Cries inside bleeds the word

(6-11)

We lay high and meditating on white evil.

We are destroying it. They die in the streets.

Look they clutch their throats. Agggggg. Stab him.

Agggggggg.

MMMMMMMMMMMM

³⁶ From Clay's long monologue in *Dutchman*, 34.

OOOOOOOO (16-21)

In this poem, Baraka employs a vast array of free jazz techniques to underscore how the music actually draws from a black vernacular tradition that arcs back to Voodoo and other black spiritual practices. The irregular meter of the lines –meter was “abandoned as a compositional constraint” (Berliner 337) by free jazz groups –combined with scatted chanting provides an idiomatic framework that is constantly referenced by the theme of destruction in the poem. By conjuring up the black nation’s collective sense of blackness, the griots “bleed[s] the word” and restore its validity as black-centered language, as a compositional language capable of voicing and performing the new black ethos.

Thus, in “The Racist” (*BM*, 126-127), Baraka’s griotic “we” employs the free jazz motivic repetition of “Black Art” (“We want”) in order to detail what this new black aesthetic of collective art “created out of the context of the people” and divested of “white evil” entails:³⁷

We want everything. We want
to feel
everything. (11-13)
...
(new things
like black
like feeling

³⁷ Benston prefers to talk about the “rhythm of incandescent desire” when speaking of the repetition of “we want” in “Black Art.” In *Performing Blackness*, 195; Sollors quotes Baraka “10 Phases” which he draws from Karenga. “Collective” is the first characteristic of the new revolutionary black art. 187.

like inside kingly wealth

like
 the world
 or love
 or all that the shadowy beings
 are deprived of. (17-25)

Using one of Hughes's recurrent images ("SHADOW") in *Ask Your Mama*, Baraka claims a "space" for both the new black poets and for the expanding black nation. Welding together cultural and territorial nationalisms, Baraka's griotic "we" anticipates the call of "IT'S NATION TIME:"

we are worlds of leanings, talling, reaching, with,
 reaching with, what we reach for already
 in back, of us, reaching
 for and through
 the space we take (50-55)

The absence of a final period, like the unclosed parenthesis earlier ("(new things") opens both poetic and musical vista and creative flux for new explorations. The "space" to be taken, like the "(new things" to be explored, offers endless possibilities for the poet as for the free jazz innovator. These poems exemplify how the metaphor of free jazz as "music running into words" is always available to Baraka.³⁸

³⁸ In "New Music, New Poetry," reprinted in *The Music*, 243.

In “The Changing Same,” Baraka mentions that the “new music began by calling itself ‘free,’ and this is social and is in direct commentary on the scene it appears in. Once free, it is spiritual” (193). As Mackay suggests, this aesthetic position regarding free jazz is also applicable to his poetry (381). In the poem “Vowel 2” (*BM*, 189-191), Baraka uses the trope of freedom inherent in free jazz to structure the poem and to infuse its thematic content:

Freeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee
 Freeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee
 Freeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee
 EEE EEE EEE
 EEE EEE EEE
 EEE EEE EEE
 EEE EEE EEE
 Freeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee
 BURST
 Bodys moving in the light
 BURST (1-11)³⁹

The melismatic representation of “Free” suggests a celebratory embrace of shared blackness that has been finally liberated (“BURST”) from the shackles of socio-historical – and aesthetic – discrimination. By capitalizing “BURST,” Baraka not only punctuates its sound and the rhythm of the whole poem, he also doubles its meaning. With the black

³⁹ Sollors briefly analyzes this passage as one instance of Baraka’s use of the scream, 196-197. While it is pertinent, Sollors’s contention is rather limiting (not limited) in terms of interpretative potential.

“Bodys” –the historical site of violence and prejudices –now allowed to “move” freely, creative expressions of blackness “BURST” on the community: “BODYSMOVING SOUNDS BEAT AROUND IT BEAT EEEEEEE FREEE EEEEE/ BODYS MOVING FREEEEEEEE (21-22). Moreover, though the insisting repetition of “FREE” and “BURST,” Baraka as poet/griot reclaims the word through the music; sounds and words “BURST” freely on the page. Even the presentation of the poem subtends such affirmation. The poem is printed in landscape setting, which supports the intertwined themes of compositional and representational freedom characteristic of both the new music and Baraka’s Black Arts poetry, and proposes new –as in countercultural and anti-establishment –approaches to representing blackness in poetry.

By subverting usual presentation and by affirming complete freedom through idiomatic and thematic treatment, Baraka asserts his griotism: “FREE” and “BURST” lead naturally to a new form of black preaching. The juxtaposition of the capitalized “FREE,” “BURST,” and “PREACH” (51) aims at reproducing visually the gradation of affects that will trigger and sustain the new revolutionary art. At the same time, this juxtaposition of terms seeks to reproduce the juxtaposition of sonically elaborated patterns of compositional spontaneity present in free jazz.⁴⁰ Interestingly, after several repetitions of the motivic “BURST,” the poem ends with a succession of tonal inversions, accentuations and step-rhythmic constructions that culminate in the assertion of the new revolutionary black spirit (“the energy/ the force”) born out of aesthetic, musical and socio-political freedom:

⁴⁰ Aboucaya and Peyrelle, 140, trans.

preach

BURST

preach

BURST

preach

BURST

PREACH

PREACH

PREACH

Burst BURST burst BURST

Body's moving mind is soul is spirit is is the place

the energy

the force (45-57)

Ultimately, the poem “preaches” a similar theme –with a similar music –than “Black Art.” Both poems militate, using the agency of free jazz, in favor of raising black consciousness and creating the black nation (“the place”), a geographical and sociological correlative to the black spirit.

“Vowel 2” is also important for the way in which Baraka uses fragmented phrasing (Gridley 227), another free jazz characteristic that Baraka borrows for his poetics. In the looser compositional framework of free jazz, fragmented phrasing often resulted in the rhythmic asymmetry and contributed to the myth of the music being incoherent and dissonant. In the poetry, this dissonant and disharmonic approach to improvisational

composition translates into parataxis and, as will be discussed later, run-on syntax.⁴¹ Parataxis, for Baraka, aims at signifying upon traditional Westernized syntax, which had, up to then, forced the black poem into the realm of mimetic art.⁴² Preferring to re-create in his poems the sonic disjunctions of free jazz collaborative improvisation and the spontaneous approach to composition perfected by Coltrane, Baraka remodels the black poem based on the needs for new compositional paradigms and aesthetics. One example of paratactic composition is the poem “spake adventure” (*BM*, 177). See the first few lines:

pacts boys and dogs, dirty niggers, fly
 speak sound sunny walking dogs grassiron, initials, signs
 street crack sound round universe green stains paint...round rounded
 ded lamp shade of bird winged gone sound moan love god job
 is abbreviated no cars dead paper and metal, stone and windows, sun
 and the fellahs sings something flying leaves banged in the bowl (1-6)

Baraka’s ability to reproduce the dynamics of improvisation is shown in this extract. Each line resorts to alliterative continuity to explore sound/word associations. For instance, the alternating alliterative sequences of stops and fricatives produce alterations of pitch and tone that lends a punctuated musicality to the poem. The “adventure” then becomes a journey into sound; that is, each line, through its paratactic structure evocative of stream-of-

⁴¹ Mary Ellison also discusses run-on syntax as a jazz device. Her discussion is, however, more general. 123-124.

⁴² See also Won-gu Kim’s insightful “‘In the Tradition:’ Amiri Baraka, Black Liberation, and Avant-Garde Praxis in the U.S.,” 345-346.

consciousness techniques, has its own sound, which, when blended with the others –a sort of stylized creative interplay –creates *a* unique, and inventively free, sound.

Paratactic composition is also one of the techniques used in “Part of the Doctrine” (*BM*, 200). In this poem, Baraka employs homophonic sequencing that foreshadow the title of his book of essays *Raise, Race, Rays, Raze*:

RAISE THE RACE RAISE THE RAYS THE RAZE RAISE IT RACE RAISE
ITSELF RAISE THE RAYS OF THE SUNS RACE TO RAISE IN THE RAZE
OF THIS TIME AND THIS PLACE FOR THE NEXT, AND THE NEXT RACE
OURSELVES TO EMERGE BURNING ALL INERT GASSES GASSED AT
[THE
GOD OF GUARDING THE GUARDIANS OF GOD WHO WE ARE GOD IS...

(1-5)

As new “GUARDIANS” of “WHO [THEY] ARE,” that is, as self-determined griots of a newly re-appropriated and re-historicized blackness, black cultural nationalists partake in a project to illuminate, symbolically, the “RACE’s” historical “shadow world” with the “RAYS” of a Sun-Ra. Here, parataxis allows for a dialectic of consciousness “raising” and “razing.” For Baraka, as for most black cultural nationalists, it is fundamental to “raze” the last vestiges of cultural whiteness for the new social and cultural paradigms to be truly implemented; only then can “race” consciousness be “raised.” Baraka’s imperative to “RAISE THE RACE” and to “RAZE” cultural whiteness in politics *and* in poetry echoes what Larry Neal advocates in “And Shine Swam On:” “what we are asking for is a new synthesis; a new sense of literature as a living reality. But first, we must liberate ourselves,

destroy the double consciousness” (21).⁴³ Through the motivic repetition of this homophonous dialectic (RAISE-RAZE), Baraka therefore affirms his own role as griot, whose usage of free jazz as cultural memory, aims at claiming black nationhood.

The same griotic sense of mission is central to “Black People: This is Our Destiny” (*BM*, 199). For the poem, Baraka, using the “nationfying” “we,” has recourse to run-on syntax as compositional device. In fact, the poem is one long sentence, whose clauses are separated only by occasional commas. This complete disregard for acceptable syntax evokes that of free jazz musicians like John Coltrane who often extended compositions beyond time constraints; it wasn’t rare for a Coltrane set to be comprised of only one or two songs.⁴⁴ Once again, Baraka reverts to the free jazz metaphor of collective expression to restate his theme of black unity. Thus, all the clauses, whose juxtaposition suggests the improvisatory structure of polyrhythmic patterns, converge to reaffirm the centrality of the “rhythm” for the nationalization of the black masses: “a rhythm a playing re-understood now by one of the 1st race/ the primitives the first men who evolve again to civilize the world” (18-20). By using the diasporic history that Hughes had already mapped in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” to underline the continuity of blackness, Baraka claims a continuum of “rhythms” continuously “re-understood,” readapted and refigured to emote the masses and bring about the revolution of consciousness.

⁴³ Reprinted in *Visions of a Liberated Future*, 7-23.

⁴⁴ Berlinger cites Elvin Jones, Coltrane’s drummer, who recalls such performances, 338.

Similarly, in “The Spirit of Creation is Blackness” (*SP*, 225-226), Baraka uses run-on syntax and paratactic constructions in order to reproduce poetically the seemingly autonomous rhythmic patterns of free jazz improvisation. At the same, Baraka’s theme is rather linear; he charts the evolution of black nationalism (“these are the reds, the greens, the holy blacks/ of the necessary harmony,” 20-21) in the U.S.⁴⁵ Such griotic poeticizing of Black History is parallel to Baraka’s understanding of cultural expression as a “changing same.” “We are sons drawing new life/ go, together, as part of the same” (4-5). Interestingly, while the structure of the poem employs parataxis in order to evoke the sonic abstractions of free jazz, the theme follows the flux of the cultural continuum. Hence, while the phrasing, like in free jazz, is often fragmentary, the theme of unity remains at the center of the poetic and political project:

Yo head be all our heads and its risen like it was the sun drawn you up
with it, and we are drawn around in tune like motion, plane you plane me
are plane we, a crowd of us, swahili black, weusi jua, and there are words
with this melody, and words and melody, tune, rhythm, the harmony, are all
the same.

we merge with it
all things are it
we rhythm and sound and suncolor
we rise and set and sing and move (41-49)

⁴⁵ Accordingly, see the title of Alphonso Pickney’s own map of black nationalism in the U.S., *Red, Black, and Green*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1976.

Baraka's conflation of personal and communal consciousnesses into the trope of blackness is equated with the new vernacular paradigm of jazz text ("words and melody, tune, the harmony" –the last three comprising the jazz nexus), which indicates how black national expressivity is actually a merging of cultural performances; historicity and jazz performativity are the two vectors of "the changing same." Moreover, the "it," the new paradigm of blackness, proposes a new ontological "we rhythm." With this, Baraka points to the Africanisms inherent in this African American "we," mainly in regards to the function of music, which, according to Patricia Maultsby, is to "translate everyday experience into sounds" (188). In thus indexing Africanisms, Baraka not only alludes to the free jazz musicians' renewed interest for African idioms (Gridley 227), he also gestures toward reclamation of Africa as the locus of cultural memory.

IV. "I am descended from Drum:" Reassessing African Retentions within the Syncretic Matrix of Free Jazz.

In *Red, Black, and Green: Black Nationalism in the United States*, Alphonso Pinkney defines cultural nationalism in these terms:

Within the context of black nationalism, the concept of cultural nationalism assumes that peoples of African descent share a way of life, or culture, which is fundamentally different from that of Europeans and other non-Africans. This way of life, it is assumed, is permitted greater freedom of

expression on the continent of Africa than in the Western Hemisphere, but it is shared by Afro-Americans as well. (127)

Many cultural theorists have expounded the ontological and cultural interlinkings between Africa and African America especially in the 1960s, in the era of liberation and anti-colonialism in Africa. For instance, in the Black Arts movement's seminal *Black Fire*, the second essay is John Henrik Clarke's "Reclaiming the Lost African Heritage." It follows Stewart's aforementioned essay that defines the revolutionary black artist. Significantly, the placement of the essay suggests that it is essential for the revolutionary artist to be firmly grounded within his cultural traditions, namely those that affirm his "Africanness." Similarly, many poets of the Black Arts Movement claimed Africa as motherland.

For Baraka, to claim an African lineage is necessary to delineate and define the African American distinctive identity. Reflecting on his time as a cultural nationalist, Baraka confesses to Ossie Onuora Enekwe that, "we felt we had to know African history and African culture if we were to fully understand our origin as a people" (128).⁴⁶ Essentially, the cultural and identitive dialogisms that Baraka asserts are rephrasings of his demands for diasporic unity found in "S.O.S." Moreover, the call to the Diaspora for a cross-fertilizing and experiential blackness implies a return to the "political and cultural solidarity" (Woodard 170) of Garvey's "Back-to-Africa" mentality. Baraka states,

⁴⁶ This interview, conducted in 1978, is collected in *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*, edited by Charlie Reilly, 118-129.

“Back to Africa” for certain, in all the ways we can reestablish contact, since we understand our connection Racially, Historically, Culturally, Politically, and Emotionally... To recreate Africa as a unified power base to demand respect for Black people the world over. This is Pan-Africanism, because wherever we are we have a commonality based on our common struggle. (qtd in Woodard 171)

This political and cultural return to “roots,” which had already been claimed by free jazz musicians like Coltrane in his *Africa/Bass Sessions* (1961), translates into a body of poems that seek to extend the “boundaries” of the black aesthetic in formation to include more stylized elements of the African aesthetic defined by Gena Da Caponi.⁴⁷

In the poem “Africa Africa Africa” (*SP*, 175-176), Baraka restates the antiphonal “Africa for Africans” (1-4) mantra before engaging creatively, spiritually, and politically with the Diaspora:

Africa
 Africa
 We are a whole people
 We are a whole gorgeous people
 We are Africans (24-28)

 A whole people, where ever in this
 solar system, we are the soul of the

⁴⁷ Norman Weinstein recognized that Coltrane’s production after 1960 derived primarily from his engagement with Africa themes, 63; Caponi’s map of African aesthetics is explained in the introduction.

whole
 system
 Africans
 Our land, wherever we are,
 Africa (33-39)

In the “dialogic interaction” (Caponi 9) between “whole,” “people,” “we,” and “Africans,” Baraka configures most of his nationalist tropes. As mentioned before, notions of wholeness permeate Baraka’s profound understanding of the necessity of grasping this sense of historical and experiential (“whole”) blackness. By locating the site of this developing ethnic “group consciousness” (9) in Africa, Baraka is able to define black identity as unitary trope dialogically linked with an inherent myth of origin impossible to deny. Similarly, the motivic repetition of “we are,” “whole,” and “Africans” establishes an ontological linkage Baraka constantly reinvests in his anthropological journey to find “the historical roots of Afro-American people.”⁴⁸

Baraka’s grounding in African cultural “roots” also includes his study of Swahili.⁴⁹ In “Kutoa Umjoa” (*SP*, 224), which in Swahili means, “call for unity,” Baraka conceptualizes his nationalist “we” in terms of its pan-African reverberation:

all them meeeeeees need to
 hook up into a big we a big we
 a big big black black weeeeeee
 all them big black bad bad meeeeees

⁴⁸ See the interview in *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*, 103.

⁴⁹ See his interview with Enekwe, 128.

need need needta hook up hookhook hook up
 in a bad black wee a bad badd a black black black
 we
 yeh (30-37)⁵⁰

By welding together literary renditions of altissimo (“meeeeeees,” “weeeeeee”) and rhythmic patterns produced by repetitions of units (“big,” “black,” “need,” “hook,” “bad”), Baraka highlights the African retentions in free jazz.⁵¹ Here again, Baraka’s desire to probe the historical roots of Black Americans inspires a musicological interest in free jazz ancestry. Evoking the “African concept of music as a communal, creative activity” (Erlich 45), the poet’s griotic exhortations to unite under the communality of African ancestry suggests that the liberation of diasporic Blacks, like the liberation of jazz improvisational composition by free jazz and the liberation from Europeanized aesthetics by the new black poem, is a collective and polyphonic project.⁵² This process is repeated in “Somebody’s Slow Is Another Body’s Fast (Preachment)” (*SP*, 221-223): “I weee. Bee weeee. A weeeee. Us need. Us. Us need. Our self’s. Us/cd be” (61-62).

Empowered by this “active engagement of the whole person and the whole community” (Caponi 9) –the “me-within-the-we” of shared blackness across the Diaspora – Baraka, in “AFRIKAN REVOLUTION” (*SP*, 230-234), once again adopts the guise of the griot/exhorter to summon all Blacks of African descent to unite in the struggle against

⁵⁰ For a very brief reading of this poem, see Sollors 203-204.

⁵¹ Gridley defines altissimo as “ultra-high register playing,” 227.

⁵² For Erlich, the communality of African music is also “at the heart of Afro-American... jazz,” 45.

“Racists, Capitalists, Imperialists, Sick People/ Fascists, racist rulers of the Black” (111-112). Written and conceived as an interlocked series of extended solo performances reminiscent of free jazz improvisation, the poem is “free” in terms of its complete disregard for rhyme, meter, line structure. Instead of parataxis, Baraka exploits the potential of vocal polyphony throughout the poem in order to suggest extemporaneously the many strands of the Diaspora’s fabric. These converge in the last part of the poem to underscore, once more, the interconnected needs for unity and ethnic consciousness:

All over the world Afrikans
 Sweet beautiful Afrikans
 NewArk Afrikans (Niggers too)
 Harlem Afrikans (or Spooks)
 Ghana Afrikans (Bloods)
 Lost Angeles Afrikans (Brothers)
 Afrikan Afrikans (Ndugu)
 West Indian Afrikans (Hey man)
 South American Afrikans (Hermano!)
 Francophone Afrikans (Monsieur)
 Anglophone Afrikans (Mister Man)
 Anywhere Afrikans
 Afrikans Afrikans Afrikans
 People (155-168)

While the poem constantly reverts to extemporization and polyvocality to affirm diasporic collective consciousness, the use of parentheses further enhances the call and response dimension of Baraka’s griotic/poetic endeavor. By individualizing, and essentially, familiarizing black denominations in the responsive parentheses, Baraka asserts the

communality of diasporic cultures. Moreover, his vested interest in Third-World cultures not only prefigures his shift to revolutionary nationalism and Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideology, it also parallels the “amalgamation” of free jazz with “music of cultures in the Third World” (Gridley 227). What the aforementioned poems also prove is that Baraka, like most black cultural nationalists, theorized free jazz as syncretic music that retained some Africanisms.⁵³ In this, Baraka echoes Larry Neal for whom free jazz was “out of the African mode.”⁵⁴

Of the most important African musical and oral retentions present in free jazz –and reinvested in Baraka’s cultural nationalist poetry –one finds pitch and tone modulations and vocal stylizations. For instance, in “Tele/vision” (*BM*, 207-208), Baraka borrows from tonal techniques of the African oral tradition:

Who will be the final coming attraction and beautiful character actor of
my bonafide creation? The me’s of it, The strong I’s. Yell. They.

[CRAAAAAAAYYYY

YYYYYYYYYYYYYYYVE to good faith blessing. Ahhh. The nature.

[The smell. I am whole

I am whole. (26-29)

⁵³ For one, Larry Neal conceptualizes black music as “the most dominant manifestation of what we are and feel...It has always...represented the collective psyche” (“Shine,” 22). By emphasizing the ritual dimension of the music, Neal seems to re-establish its preeminence as “collective process” and “social activity” (Maultsby 188; Stewart 9); Jost for instance discusses Africanisms in the works of Archie Shepp (113) and Sun-Ra (193).

⁵⁴ “The Social Background of the Black Arts Movement.” *Black Scholar* 18 (1987): 15.

By stretching the word “crave” over two lines and by heightening the pitch using a vowel – Y –not present in the usual spelling, Baraka creates a sonic crescendo that suggests the urgency of fulfillment present in the theme of black cultural “cravings” for adequate representation in the media. The poem’s desire to find “the path back to my self” (8) –a black self historically portrayed as the quintessential sidekick (“sammy davis/for allen ginsbergs frank sinitras”) which is a metaphor for black second-class citizenship –is also represented in this sonic crescendo that climaxes to an assertion of black “wholeness.” The repetition of “I am whole” –repetition being another stylistic element of the African oral tradition –serves to emphasize the overall themes of cultural nationalism: black pride and black self-determinism.⁵⁵ Combined, the heightened pitch of “crave” and the repeated “I am whole” create a sort of formula that permeates most of Baraka’s cultural nationalist poetry.⁵⁶

Thus, in “The Spell” (*BM*, 147), Baraka plays with tonality to achieve thematic effect:

The Spell The SPELL THE S P E L L L L L L L L L !
 Away and sailing in warm space. The eyes of God-our on us
 in us. The Spell. We are wisdom, reaching for itself. We are
 totals (1-4)

The pitch gradation created by the capitalizing of words is only enhanced by the tonal spacing and stretching of “S P E L L L L L L L L L !” Consequently, the tonal effect of

⁵⁵ See Okpewho, 71-78.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 76.

the extended “L” sound suggests a chant-like wail that returns to the etymology of black song in the African ancestral “warm space.” The enchanting sound effect is further accentuated by the image of a Black God different from the white American God that allowed for slavery, and postbellum racism and oppression. Like in “Tele/Vision,” sound tends to support sense, in that the “L” sound is reverberated in “totals,” which restates the ontological “wholeness” of Africans of the Diaspora who no longer accept forms of colonization, as well as the cultural “wholeness” Baraka wants to invest in his poetry. Thus, the “SPELL” is the called-for return to cultural blackness.

This return to blackness entails a re-inscription of diasporic folk culture. In “All in the Street” (*SP*, 211-215), Baraka traces the cultural lineage of African American artists/griots: “who we are is/ The Magic People...The Black Genius/ Prophets of the Planet” (46-48). Later in the poem, the poet acknowledges this ancestry as well as that of the African oral tradition; as Black American griot, he conjures up the voices of “Magic People,” and “Prophets of the Planet” who now “speak thru/ [his] mouth” (101-102):

We still gentle hummers and oobedah scatters

oobbbecoobbee dah

oobbbecoobbee dah

dah

dah

daaaah daaah oooobee obbee dah (204-209)

In stretching the tonal potential of “obedah,” Baraka creates the sound of chanting which usually accompanies obeah –Jamaican folk magic –burial ceremonies. In this poem, the

African oral tradition becomes the basis for the new African American poem in terms of both theme (obedah as vernacular folk culture) and idiom (toned chant).

The pitch and tone manipulations in “Tele/vision,” “The Spell,” “All in the Street,” or “Vowel 2,” for that matter, are examples of a technique that Stephen Henderson calls “worrying the line.”⁵⁷ While Henderson fails to establish a connection with the African oral tradition, he nevertheless adds an interesting dimension to the technique when he states that “worrying the line” allows for “didactic comment” (33). Transposed on Baraka’s cultural nationalist poetry, this “didactic comment” becomes a griotic exercise of exhortation in which Baraka calls “all black people” to claim their unifying blackness, this ontological “wholeness” or “total reality.” In the aforementioned poems, this griotic call to action is clearly asserted. In “Black Art,” the high pitched “LOUD” (line 57) and the interjectory pitch of “CONSCIOUS” (line 131) in “AFRIKAN REVOLUTION” both also support the urgency of such call to action.

That Baraka, during his cultural nationalist period, was aware of these African influences on free jazz is evidenced by the paradigms elaborated in *Blues People*.⁵⁸ In fact, Baraka’s ability to manipulate pitch and tonality reveals the poet’s immersion in Africanisms, especially in regards to using music as a paralinguistic resource.⁵⁹ While

⁵⁷ In *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, 33. See also Shirley Anne Williams, “The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry,” Cheryl A. Wall, *Worrying the Line*, 8; Maultsby, 194-195.

⁵⁸ In his interview with Benston, Baraka notes the inherent problems of this aesthetic position, stating, “I tried to make African culture an absolute, a static absolute to which Afro-American culture related at all points in a static way.” In *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*, 115.

⁵⁹ See Okpewho for an elaborated survey of paralinguistic resources available to the griot, 46-51.

critics have been content to analyze Baraka's vocal stylizations as either reproductions of bop scatting or basic vernacular screaming, their performances on the page are much more complex, and as such, necessitate closer analysis.⁶⁰ For instance, Harris's contention that "extramusical sounds such shouts, screams, and grunts have been associated with the black musical tradition" arcing back to "anonymous singers of the spirituals" ("How you Sound," 313) is incomplete and rather limiting in terms of potential African aesthetic carryovers. Instead, the model of analysis I propose re-inscribes African pitch and tone effects as core elements of the stylized free jazz aesthetic.

In African music, "thought is [often] transformed into sound," that is "the human voice and the musical instrument 'speak' the same language, express the same feelings" (Bebey qtd. in Maulstby 192). In the African oral tradition, these vocal sounds are called ideophones or "idea[s]-in-sound" (Okpewho 92) and they "are not like normal words to which meanings are readily assigned. They are simply sounds used in conveying a vivid impression" (92).⁶¹ Similarly, free jazz musicians often reproduced a vast array "vocally derived sounds" (192) to convey both urgency and feelings of revolt in the performance, that the poets of the Black Arts movement adopted as technique.⁶² Also, free jazz saxophonists, for example, were often trying to speak through their horn. Ornette Coleman,

⁶⁰ For critics who consider these passages as bob scatting, see Harris, *Poetics and Politics*, 107-113; Ellison, "Jazz in the Poetry of Amiri Baraka and Roy Fisher," 127-128; Brennan, 306-307; for critics who see instances of "screaming," see DuEwa Jones, "Politics, Process, and (Jazz) Performance," 249-251; Sollors, 196-199; Benston, *Performing Blackness*, 204-207.

⁶¹ For more on African vocal stylizations, including ideophones, see Samuel Floyd, 28-33.

⁶² See for instance Don L. Lee's "Don't Cy, Scream."

for one, employed the vox humana technique.⁶³ Manipulation of pitch effects by free jazz musicians resulted in the production of altissimo, “shrieks, squawks, wails, gurgles, and squeals” (Gridley 227). Because they find their source in ideophonic performance, I argue that the free jazz vocally-derived effects cannot be only analyzed as scatting in the tradition of Hughes’s *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. The literary renditions of the “shrieks, squawks, wails, gurgles, and squeals” add to the ideation process of the poem’s composition; they provide paralinguistic commentaries on the poem’s content, much like in the compositional tradition of free jazz.⁶⁴ As such, they are not and cannot be considered as mere musical ornamentations or onomatopoeic sounds randomly performed.

Take the poem “It’s Nation Time” (*SP*, 198-200) for instance. In it, Baraka employs ideophones for two interlinked purposes: first, as a way to restore the ancestral link with the African griot’s oral and percussive traditions, and second, as a way to announce the coming of the black nation to the sound of free jazz:

it’s nation time...

Boom

Booom

BOOOM

Dadadadadadadadadadad

Boom (34-40)

⁶³ See chapter 1, n.118.

⁶⁴ William Cook, in his survey on the Black Arts poets, mentions in passing how Baraka’s “Black Art” employs ideophones. In *The Columbia History of American Poetry*, 808.

Dadadadad adadadad

Hey aheee (soft)

Hey ahheee (loud)

Boom

Boom

Boom

sing a get up time to nationfy (44-50)

This passage provides a key example of Harris’s flawed analysis of vocally-derived sounds as only scat phrases. About this excerpt, he writes that, “scatting becomes rhythmic incitement” (*Poetics*, 107). While he is correct in affirming that the rhythm of the repetitions creates “incitement,” he fails to see that this incitement is superbly present in the ideophonic “Boom.” Once again, Baraka modifies the pitch first by toning it down adding an extra “o” guttural sound and then by capitalizing “Booom,” thus creating an exclamatory sound that supports the signification of the initial calling “boom.” Indeed, “boom” refers to the renewed interest in blackness, the “boom” in nationalism, the rallying cry for unity, and also the boom of the talking drum which claims Africa as site of ancestral blackness. Once again, the project of reclamation is front and center. Even the rhythmically frantic “Dadadadadadadadadadad” evokes the drum rhythms –and language –of a shared cultural memory. The interaction and interplay between “Boom” and “Dadadadadadadadadadad” create an antiphonal percussive dynamic reproduced by the voiced call-response of “Hey aheee (soft)/ Hey ahheee (loud).” Both percussions and voices “speak” of the same ebullient feeling for black nationalism. Finally, tonal and pitch variations convey the idea of nationhood that the repeated refrain “it’s nation time” recuperates.

Ideophones are especially important in the Third-World Marxist poems of *The Music*. In these poems, ideophones become “ideolog[ies]-in-sound.” In spite of political and ideological changes –from cultural nationalism which fought against racism and all forms oppression to Third-World Marxism which seeks to fight against the injustices caused by “monopoly capitalism” and imperialism –Baraka still employs free jazz as compositional and conceptual framework as well as agency toward reclamation of Black American History.⁶⁵ If the enemy is different, the cultural project of revolutionary nationalism –now defined as Socialist Revolution –still demands of its griots a deeply-anchored consciousness regarding diasporic Black History and vernacular culture.⁶⁶

Ideophones in Baraka’s new poetic phase should follow the tenets of black art and music. In “The Great Music Robbery,” Baraka contends that, “[w]hat makes the art and music so attractive is its core of democratic longing; inside [free jazz] is a cry for equality and liberation” (328).⁶⁷ For Baraka, the continued attractiveness of free jazz resides in the fact that its most committed musicians like Coltrane symbolize the revolt against co-optation, commercialism and the imperialist approach to commodifying the “new thing.” As such, Baraka correlates free jazz’s form of aesthetic and commercial liberation to Third-World Marxist ideology. He writes,

[t]he very term of the most “avant” of the new music, “Free Jazz,” speaks
from the ground, from the zeitgeist of the world itself, reflecting and still

⁶⁵ See the introduction to *Hard Facts*, in *Selected Poetry*, 238.

⁶⁶ In that sense, I am in complete agreement with Kim’s thesis in “In the Tradition.”

invoking that time when Mao said, “Countries want Independence, Nations Want Liberation, People Want Revolution!”⁶⁸

Therefore, free jazz in Baraka’s poetics still means liberation. It is only normal then that his use of ideophones should convey this redefined ideology of liberation. Moreover, his use of ideophones should also evoke the tradition of black resistance inherent in the music.

For instance, in “The Real Construction” (*The Music*, 81-83), Baraka contends that free jazz provides “[N]ew ways to swing,” (1) which is obviously a subversive claim since free jazz was actually trying to take the commercially corrupted swing out of the music. Instead, the new jazz music is “[C]alling sense dadadadadadadadadadadada...../

calling consciousness.....ssssssssssssss” (40-41). In this apparent dialectic between “sense” and a tonally extended “dada” lies the essence of free jazz, the “new constructs to raise us all” (96). While the music’s dissonance makes it, for a white audiences, inaudible and a form of disharmonic anti-music equivalent to Dada, it actually provides “sense” for the black community who not only finds in free jazz’s collective approach the reaffirmation of the cultural continuum, but also new paradigms, “new life new heart new strength new direction” (97), that seek to unite the black masses. Baraka believes that black creative expression should “bring out a little American Dada, Ornette Coleman style.”⁶⁹ While it gestures towards a revolutionary future, free jazz’s Dadaistic

⁶⁷ In *The Music*, 328-332.

⁶⁸ In “Jackie Mc –Coming and Going,” from *Diggings*, 410.

⁶⁹ “Philistinism and the Negro Writer,” collected in *Anger and Beyond: The Negro Writer in the United States*, 53.

approach to compositional improvisation imparted by the ideophone remains deeply connected and committed to perform black ontology.

In “I Love Music” (*The Music*, 47-48), Baraka encodes the ideophones with the dissonance of Coltrane’s “free” sound as well as with the trope of black liberation. In that sense, it is important to understand how Baraka prefaces the poem since it informs the meaning of the ideophones he uses. The poem actually begins with Baraka quoting Coltrane:

“I want to be a force for real good.
 In other words, I know that there are bad forces,
 forces that bring suffering to others and misery to the world,
 but I want to be the opposite
 force. I want to be the force which is truly
 for good.” (1-6)

Written as a eulogy, the poem employs the quote to imply that Coltrane’s “force,” that is his innovating and spiritual sound, has remained “for good” as evocative music in the black cultural continuum.⁷⁰ Coltrane’s memory can be conjured up by playing his records; like the poem, each memorialization re-historicizes the meanings of his music for the black community.

Baraka mentions how Coltrane’s compositions “a love supreme” (15), “afroblue” (15), “alabama” (23), “I want to talk to you” (24), “my favorite things” (25), and “like

⁷⁰ The poem appears in *Eulogies*, 14-16.

sonny” (26) expound a collective sound and represent Coltrane’s black weltanschauung.⁷¹

The compositions:

can be

life itself, fire can be, heart explosion, soul explosion, brain explosion

can be. can be. can be. aggeewheeeuheageeeee. aeegeheooooaaa.

deep deep deep

expression deep, can be

capitalism dying can be

all, see, aggggeeeeeoooo. aggrgrrgeeeoouuuu. full full full can be (27-33)

Here, the ideophones communicate the “deep deep deep” expressions of liberation from conventional English. In this meta-language, Baraka finds a cathartic correlative to Coltrane’s music. Baraka affirms, “Trane’s constant assaults on the given, the status quo, the Tin Pan Alley of the soul, was what Malcolm attempted in our social life.”⁷² Therefore, in the poem, ideophones function like liberating soul ejaculations, like sounds encoded with the impulse to initiate liberation. Baraka even extends the liberation project to Third-World Marxism (“capitalism dying”). In fact, the ideophonic “explosion[s]” not only break down the walls of “the tin pan alley jail,” they also destroy the handcuffing pressures of the capitalist and imperially commodified industry symbolized by Tin Pan Alley music.⁷³

In “Caution: A Disco Near You Wails Death Funk” (*The Music*, 55-59), Baraka recuperates the ideophones of “I Love Music” and posits them against the image of blood-

⁷¹ In “A Jazz Great: Coltrane” and “Coltrane Live at Birdland” Baraka analyses the meaning of these songs. Both essays follow one another in *Black Music*, 56-68.

⁷² In the liner notes of *The Last Giant: The John Coltrane Anthology*. Rhino, catalogue # 71255, 1993.

sucking vampires with “southern accent[s]” (64), a metaphor of the continued economic oppression of African Americans by a system favoring white capitalist power structures. Hence, “Agghhh eee agggghhh ahee aghhee agghhee” (65) is Baraka’s –channeling Coltrane’s sound–ideophonic response to “[white] america”’s treatment of African Americans. Also encoded in the ideophone is the trope of black refusals to accept the images forced onto Blacks by their oppressors. In the final section of the poem, Baraka’s ideophone imbricates gagging sounds in order to convey the poet’s disgust over appropriation of black music –another form of bloodsucking symbolized by Tin Pan Alley: “agg agg agg agg agg agg agg agg agg/ bumpty bump bumpty bump agg bumpty agg bumpty agg bumpty/ duh dump duh dump duh dump duh dump duh dump dhu dhupt” (177-179). The poet’s gags are triggered by the popularity and commercial success of Tin Pan Alley songs like “On the Bumpy Road to Love” interpreted by Judy Garland –the song was written by Al Hoffman and Al Davis, two Tin Pan Alley writers. In response to Garland’s singing “bumpty bump” the poet offers “duh dump” whose repetition only enhances the image of the song originating from a corrupted industry (a capitalist “dump”). Ideophonically, the passage illustrates how negotiations of a white-ruled commercial space were one of free jazz musicians’ main preoccupations.⁷⁴

Similarly, in “Class Struggle in Music (1)” (*The Music*, 96-99), Baraka has recourse to ideophones to restore the diasporic link between African rituals –presumably the ring

⁷³ “John Coltrane (1926-1967)” in *Eulogies*, 14.

⁷⁴ For more on free jazz musicians’ negotiation of a capitalist industry, see Kofsky, ch.6; Anderson, ch. 5.

shout –and “a blues emotion” (124) that still permeates the struggles for black liberation in the U.S.:

in we/us –eye
 eyes
 sees
 Blue us
 Blue we’s (Blue *ooos*)
 a boom boopa doompa doom
 a boom boopa doompa doom
 a boom boopa doompa doom
 a boom boopa doompa doom (130-138)⁷⁵

Here, the ideophone re-imagines the blues legacy in the talking drum of African rituals. In the same vein, blues is theorized in terms similar to the Hughesian poetic reservoir, which black poets and free jazz musicians constantly return to and tap for cultural re-inscription. In that sense, it is not scat writing, it is an ideophonic dialogue with the cultural continuum.⁷⁶ As the emotional “root,” blues ritualizes ways to transcend momentarily the burden of economic oppression and “class struggle.” Significantly, the ideophone works as mnemonic that reclaims the Black American cultural memory subsumed under the trope of blues.

⁷⁵ The poem is part of *Reggae or Not!*.

⁷⁶ See Harris, *Poetics and Politics*, 111.

V. *Toward a Blues Synthesis: The Metaphor Free Jazz Anthropology in "In the Tradition," and Wise Why's Y's*

Free jazz, in the poems of *The Music*, is not only the musical agency towards a revolutionary black future, it also performs the griotic task of anthropological music primarily by restoring blues as elemental and mnemonic black music. For example, many of Ornette Coleman's and John Coltrane's compositions employed the twelve-bar structure of blues as improvisational canvas, although not necessarily as structural patterns. Baraka declares that, "[free jazz] wanted the music back to its basic African rhythms, blues orientation, the primacy of improvisation."⁷⁷ In the seminal "The Changing Same," Baraka, then still exploring cultural nationalism, believed that, "Blues...is ...the deepest expression of memory. Experience re/feeling. It is the racial memory" (183). As a Third-World Marxist, he maintains that "[J]azz incorporates blues, not just as a specific form, but as a cultural insistence, a feeling-matrix, a tonal memory. Blues is the national consciousness of jazz...Without blues, as interior animator, jazz has no history, no memory."⁷⁸ For Baraka then, blues is cultural memory and its centrality in free jazz mentality offers a unique opportunity to probe and revisit the history of his people.⁷⁹ In that sense, the poems of *The*

⁷⁷ In "Greenwich Village and African-American Music," collected in *The Music*, 186.

⁷⁸ In "Blues, Poetry, and the New Music," collected in *The Music*, 263-264.

⁷⁹ In "How Baraka Writes Free Jazz," Harris states that "to achieve this black sound [in his poetry], to find black language, Baraka turns to free jazz because it contains the sound of the blues, the black voice, the black memory, in its most contemporary form," 319.

Music, and especially “In the Tradition,” constitute historical mnemonics in the tradition of the African historical songs.⁸⁰

Perhaps of all the free jazz musicians, Coltrane is the most deeply invested in black vernacular music and African idioms. His forays into spirituality –and reinvestment of the ethos of the spirituals –are evidenced by album titles such as *Meditations*, *Ascension*, and of course, *A Love Supreme*. As for the blues, even if his approach was often nontraditional, it is the spirit of the blues that pervades his art.⁸¹ In fact, what Baraka retains from Coltrane is the musician’s investigative mind and the desire to draw from his own cultural traditions elements to form new artistic expressions. Accordingly, the trope of blues as anthropological art is often subsumed under that of John Coltrane as Black Art griot in Baraka’s poetry, much like it was in David Henderson’s and Sonia Sanchez’s poetries.⁸²

In the often-anthologized “AM/TRAK” (*SP*, 332-337), Baraka traces Coltrane’s “History” (3), providing at the same time a synthesis of jazz history.⁸³ Coltrane is portrayed as the “*black blower of the now*” (123) whose “sound” includes “[T]he vectors from all sources/ slavery renaissance/ bop charlie parker” (124-125). At the same time, “Trane was the spirit of the 60’s/ He was Malcolm X in New Super Bop Fire/ Baaahhhhh/

⁸⁰ See Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 32-33.

⁸¹ For some example, see Lewis Porter’s *John Coltrane: His Life and His Music*, 183-184, 190.

⁸² For more on this trope, see Baker’s first chapter in *The Journey Back*; see Benston’s excellent third and fourth chapters on Coltrane’s music, his praxes and their effects on the poets of the New Black Poetry.

⁸³ Here Feinstein quotes Lacey for his study of “AM/TRAK,” in “From ‘Alabama’ to ‘A Love Supreme:’ The Evolution of John Coltrane.” Retrieved at: <http://domattica.wordpress.com/from-alabama-to-a-love-supreme->

Wheeeeeee...Black Art!" (155-158). In the aforementioned "I Love Music," Coltrane's "afroblue," which title invokes ancestral ritual music rooted in Africa and re-actualized in the U.S., elicits a partial map of the African American cultural continuum from Langston Hughes to blues singer Big Maybelle via Charlie Parker, all of them writing and performing Black History, "wailing in unison/ a terrible/ wholeness" (59-61). Accordingly, Coltrane says, "I'm very interested in the past, and even though there's a lot I don't know about it, I intend to go back and find out" (qtd in Benston 143). As "chief innovator" of free jazz improvisation, Coltrane embodies the musician in constant conversation with his tradition.⁸⁴ For Baraka, the same sense of conversation with his cultural tradition, and the same desire to "go back," are what distinguishes his later poetry, especially the "In the Tradition" (*The Music*, 105-112).⁸⁵

With "In the Tradition" Baraka performs a griotic task similar to Langston in *Ask Your Mama*, that is, he employs a recurrent leitmotif as a conduit into historiographical reconsiderations. The poem is dedicated to Arthur Blythe, whose own "In the Tradition"

[the-evolution-of-the-john-coltrane-poem](#); see Lacey's "Baraka's 'AM/TRAK:' Everybody's Coltrane Poem" in *Obsidian II: Black Literature in Review* 1.1-2 (1986): 12-21.

⁸⁴ The quote is from "A Jazz Great: John Coltrane," in *Black Music*, 58; regarding the image of conversation, I mean to echo Berlinger who theorizes that improvisation is about the musician's conversation with the tradition (497).

⁸⁵ For an excellent analysis of the poem, see Kim 355-361. Kim's argument is both pertinent and groundbreaking. In that sense, he provides a superb overview of the poem. Interestingly, he barely discusses Baraka's own conversation with the tradition. I prefer to look at "In the Tradition" in terms similar than those outlined in the chapter on Hughes. See also David L. Smith's "Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts of Black

functions as musical cue and “core riff” (Kim 356) throughout the poem. Blythe’s choice is significant for “[H]is aesthetic vision is broad enough to embrace that which is traditional, the modernist and the experimental impulse in contemporary jazz” and this aesthetic syncretism correlates the griotism Baraka deploys in the poem.⁸⁶ Blythe’s “In the Tradition” includes compositions by Fats Waller (“Jitterbug Waltz”), Duke Ellington (“In a Sentimental Mood,” which he played with Coltrane, “Caravan”) and John Coltrane (“Naima”). Thus, with this album, Blythe revisits the jazz continuum, from Waller’s stride piano playing descending from ragtime to Ellington’s extraordinarily productive ensemble work in the 1930s and to Coltrane’s avant-gardism rooted in both blues and bebop.⁸⁷ Blythe’s synthesizing work represents an ideal aesthetic template for Baraka, who infuses Blythe’s musical syncretism in his poem.⁸⁸ What Blythe’s work further provides is a motivic re-inscription of blues as ethnic memory “in the tradition” of Hughes’s mnemonic use of the “Hesitation Blues” in *Ask Your Mama*.

Blues, in “In the Tradition,” allows Baraka to revisit the history of black struggles, and, more importantly, to claim that history for African Americans. At the same time, Baraka employs the agency of the music –free jazz as compositional *and* conceptual

Art,” 250-252. Contrary to my approach, Smith contends that “the influence of Langston Hughes is not discernible in Baraka’s recent poems” (250).

⁸⁶ See his biographical notes at www.arthurblythe.com.

⁸⁷ For more on Waller’s music, see Paul Machlin’s bio-critical essay at <http://newarkwww.rutgers.edu/ijs/fw/music.htm>.

framework, blues as cultural memory –in order to write stylized ways to re-tell African American cultural history in black vernacular terms. It is the music that provides a point of re-entry into the tradition and it is through the music that historical moments will be assessed. The poem’s opening couplet supplies the proviso, which the black expressive tradition has historically responded to: “Blues walk weeps ragtime/ Painting slavery” (1-2). With these lines, Baraka states that African American vernacular expressivity has always been trying to negotiate the particular “history” of black enslavement in the U.S., from its beginning to its aftermaths. The “blues emotion” is the African American ethos located in the historical nexus of the antebellum, whose experience fragmented families and communities and, in essence, fragmented cultural histories. This entailed the creation of a new culture born out of the intersecting African cultures, a syncretic vernacular “whole,” that affirmed black resilience in performance. Significantly then, the result of this performative resilience is a creative outpouring (“Painting”) that seeks to defeat threats of historical erasure. Similarly, the blues “weeping” is obviously subversive as it is internally regulated by the Hughesian “laughing-to-keep-from-crying” motif, and, as such, morphs into ritualized performance of shared history.

Moreover, the blues becomes the vernacular source out of which ragtime and jazz – the allusive “walk” refers to a style of bass playing (Smith 251) –will emerge as actualized forms of “the changing same.” This musical continuum actuates a process of rememory to

⁸⁸ For instance, “[V]arious Arthur Blythe ensembles have included African drums, Turkish Percussion, Violins, violas, electric guitar and tubs, in addition to piano, contrabass and drums,” retrieved at

reconstruct the past. Such process is Baraka's counter-movement to re-historicize the fragmented personal stories of the "lost chillen" (6), the first Black American ancestors who faced the inhumanity and humiliation of familial separations on the auction block. Thus, against the relentless threats to destroy the familial unit –threats repeated under various guises and forms of lures from miscegenation to artistic exploitation ("genius bennygoodman headmaster/ philanthropist/ romeos," 12-14) –Baraka posits his version of the gestalt to affirm the black historical consciousness.⁸⁹

In the gestalt, politicians, cultural workers, freedom workers, musicians, and writers inform one another's battles; these cross-fertilizations constitute the foundation of the black aesthetic:

Tradition
of Douglass
of David Walker
Garnett
Turner
Tubman
of ragers yeh
ragers

(of Kings, & Counts, & Dukes
of Satchelmouths & Sun Ra's
of Bessies & Billies & Sassys
& Mas

www.arthurblythe.com.

⁸⁹ See also Kim for another reading of these lines, 359.

Musical screaming

Niggers

yeh (44-59)

In this nomenclatural tapestry of black heroes, Baraka, channeling Hughes's griotic spirit in *Ask Your Mama*, employs the tradition of naming in order to reproduce the image of polyphonic improvisation inherent in free jazz. All these individual voices, each being an intricate part of the "we" of free jazz collectives, converge to affirm a shared "tradition." Each name also invokes a tradition of resistance. For instance, Frederick Douglass's physical resistance against Covey becomes a leitmotif for other forms of resistance, from David Walker's political resistance in his *Appeal* to the blues resistance of Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" and Sun Ra's diachronic free jazz exploration of the African diaspora.⁹⁰ Similarly, with "Kings," Baraka alludes to King Oliver's important Creole Jazz Band, and, at the same time, to Martin Luther King. Abolitionists, jazz revolutionaries and visionaries, blues songstresses, and freedom workers are all counterpointing figures ("ragers" "screaming") in the grand narrative of Euro-American racist culture; through their cultural work they oppose those who are "denying with lying images/ [black] strength & African/ funky beauty" (35-37).

What is made evident in "In the Tradition" is the fact that Baraka's black aesthetic is polycentric. The "Tradition" is in fact an intricate web of stories, a cultural matrix that serves as framework for both assessments and affirmations of black life in the U.S., and

⁹⁰ For more on blues as resistance, see Tony Bolden's *Afro-Blue*, especially chapter 3, 37-73.

which I term jazz gestalt. Still, it is the polycentric aspects of Black American tradition and heritage, which Baraka subsumes under the trope of “the changing same,” that makes “In the Tradition” a logical continuation of *Ask Your Mama*. Like in Hughes’s polyphonic poem, Baraka conflates these polycentrisms in order to map the ways in which each strand of the tradition reclaims History. For instance, within *the* tradition lies a multiplicity of black legacies:

tradition
of Brown Welles
& Brown Sterling
& Brown Clifford
of H Rap & H Box (60-63)

Here, cultural memory is catalyzed by the echoing sound “Brown.” In its multi-layered meaning, “Brown” refers to William Wells Brown’s work as abolitionist and novelist, and to Sterling Brown’s cultural consciousness, folk poetics and profoundly expounded theories on jazz. Consequently, Sterling Brown’s ethnic consciousness and jazz knowledge invokes Clifford Brown’s timely bebop and hard bop contributions to the jazz canon. These aestheticisms are bookended by a re-memorialization of SNCC black activist H. Rap Brown, whose *Die! Nigger Die!* is a sociological extension of what Henry “Box” Brown underwent first as a slave, then as a freedom worker for the Anti-Slavery Society.⁹¹ These polycentric accomplishments all come together in this panoramic view of Black History.

⁹¹ Brown acquired the nickname “Box” after he escaped to freedom while in a box for 27 days.

Later in the poem, it is the name “Walker” that inspires the poet to probe its historical lineage: “Tradition of/ For My People Margaret Walker & David Walker & Jr Walker/ & Walker Smith” (108-110). Again, it is a poem that effects rememory: Margaret Walker’s seminal “For My People,” whose griotic function is echoed in “In the Tradition,” looks back to David Walker’s political activism and, at the same time, foreshadows the impact of such figures as Motown icon Junior Walker, and boxing legend Sugar Ray Robinson (born Walker Smith). In turn, Robinson is part of a tradition of “Sugar Rays” that also includes “Sugar” Ray Leonard, who is “Rockin in Rhythm w/ Musical Dukes” (110). Interestingly, the allusion to Duke Ellington, previously suggested in “of Kings, & Counts, & Dukes” is followed by “What is this tradition Basied on” (111), thereby asserting that “Count” Basie’s music is both foundational and metaphorical.⁹² The metaphor inherent in both Basie’s and Ellington’s ensemble work is that of a collective approach –central to free jazz –to ritualized music. Whether it resides in the implicit dialogue or conversation between the musicians as they are composing or in the dialogic nature of the performer/audience dynamic, the metaphor is central to black artistic performances.

The metaphor even extends to the conversational nature of the relationship between performer and tradition, between the individual and the community, between individual and collective consciousness. Within such dialogic framework, Baraka transposes the interplay and interactive dynamics of collective improvisation.⁹³ What I mean is that each stanza

⁹² See David L. Smith, for a rather brief interpretation of the meaning of this line, 252.

⁹³ Here I mean to echo Monson’s model for interpreting improvisation.

functions like an interdependent solo that, when juxtaposed onto the other solos, makes for the composition or, in the poem's case, for the polycentric tradition.⁹⁴ Each stanza is articulated internally around a central theme that is a ramified constituent of the overall theme. Moreover, since stanza structures are inconsistent, it is possible to assume that each stanza highlights a different approach to performing the black musical continuum. In this tradition of improvisers and revisers –or musical “ragers” –each solo/stanza is a stylized performance of the black aesthetic. For instance, Baraka uses both content and structure to evoke the lineage of bebop in blues:

say, you're terrible
 you're awful, Lester
 why do you want to be
 the president of all this
 of the blues and slow sideways
 horn. tradition of blue presidents
 locked up in the brig for wearing zoot suit
 army pants. tradition of monks & outside dudes
 of marylous and notes hung vibrate blue just beyond just after
 just before just faster just slowly twilight crazier than europe or its
 racist children

bee-doo dee doop bee-doo dee dooo doop (78-89)

⁹⁴ Kim prefers the framework of “Freedom Swing” soloist poetics of repetition, 358. His point, though, has informed my theorization of free jazz improvisation.

The expansive structure of the stanza becomes a commentary on how jazz, and bebop more specifically, expanded on the blues scale for its improvisatory explorations. Indeed, rememory of Lester Young as “president” of a tradition of tenor saxophonists rooted in blues allows for a reconsideration of his impact. Simultaneously, the impact of his contemporaries, among which Fletcher Henderson, Coleman Hawkins, and Count Basie, one of Baraka’s core motifs, is considered in terms of its influence on future generations of bebop innovators like Thelonius Monk and “outside dudes” like Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie (“wearing zoot suit”). As stated in the first chapter on Hughes, bebop music was political for how it tried to theorize and compose in patterned ways (“just beyond” “just faster”) white musicians could not, it was hoped, replicate and fathom. Bebop was also firmly ingrained in the blues tradition, often using the twelve-bar structure and, more importantly, the blue note (“notes hung vibrate blue”). Baraka’s use of a scat phrase simultaneously doubly functions as an instance of signifying upon Euro-Americans who misunderstood and misappropriated bebop (“europe or/ its racist children [in America]”) and as a cultural means of expression steeped in the oral tradition.⁹⁵

This tradition of vernacular resistance, symbolized primarily by blues and jazz, permeates the poem. From Langston Hughes “& Langston Manifestoes” (104) such as “The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain” that advocates black pride and jazz as music of black revolts to the Black Arts movement’s refusals to abide by aesthetics and politics

⁹⁵ See also Kim who discusses the importance of the oral tradition, “the tradition of playing and saying” in the poem, 359.

regimented by white society, Baraka traces the trajectory of black revolutionary poetics. These, in turn, can be used to offset white attempts to disown and commodify black culture, and finally to downplay its impact on white culture:

But just as you rise up to gloat I scream COLTRANE! STEVIE WONDER!

MALCOLM X!

ALBERT AYLER

THE BLACK ARTS! (151-154)

By using the free jazz “scream” Baraka catapults black culture at the forefront of the struggles of aesthetic and socio-political freedom. Sonically, the scream is rendered by the capitalized lines comprised of cultural heroes. Again, the jazz gestalt is evoked in the cross-fertilizing reference to revolutionary free jazz (“COLTRANE”), revolutionary politics (“MALCOLM X”), and revolutionary imperative in black aesthetics (“THE BLACK ARTS”).

This free jazz framework is further matrixed by cultural embeddings of the tradition:

Shit & whistling out of my nkrumah, cabral, fanon, sweep –I cry Fletcher
Henderson, Cane, What Did I Do To Be So Black & Blue, the most perfect
couplet in the language, I scream Moon Indigo, Black Bolshevik, KoKo,
Now’s the Time, Ark of Bones, Lonely Woman, Ghosts, A Love Supreme,
Walkin, Straight no Chaser (155-159)

Baraka finds in the tradition of ritualized songs the vernacular “womb” that contains all black (hi)stories of struggles and resistance, from Africa to Black America.⁹⁶ The centripetal animator of this womb is the blues “What Did I Do To Be So Black & Blue,” whose encoded message of hope and resilience amidst the existential absurdity brought on by white racism, makes it “the most perfect couplet” in the black vernacular “language.”⁹⁷ In fact, this mnemonic blues couplet provides a foundational language around which all jazz compositions gravitate. At the same time, the “couplet” becomes a battle “cry” –music operating dialogically as history –enforced to effect political liberations, thereby restating the fundamentality of musical agencies in the revolutionary black struggles.⁹⁸

Encompassed in Blythe’s “In the Tradition” is a collection of black voices and black creative expressivities of “an unending everywhere at the same time/ line/ in motion forever” (174-176), an image that riffs upon Baraka’s “changing same.” Whether it is through the Art Ensemble of Chicago (178), Miles Davis (179), Horace Silver who with Art Blakey founded the Jazz Messengers (180-181), through Duke Ellington’s griotic *Black, Brown and Beige* (182) and free jazz’s Pharaoh Sanders (183), or through writer/anthropologist Zora Neal Hurston (188) and visual artist Aaron Douglass (192), Baraka establishes a continuum of black artistry aimed at understanding, defining and

⁹⁶ This is taken after Baker’s concept of the blues as “womb,” in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, 3-5.

⁹⁷ For a definition of existential absurdity, see James Cone, *Black Religion and Black Power*, 8.

⁹⁸ Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah, Guinea’s Amilcar Cabral, and anti-colonialist Frantz Fanon influenced the new black radicals’ theorizations of the black nation. See Woodard, 50.

representing blackness. These revolutionary voices also emerge from a diasporic consciousness, under synonymous denominations:

in the tradition
of revolution
Renaissance
Negritude
Blackness
Negrissimo
Indigisme (259-265)

As such, Blythe's composition becomes a ritual for the re-historicizing of black cultural heroes, thus correlating the kaleidoscopic mappings of Hughes's *Ask Your Mama*. Jazz, in both poems, occasions historiographical performances of remembering and of remembering.

Therefore, in "In the Tradition," Baraka employs the agency of Blythe's song as a way to affirm a collective ethnic consciousness and a collective history:

in the tradition thank you Arthur for playing & saying
reminding us how deep how old how black how sweet how
we is and bees
when we remember
when we are our memory as the projection
of what it is evolving
in struggle (278-284)

Recuperating the "we is and bees" motif from "More Trane than Art" (*The Music*, 84-86), Baraka's "tradition" further connotes the poet's desire to write Black History using free

jazz praxes. Coltrane's music tends to prove Baraka's contention that "our hearts are art" ("More Trane than Art," 32), which homophony yields an essential Barakan principle which is that black "art" is black ontology performed ritually. In the same grain, Coltrane's blowing becomes a symbol for the vernacular breadth used by poets, musicians, and politicians. Like Coltrane's music, black artistry should always reveal the refusals to comply with the definitions of the oppressors, whether they come from white racists or imperialists. That self-determined will to resist these forms of representational oppression underscores the historicity and expressivity conflated "in the tradition."

By highlighting this tradition of ritualized artistry as resistance in his poem, Baraka acknowledges his role as griot of the black experience. His griotism takes after that of other key griots such as poetic forefather Langston Hughes, and jazz archivists John Coltrane and Arthur Blythe.⁹⁹ The closing lines of the poem reaffirm Baraka's poetic project of historical reclamation:

thank you langston/arthur
says sing
says fight
in the tradition, always clarifying, always new and centuries old
says

⁹⁹ Ironically, in "A Dark Bag" (*Home*, 121-132), Baraka criticizes Hughes for his role as anthologizer. His critique, like that in "The Myth of a Negro Literature," was thwarted later by his nationalist politics, which asked of him that he claim the whole black literary tradition. A poem like "In the Tradition" proves his desire to embody the Hughesian anthropologist/anthologizer; interestingly, Baraka criticizes the later period in Coltrane music as being "bourgeois navel-watching." See his interview with Benston, 113-114. The Coltrane that Baraka reclaims in "In the Tradition" is, it seems, the musician of "A Love Supreme."

Sing!

Fight!

Sing!

Fight!

Sing!

Fight! &c. &c.

Booshee dooooo doo doooo dee doooo
dooooooooooooo!

DEATH TO THE KLAN! (318-31)

With the construct “langston/arthur,” Baraka reiterates his aesthetic belief that “poetry is music;” both Hughes and Blythe “sing” the same tradition. Moreover, both have used their artistic productions to contribute to the black community’s emotional and political emancipation.¹⁰⁰ With the alternation of “Sing!/ Fight!,” which restates the theme of the poem –and of the tradition –Baraka creates rhythmic crescendo that evokes the militancy of freedom marches. To accompany these Hughesian “marchers,” Baraka reverts to Coltrane by way of Blythe; the scat at the end is from Coltrane’s “Naima,” which also closes Blythe’s *In the Tradition*.¹⁰¹ Finally, the sloganistic shout “DEATH TO THE KLAN” conjures up memories of oppression and racist measures which performances of the tradition, like Coltrane’s music, has sought to exorcize; the “KLAN” becomes a symbolic construct –opposed by the “langston/arthur” construct –for the ways in which Euro-

¹⁰⁰ Although Hughes was criticized for shying away from revolutionary rhetoric after his passing before the McCarthy hearings, his *Good Morning Revolution* remains a key work for Black Arts poets such as Baraka and Sonia Sanchez. See Baraka’s interview with Enekwe, 126-127 in *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*; Sanchez’s interview with Sesay in *Conversation with Sonia Sanchez*, 145.

Americans have treated African Americans ever since the days of slavery.¹⁰² The “KLAN” is the symbolical entity against which African Americans “Sing” and “Fight” to claim their humanity and their history.¹⁰³

The dialogic link between griots like Hughes and Baraka is expanded in the latter’s *Wise Why’s Y’s* (1995).¹⁰⁴ In the introduction, Baraka writes that “Why’s/Wise is a long poem in the tradition of the Djali (Griots) but this is about African American (American) History.” Baraka’s griotism is grounded in a tradition represented by Hughes; he admits that his long poem is “also like...Hughes’ Ask Yr Mama...in that it tries to tell the history/life like an ongoing-offcoming Tale” (Baraka’s underlining). While “In the Tradition” was more concerned with mapping the history of black artistry as ritualized resistance, *Why’s Wise Y’s* goes back to the roots of the African presence in the New World, to slavery and the etymology of racial inequality. In essence, Baraka’s griotic mission in *Wise Why’s Y’s* is to re-map the functionality and centrality of black music as an aesthetic correlative to black ontology. Preceding the tale then “is a long improvisation...It is called, in its entirety, *PRE-HERE/ISTIC* Sequence” (5). That long improvisation is imbued with the spirit of free jazz; as mentioned earlier in this chapter, for Baraka free jazz

¹⁰¹ See Kim who cites Gary Giddings’s liner notes to Blythe’s album, 360, n29.

¹⁰² Kim tells the story of the slogan, which he perceives as an “elegy” for “those who died in struggle in Greensboro the same year Blythe recorded the tune,” while manifesting on November 3, 1979. Kim links the place with the “first sit-ins, SNCC, and the first radical surges of the Civil Rights Movement.” They “rallying call” of the 1979 protectors was “DEATH TO THE KLAN,” 360-361.

¹⁰³ David L. Smith states that the theme of the poem is “Afro-American history,” 252.

¹⁰⁴ Smethurst, in *The Black Arts Movement*, also links *Wise Why’s Ys* with Hughes’s *Ask Your Mama*, 69.

is syncretic music. It is only logical then that he would use a free jazz framework in order to (re-)write/retell African American History. In that sense, the “long improvisation” with its many polyphonic strands probes the polycentric “prehistory” of free jazz, while performing the griotic task of investigating the “prehistory” of black liberation. Thus, like Hughes in *Ask Your Mama*, Baraka develops intersecting histories: the history of African American life and the history of African American coded music are in constant conversation with one another in the poem.

In the same grain, Baraka mentions that each section of this “tale” is, like Hughes’s *Ask Your Mama*, “accompanied by a piece of music” (p.5). The comparisons between Hughes’s poem and Baraka’s are evident, especially in the way each poet conceptualizes musical accompaniment as a meta-commentary on the poem. For instance, in “Wise 1” (7) the griot, recalling his slave ancestor’s arrival in the New World, forewarns his audience:

If you ever find
yourself, somewhere
lost and surrounded
by enemies
who won’t let you
speak in your own language
who destroy your statues
& instruments, who ban
your oom boom ba boom
then you are in trouble (1-10)

Baraka as griot emphasizes the impact of having been denied African language and, more importantly, African rituals on the newly arrived slaves. At the same time, the musical cue

for this section calls for the spiritual “Nobody Knows The Trouble I Seen,” thereby underscoring the fact that slaves never accepted these denials and the claims to sub-humanity enforced upon them. Instead, they encoded the music they were allowed to perform as para-linguistic devices. This new coded language was to be found in the music, which was to reaffirm its African origins.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, the banned Talking Drums –the ideophonic “oom boom ba doom” –will be reclaimed first by the bebop rhythmic jaggedness of Charlie Parker’s “Billy’s Bounce” in “Wise 2,” and then in “Wise 5” (14-15) through Warren “Baby” Dodds’s famous *Talking and Drum Solos* (1946), the first album of unaccompanied drums in the jazz canon.¹⁰⁶ In Baraka’s poem, Dodds’s drumming becomes an extension of the banned African Talking Drums; it enacts the storytelling tradition through which the history of jazz will be performed, thus correlating what Baraka as griot does at the poetic/historical level.

Similarly, in “Wise 3” (10-11), Grachan Moncur III’s free jazz “Hypnosis” becomes the agency for the reclamation of the blues tradition symbolized by Son House:

Son singin
fount some
words/ Son
singin
in that other
language (1-6)

¹⁰⁵ See also Harris’s idea that “black music represents articulate black speech.” In *Poetics and Politics* 118

¹⁰⁶ Again, Harris prefers to define this as a scat figure. In *Poetics and Politics*, 118.

Again, Son House's "other language" is the blues, and its parlance is a form of defiance. These blues praxes inform Moncur III's music.¹⁰⁷ In fact, Moncur's free jazz is the synthesis of his collaborations with Ray Charles, Sonny Rollins, Archie Shepp, Marion Brown, and the Jackie McLean Quartet –all musicians deeply invested in re-historicizing blues as root music. Thus, this "other language" narrates the cultural continuum. The allusion to the continuum by way of the dialogism between Son House and Moncur – between blues and free jazz –is another instance of the musical motif commenting on the poem.

In "Wise 4" (12-13), the speaker, a slave with "rebellion" (28) on his mind, shed his slave name and renames himself "Coltrane" (35) and "Thelonius" (38) in dreams foreshadowing of (free jazz) revolts against (aesthetic) imprisonment. Accordingly, the slave's "killer frustration" (24) are echoed in the musical accompaniment of David Murray's confrontational free jazz.¹⁰⁸ In "Wise 11" (24-25), the griot deals with the aftermath of Reconstruction's failure in the south, which led to the Northern Migration: "they enter the cities to enter future/ reality" (12-13). Still filled with "death...blood...[and] hooded/ criminals" (13-14), both North and South remain segregated and oppressive. Baraka aptly sets his musical motif, Jelly Roll Morton's "Milneburg Joys," against the backdrop of black demands for self-determination ("What was it we wanted = Ourselves!" 16). The song's title is evocative of the town near Lake Pontchartrain in New Orleans,

¹⁰⁷ Interestingly, Moncur played in New Ark, a jazz trio that accompanied Baraka in the 1980s.

which became an important and symbolical place for black musicians since segregation did not exist there. Moreover, Milneburg is the place where jazz was supposedly born—in an epigraph to the poem, Jelly Roll Morton appoints himself as “Creator (of Jazz).”¹⁰⁹ Thus, Milneburg is one of the first utopian loci of “free” jazz performances that fulfilled the constitutional promises of post-bellum America. Similarly, in “Why’s 12” (26-27), the theme of northern failure to actuate its promises of freedom to newly freedmen is accompanied by “Old” George Lewis’s ironic “High Society,” thereby signifying on the image of freedom-loving northerners who are as vicious as southern planters.¹¹⁰ In Baraka’s poem, Lewis, nicknamed “King of Traditional Jazz,” traces the lineage of jazz in blues, the failure of Northern Migration being a core theme of many blues.

The griot’s task in *Wise Why’s Y’s* is also to historicize the cultural continuum, and thus reaffirm its conversational potentialities. For example, in “The Stranger (14)” (29-39), the griot engages in a long disjointed monologue—or solo—to the tune of Buddy Bolden’s “Didn’t He Ramble?” Actually, Bolden as jazz primogenitor and inventor of jazz improvisation, becomes a metaphorical figure inhabiting the voice of the griot.¹¹¹ The long monologue, a verbal “rambling,” is responded to by Ornette Coleman’s own “Ramblin’” in the sixteenth movement (45-49). These explorations of the continuum also offer occasions

¹⁰⁸ For a succinct but pertinent biography of David Murray’s many phases, see <http://www.scaruffi.com/jazz/murray.html>.

¹⁰⁹ See the history of the town at: <http://www.stphilipneri.org/teacher/pontchartrain/section.php?id=144>.

¹¹⁰ Baraka might be alluding to the situations depicted in Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*.

¹¹¹ Bolden was recognized for his fusion of blues and spirituals, as well as for the way he re-conceptualized ragtime improvisation, which became the basis for jazz.

to investigate genealogies. In “What About Literature?” (15), the griot establishes a genealogy of African American canonical writers from Frederick Douglass to Margaret Walker via Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston and James Baldwin that reverberates in the “WE” of black revolutionaries. This genealogy is the griot’s “Love Call” (the musical motif is Duke Ellington’s “Creole Love Call”) to writers whose pidginized black voices helped shape African American Literature.

Similarly, in “Y’s 18 (Explain’ The Blues)” (57-66), the griot reverts to “Ma Rainey” as both musical and thematic motif. Ma Rainey becomes the agency via which the griot names the various measures white racists and imperialists have used to disenfranchise African Americans. In so doing, the griot re-inscribes the blues as black experience, whether past, present or future. The blues’s capacity to adapt and transform itself –for example in bebop and free jazz –is still responsive to the particular ethos of the black experience. Baraka also employs Blind Lemon Jefferson as blues griot in “Conversation In a World (24)” (87). Blind Lemon’s blues is “Wise/ Music” (8-9) that relentlessly questions (“Full/ of/ Why’s,” 10-12) the motivations of the white oppressive and imperialist societies. The wisdom of the music lies in its constant ritualized reaffirmation of black emotional strength, which allows African Americans to transcend the daily burden of racism and socio-economic oppression.

In “(25)” (89), Baraka brilliantly places the traditional “Hambone” but calls for free jazz “rager” Archie Shepp’s version on the militant *Fire Music* (1965).¹¹² With this musical motif, Baraka invokes the vernacular traditions inherent in free jazz. Moreover, the song’s title suggests “hamboning” techniques, which means slapping the chest and laps as substitute for percussions or drums. On Shepp’s album, the track functions like an extended scream accompanied by the drummer, Roger Blank, “hamboning.” In the poem, the scream is not present, but it is implied in “WORD PAINTING/ WORDPAINTING” (1-2). “Word painting” is usually defined as a musical rendition of words or phrases, which is basically synonymous to what Baraka does with ideophones. Thematically, “hamboning” and “word painting” illustrate how the slaves negotiated the “banning” of their instruments, and still created coded music as means of communication. Here again, musical agency – subsumed under the trope of free jazz syncretism – allows for the preservation of cultural traditions and history.

As mentioned earlier, in this synthesizing poetic sequence of the meanings of slavery and their effects on African American identity and ontology, Baraka often relies on black musicology to provide a didactic commentary on significant historical events. For instance, in “The Y #23” (86), the griot considers the ramifications of Marcus Garvey’s arrest and deportation: “History bleeding history bleeding/ 1929, death on time/ Garvey gone” (15-17). 1929 also suggests the beginning of the Great Depression and, so, the end of

¹¹² The album includes a jazz poem on Malcolm. Quintessentially Black Arts in spirit and aesthetics, Shepp’s album was played, in parts, at a 1965 benefit concert supporting black militancy.

the Harlem Renaissance. While black politics and literature enter transitional phases, Louis Armstrong, through the revolutionary style developed in “Potato Head Blues,” is redefining the jazz solo, thereby ushering in a more modernist approach to jazz improvisation.¹¹³

Elsewhere, Billie Holiday’s evocative “Strange Fruit” (“W WHY-EE-EEE! [32],” 104-105), with its rememory of lynchings, proposes a historical lineage for the poem’s narrative of Fanny Lou Hammer’s arrest and beating on June 1963 in a Winona, Mississippi jail. Like Holiday’s griotic song, Duke Ellington’s epic *Black, Brown and Beige* is conceptualized as history, “depicting the journey of black people from Africa to enslavement, through the Emancipation and the sorrows and triumphs of assimilation.”¹¹⁴ Ellington’s suite parallels what Baraka is doing in the poems; in fact, both suite and poems chart the ways in which slaves employed music to transcend their status and how that tradition of song is still central to black life. Moreover, both Ellington and Baraka aver that in order to “get” black music, it is fundamental to understand African American cultural history.¹¹⁵

Ultimately, what both Baraka and Ellington –and Hughes, in *Ask Your Mama* for that matter –prove is that Black Americans conceptualized music as didactic performances of a shared ethos. Constantly reassessing the affects of slavery, these griots have recourse to

¹¹³ Interestingly, “Potato Head Blues” appears on *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: 1923-1924*, the title referencing James Joyce’s work. The method of improvisation developed by Armstrong can be said to correlate Joyce’s development of the “stream-of-consciousness” technique.

¹¹⁴ From the back of the album. See also the extended liner notes from the Columbia release. Catalogue # ck 65566, 1999.

¹¹⁵ Ellington states this objective in “Duke Says Swing is Stagnant!,” *Down Beat* 2 (1939): 16-17.

music as a ritualized compendium of the black experience. While in *Ask Your Mama*, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Louis Armstrong, and Charlie Parker were musical exemplars and pillars of aesthetic development, in Baraka's *Wise Why's Y's*, it is John Coltrane, "The Wise One" –here, functioning as both musical motif and moniker for Trane –who embodies the quintessential free jazz griot. His music encompasses all the motifs and musical revisionisms of the forty movements in the poem.¹¹⁶ Coltrane's all-encompassing music also includes Baraka's own political and poetic revisionism; it expounds a regenerative commitment to producing a syncretic poem. Like David Henderson, Baraka understands how Coltrane's music didactically moves the "changing same" forward for future generations. Thus, with Baraka's closing "Think of Slavery/ as/ Educational!" to the tune of Coltrane, the griot/poet momentarily ends his tale/ritual.

For Baraka, and, as we saw in the previous chapter, for Sonia Sanchez, to write is to remember, to improvise is to revolutionize, to re-historicize is to educate in order to change. To write "*musicked*" poetry is Baraka's attempt to answer and transcend the relentless black question:

Whyyy' sssssssssss

Whyyy sssssssssss

Whyyy

¹¹⁶ For instance, his inclusion of musicians like Moncur, Brown, Shepp, Ra, Coleman, and Sanders evokes Don L. Lee's map of the "*men of the movement*" in "Toward a Definition: Black Poetry of the Sixties (after Leroi Jones)," 215-216.

&c.

("History-Wise #22," 53-56)

To write poetry then is to try to free blues and jazz people.

Conclusion

My doctoral dissertation, *In the Circle: Jazz Griots and the Mapping of African American Cultural History in Poetry* studied the ways in which African American poets of the 1960s and 1970s, Langston Hughes, David Henderson, Sonia Sanchez, and Amiri Baraka employ jazz as cultural memory. Their theorization of the jazz gestalt allows for historical reclamation; it also re-historicizes the historical and ethnic consciousness of Black Americans. As such, the four jazz poets discussed in this dissertation can be regarded as griots whose function is to sensitize later generations about the need to know themselves and to study the etymology of their blackness. According to these four poets, this process is necessary to any nationalist aspirations. For those reasons, I believe that the poetic and cultural work of Hughes, Henderson, Sanchez, and Baraka can be used as templates for the hip-hop generation, whose ethnic consciousness often seems eroded by capitalism and misogyny.

The interest in the topic emerged, in part, from an online article by Matthew Birkhold, who quotes an argument that erupted between Tricia Rose, author of the important *Black Noise*, and video director Jessy Terrero during the 2005 *Feminism and Hip-Hop* conference. What triggered the debate was Rose's assertion that because it had "internalized capitalism and misogyny, it was time to let hip-hop go." Terrero, defending his videos' depiction of black women argued that "women were portrayed in videos in a manner that guaranteed profit for both the director and the label" to which Rose replied, "If having the Klan come through your video and lynch black folks is going to make you money,

are you going to do it?"¹ This argument is symptomatic of the ongoing debate regarding hip-hop and its potential to lead African Americans to re-historicize the inherent meanings of their blackness. Yvonne Byone contends that "[t]he chief question is what is the impact of a Hip-Hop generation political initiative that seeks to empower young people of color, if it is so reliant on rap artists whose creative work is often dominated with misogynistic, offensive or purely materialistic messages" (20). Later, she concludes that "[r]ealistically, how revolutionary can a 'Hip-Hop Movement' be if its primary motivator is a market-driven entertainment entity?" (21).

Byonne's questioning in 2004 evokes what critic Bakari Kitwana had already identified, at the turn of the 1990s, as an intergenerational "crisis" (xi) in Black America. Kitwana cites an interview to hip-hop magazine *The Source*, in which Maulana Karenga states,

Our youth can be our fate or our future. If young people embrace Black culture, ground themselves in it, and feel compelled to continue the legacy, then they are our future. But if they turn their backs on their Blackness, if they have contempt for their fathers and mothers, if they do nothing but engage in self-congratulatory narratives and music about themselves and imagine that they are any threat to this society or that they have any future in it simply by talking negative, then they are not our future; they are our fate. (xi)

In order to address these intergenerational discontinuities, this dissertation has sought to analyze how Langston Hughes, David Henderson, Sonia Sanchez, and Amiri Baraka

¹ Retrieved from the website, <http://www.wiretapmag.org/stories/43121>.

imbricated jazz themes, idioms, and techniques in their poems. As I have shown in my argument, they perceive jazz, the most urban expression of the black experience, as a thematic and idiomatic agency capable of performing Black History. That I located the 1960s in Black America as a site of potential cultural reinvigoration is significant; during that important decade, jazz was perceived as the purest expression of the black soul. Black jazz had resisted the eroding process of white co-optation and commodification. Reincarnated and actualized in free jazz, the defying spirit of bebop embodied by Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelonius Monk found its legacy re-enacted in Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, Sun Ra, Albert Ayler, Archie Shepp, and Pharoah Sanders. The new black music might not have always *been* political, but its aural experience certainly nourished the political aspirations of emerging urban black poets, who saw mired in the musicians' revolutionary aestheticisms their own poetic/political templates for new representations of blackness.

For these reasons, I argued in this dissertation that bebop and free jazz embody black cultural memory in ways that can be used by the hip-hop generation to reassess its sense of blackness, and reclaim their ethnic consciousness as political and ontological means of empowerment. Moreover, I contended that Langston Hughes, David Henderson, Sonia Sanchez, and Amiri Baraka, through the poetry they produced and the political poetics they deployed, can be considered as griot/historians of the black urban experience in the U.S., thereby making their cultural productions an encyclopedic collective memory of a shared ethos. Each in their own ways, Hughes, Henderson, Sanchez, and Baraka has

performed revived versions of the jazz gestalt, within which poetry, music, and politics cross-fertilize and sustain one another. Therefore, each of the poems analyzed in this dissertation has served a central goal, which is to sensitize African Americans to rediscover their blackness through a re-inscriptive historicity. To re-awaken and redefine the black collective consciousness necessitates a concerted effort; African Americans must understand where they came from and who they are before they can effect social change. The four poets chosen for my argument understand the urgency of this journey back to black etymologies, and sought the agency of jazz as the cultural memory containing work songs, field holler, spirituals and blues to galvanize the efforts toward self-definition and self-determination.

As jazz griots of the new black consciousness, Langston Hughes, David Henderson, Sonia Sanchez, and Amiri Baraka therefore fulfill the requirements of black oratorical “mission” comprised of six “goals: (1) to protest grievances, (2) to state complaints, (3) to demand rights, (4) to advocate racial cooperation, (5) to mold racial consciousness, and (6) to stimulate racial pride” (Boulware qtd in Gilyard 7). At the same time, each of these poets interlink his/her oratorical “mission” with a vernacular “mission;” that is, if Black Americans are to rediscover their cultural ancestry, they must be firmly ingrained in black vernacular performativity. As mentioned earlier, Hughes, Henderson, Sanchez, and Baraka often use jazz paradigms as points of entry into vernacular exploration. Jazz, then, is reconfigured as a musical performance of storytelling forwarding the African American cultural traditions. In the same vein, this dissertation has shown how these poets develop a

jazz vocabulary comprised of typographical renditions of jazz sounds and techniques or musical annotations as a way to complement the words they use in the poems. The intricacies between sound and meaning –between sound and word, between jazz and poetry –are always dialogically linked with the trope of storytelling.

In my theoretical framework –the jazz gestalt –this trope is obviously political since reclamation of history entails a rejection of European master narratives. I argued throughout the four chapters of this dissertation that bebop and free jazz narrate, in coded improvisational aestheticisms, the rejection of white appropriation of the music, whether economic or technical. This aesthetic rejection becomes a political project of historical reclamation in the poetry of the four aforementioned poets. The jazz gestalt allows for a re-evaluation of what African American identity has meant, going all the way back to its African origins, and how it be re-inscribed within the new black consciousness. Similarly, Hughes, Henderson, Sanchez, and Baraka all attack the sources of cultural disaffiliation and discontinuity that demean postulations of blackness. Against these threats to the integrity of black ontology, they posit the black cultural continuum symbolized in this dissertation by jazz, and reclaim Africa as the ancestral site of the black aesthetic in formation. Therefore, jazz is refigured as a political performance of black resistance grounded in African American vernacular and cultural traditions. Because they constantly reaffirm the black cultural continuum, Hughes, Henderson, Sanchez, Baraka perform a historiographical griotism that employs the syncretism of jazz as internal motivator.

For one, Hughes's oratorical "mission" in *Ask Your Mama* is in agreement with his life-long poetic vocation to represent the black vernacular voice of the black masses in verse. By mapping the cultural history of Black American as well as that of the Diaspora, Hughes not only reiterates the attacks of "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" and the demands for socio-economic equality of *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, he also brings together oppositional black poetics and politics in a gesture toward intraracial reconciliation indispensable in nation building. In the catalogues for instance, Louis Armstrong and Charlie Parker co-exist, despite their aesthetic differences; they are, nevertheless, united in their respective commitment to perform their blackness in jazz.² Such vernacular "cooperation" is created and constructed by Hughes's poetic "improvisation." In the cartographical scope of *Ask Your Mama*, the model of "cooperation" achieved through improvisation is Hughes's stylization of the racial politics necessary to assert a collectively conscious blackness –artistically and politically –without fear of reappraisals. The oratorical, rhetorical, musical, poetic and political strategies Hughes uses in *Ask Your Mama* confer vernacular and ontological significance to the poem. His incorporation of stylized elements of the basic African aesthetics also signals an inherent desire to engage in cultural dialogues with the Diaspora using jazz as portal to conversation and creative exchange.

² Armstrong felt the threat of more adventurous boppers like Gillespie. He called bebop "modern malice" and did not refrain from criticizing the new advent in jazz. See Stearns, p. 219.

In turn, how Hughes conceptualizes jazz informs how he breathes new life in Black English's signifying potentialities. In that sense, Hughes's conceptualization of Black English evokes *nommo*, the African concept in which "the word is conceived as a living principle, [and as] active force to be deployed in the writer's confrontation with experience" (Irele 3). Maulana Karenga notes that "[i]nherent in the concept of *nommo* are the triple aspects of and elements of water, wind, and word, symbolizing, respectively, the life force (animation), life essence (spirit), and life creation (creativity)" (8). Moreover,

[i]t is this sacred, indispensable, and creative character of the word, as an inherent and instrumental power to call into being, to mold, to bear infinite meanings, and to forge a world [Diasporic Africans] all want and deserve to live in, that seizes the hearts and minds of the African American creative community. (8)

Identified by the New Black Poets as a catalyst for their jazz poetics, *Ask Your Mama* certainly "seizes the hearts and minds" of those to whom Hughes bequeathed his poetic mission.

Finally, Hughes's use of the concept of *nommo* in *Ask Your Mama* is integral to his claiming of Africa as Motherland and "reflects the efforts to recover and reconstruct African culture and to use the past as a foundation and framework for present and future projects" (Gilyard 8). As such, Hughes echoes Janheinz Jahn, who in *Muntu: An Outline of the New African Culture*, "posits the cultural unity of Africa and its diaspora" and "proposes as a common element a belief in *nommo*, the word" (Brown 25 –author's

emphasis). Through these aesthetic principles and rhetorical strategies, Hughes thus seeks to reaffirm his “Africanness” (Karenga 7); in this, he prefigures Umbra, the Black Arts and other Black Consciousness movements in 1960s and 1970s Black America.³

In the interview I conducted with David Henderson, he mentioned how Hughes’s *Ask Your Mama* was his inspiration and passageway into poetry. Deeply invested in forwarding the African American cultural traditions, Henderson is particularly interested in how Hughes developed vernacular parlances in order to infuse *Ask Your Mama* with stylized forms of linguistic, musical, and lyrical resistance. Like Hughes, Henderson sustains the poetic project by claiming the potential of (black) language, comprised of Black English and blues and jazz parlances to effect liberation. The affirmation of the word through the voice, and of the voice through the word –which, in Hughes’s grand narrative means the affirmation of cultural traditions in the African diaspora –becomes a poetic axiom that overrides Henderson’s cultural production. What Henderson does in *Felix of the Silent Forest* and *De Mayor of Harlem* is a griotic exploration of urban Black America. To this end, he conceptualizes rhythm and blues and free jazz as re-inscriptive musical idioms that bespeak of the impending revolution in black consciousness. Constantly alternating between iconic musical figures like Elvin Jones and John Coltrane and black political luminaries like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, Henderson traces the trajectory of the ideological and political struggles for black liberation that occurred at the beginning of the

³ See for instance, Chapter 2 in Van DeBurg’s *New Day in Babylon*, 29-62; John Henrick Clarke’s “Reclaiming the Lost African Heritage,” in *Black Fire*, 11-18.

1960s, when the more progressive wing of the civil rights movement evolved into Black Power.

In his rhythm and blues and free jazz poems Henderson conveys the trepidation of the nascent cultural nationalism, whose politics Umbra workshops served to debate. By re-historicizing the Harlem Riot of 1964 into a compendium of African American dreams deferred, Henderson's motivic "Keep on Pushing" not only recuperates one of the central motifs in Hughes's jazz poetry, he also gestures towards the revolution –musical, poetic, political –that will define Black America in the second half of the 1960s. Henderson's use of a rhythm and blues motif, Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions' "Keep on Pushing," as a refrain demonstrates the potential of the music to "speak" directly to the black masses as they gather and prepare for black nationalism. In the same vein, the poem is a corollary to the music; both claim the same continuum, both serve the same cause, both use the same coded language. This is but one example of how Henderson instills his poems with black music in order to authenticate his themes, personas, and locales.

For Henderson, rhythm and blues and free jazz rituals are authentic performances of blackness. Because rhythm and blues and free jazz are rooted in the black vernacular tradition of spirituals, blues, and early black jazz, they are musical testimonies of black resilience. They comprise the history of black struggles for liberation, and, at the same time, they usher in a new era of black consciousness. Fundamentally, the New Music in Henderson's poetry constructs new myths of blackness metonymically represented in iconic figures of liberation. Like his own griotism, Henderson's heroes follow the Hughesian

tradition of forwarding the ideals, hopes, possibilities, histories, and culture of Black Americans *to* Black Americans.

Sonia Sanchez's Black Arts poetry continues in the cultural nationalist pathway mapped by Hughes and Henderson. Perhaps of all the Black Arts griots, Sanchez best exemplifies the qualities of teacher and historian required for the task. Often using her own "herstory" as point of departure, Sanchez elaborates a series of jazz motifs –"know yourself," "love yourself," "black is beautiful" –that show the breadth of her immersion in the black cultural traditions of Africa and African America. Within the same poem Sanchez can revivify black womanhood, perform revolutionary black poetry and conjure up the voice of ancestors. She can be Harriet Tubman, Nina Simone, and Sonia Sanchez all at once in the polyphonic tapestry of her early Black Arts poems. What rarely changes in her early poems is the form; she reproduces a free jazz compositional framework wherein lineation, traditional scansion and overall structure are completely ignored. By liberating the form of her poems, she wishes to invoke the spirit –and the arrhythmic sound –of free jazz so that the lyrical and the musical are aesthetic corollaries to the political struggles for liberation.

Like Baraka, Sanchez configures free jazz syncretism as the agency of black historical rediscovery. So, while the form is constantly evoking the improvisational vistas of free jazz, the content navigates the History of Blacks in the U.S. For example, her reclamation of the black female voice occurs through a re-historicizing of the tropological chanting black woman. By dialogically linking Africa, the ancestral homeland, with

African America, Sanchez performs a function of the griotte's tale, that of mapping the epic memory of her people. She does so in order to empower African Americans, male *and* female –although the task seems geared towards black women first –to discover the inherent meanings of their blackness. Sanchez's continuous desire to re-energize the black masses by re-awakening their ethnic consciousness is tantamount to her belief that black music, especially blues and jazz, contains the histories and “herstories” to be reclaimed.

Although most of Sanchez's heroes are nameless everyday African Americans in *Home Coming* and *We a BaddDDD People*, she nevertheless creates through the continuity of her form and themes a free jazz suite that invokes Hughes's *Ask Your Mama*. When she does invoke black political (Malcolm X) or musical (Coltrane) deities, she makes them available to all black people. Always conscious that her audience is defined by race *and* gender, she feminizes the Coltrane trope in a way that makes the musician's spiritual journey meaningful to black women as well. Her early Black Arts poems therefore allow for an equal dialogic relationship between black men and black women, which Sanchez correlates to the “racial solidarity” (Joyce, *Ijala*, 78) necessary to the revolution in the streets, in the household, and most importantly, within the individual and collective mind of Black America. Sanchez embodies the quintessential Black Arts griotte, whose poetic project entails the re-programming of the black mind into a revitalized blackness capable of effecting both liberation and nation. Sanchez's use of historical reparation as means of empowerment confirms her role as teacher and promulgator of the new black consciousness. Her influence has transcended generational gaps; it is evident in the cultural

work of female groups like Sweet Honey in the Rock and acts like Queen Latifah (“U.N.I.T.Y” is a good example).

With my analysis of Baraka’s poetic journey, from his Black Arts jazz poetry to his Third-World Marxist jazz ideation, this dissertation comes full circle. In his poems, Baraka not only displays the technical and ideating jazz virtuosity he inherited from Hughes, he also highlights the need for Black Americans to rediscover their collective history. Constantly researching the etymologies of blackness in both Africa and the early African presence in the New World, Baraka, I argued, wants to exhort black people to change their status and reject the historical shackles imposed upon Africa America by white oppressors. In his Black Arts poetry, Baraka resorts to free jazz structures and linguistic innovations that he borrows from his musicological knowledge of jazz and of the black vernacular tradition. Accordingly, what is most fascinating about Baraka’s understanding of jazz is the sociological he ascribes to the black musical continuum. Convinced that black music, especially blues and jazz, has been the musical text of the black experience in the U.S., Baraka employs musical idioms, techniques and themes in his Black Arts poets as a correlative to the politics debated among Black Arts and Black Power movements. Like Henderson and Sanchez, Baraka perceives the cultural interlinkings between Malcolm X and John Coltrane as one instance of the black jazz gestalt of the 1960s in Black America. To understand politics using the music, to write poetry infused with music, to compose music instilled with politics, all domains of cultural activity in Baraka’s work convey the intersections black poets used as references.

Central to Baraka's poetic project is also the reclamation of Africa as the ancestral site of black culture and black ontology. Once again, Baraka employs the agency of jazz, more specifically of free jazz, to catalyze a re-investigative poetics grounded in stylized elements of the conceptual African aesthetic. His use of ideophones, percussive language, and tonality are all confirmatory of a desire to represent in verse the polyphonic voices of the African Diaspora. As such, free jazz is conceptualized as the pathway towards aesthetic –and obviously historical –rediscovery of Africa. By using free jazz as compositional poetics, Baraka affirms its unitary potential. Free jazz was often recognized for the egalitarian dimension of its improvisational dynamics; each member the band had an equal “voice” or sound, and each was allowed his own approach to composition. The result was often dissonant and arrhythmic, but the inherent equality of “voice” as well as the relative compositional freedom within the group represented potentially important tropes for Baraka's politics and poetics.

Free jazz as “Unity Music” is a central trope of the poems discussed in the chapter on Baraka; he uses this trope as corollaries to political mobilization, racial pride rhetoric, and, finally, to consciousness-raising projects. Since free jazz existed outside the constricting musical aesthetics of Europe and Euro-America, and since the new music, like Baraka, became famous for its championing the destruction of conventions, it was only fitting that Baraka would permeate his Black Arts poems with such revolutionary spirit.

Similarly, “In the Tradition” and *Wise Whys Ys* narrate forms of ritualized artistry used as political engagement. In both works, Baraka illustrates the fact that despite his

political shift to Third-World Marxism, his faith in free jazz as the galvanizer of black revolutions remains intact. “In the Tradition” and *Wise Whys Ys* both deploy a historiographical performativity that resembles Hughes’s in *Ask Your Mama*. These three works are imbued with the black vernacular tradition. Like Hughes, Baraka conceptualizes blues as the internal motivator of jazz performativity as activism, thus perpetuating the tradition of resistance that inheres from black music. Because blues is storytelling and because free jazz sought to reinvest blues praxes in its musical aestheticism, it remains central in Baraka’s most griotic poetry. In fact, this dissertation argued that Baraka grounds his griotism in the storytelling framework of free jazz. Fundamentally, Baraka’s jazz griotism in “In the Tradition” and *Wise Whys Ys* continues the cultural work of Hughes, as well as correlates that of his contemporaries like Henderson and Sanchez. His poetic journey symbolizes the “Changing Same” he recognized in the black musical continuum.

Finally, I wish to conclude this dissertation by linking Hughes’s, Henderson’s, Sanchez’s, and Baraka’s jazz performativities with Ronald L. Jackson’s Afrocentric model “in which Nommo is graphically posited as the center around which eight elements – rhythm, soundin’, stylin’, improvisation, storytelling, lyrical code, image making, and call and response –revolve” (qtd in Gilyard 17). In so doing, I aim to weave together the various critical threads of this dissertation into a jazz-inflected pattern that reflects the complex of elements that “make” the poem “happen” for Hughes, Henderson, Sanchez, and Baraka. Thus, I refer, once again, to Gilyard who, summarily, cites Jackson’s rhetorical model. It is worth quoting at length:

Rhythm is similar to polyrhythm in that it suggests that the energy of the rhetor must be one with the energy of the audience...The rhythm must coincide with the mystical and magical power of the word, so that the speaker, the word, and the audience are all on one accord...Soundin' is the idea of wolfin' or signifyin' within the African American tradition...Stylin' is the notion that a speaker has combined rhythm, excitement, and enthusiasm which propel a message and the audience...Improvisation is a stylistic device which is a verbal interplay, and strategic catharsis often resulting from the hostility and frustration of a white-dominated society. It is spontaneity...Storytelling...is often used by a rhetor to arouse epic memory...Lyrical Code is the preservation of the word through a highly codified system of lexicality...Image making is the element which considers legends, myths, and heroes in a given culture...Call and response is the final element which offers a culmination of all these elements into an interactive discourse atypical of European communities. It is the idea that one should affirm by clapping, saying "amen," or responding in some way (17).

Jackson's conceptual framework underpins many of the defining components of Hughes's, Henderson's, Sanchez's, and Baraka's jazz syncretizing of their poetics.

The poets' relentless poetic pursuits of the representational black speaking voice of the masses, which they find primarily in vernacular ritualization and stylization leads them to conclude that "[t]he rhythm of life is/ jazz rhythm." They establish a dialogic relation

between performance and cultural identification, whereby the performance of vernacular idioms such as blues, bebop (Hughes), rhythm and blues (Henderson), and free jazz (Henderson, Sanchez, Baraka) reunites both performer and audience under the experiential affirmations of a shared history and allows both to achieve catharsis in the process. Similarly, their respective poetic and musicological revisionism, their coded use of jazz techniques like interpolation and riffing as well as their uses of African aesthetics like chanting and ideophonic soundings constitute instances of signifyin.’ Their use of storytelling as jazz improvisational technique conveys, poetically, the scope of their encyclopedic memory deployed as resistance against historical degradation and demonization, economic oppression, and misrepresentations in the white-ruled media, which are abuses that affect delineations and acceptance of blackness. “Lyrical Code” appears under the guise of blues and jazz vocabularies, which sustain the poets’ theorization of vernacular performance in poetry. The catalogues of cultural heroes in *Ask Your Mama*, the griotic descriptions of the revolutionaries, both musical and political, in Henderson’s Harlem, the black women continuum in Sanchez’s work, the attempts to reclaim black historiography in Baraka’s “In the Tradition” and *Wise Whys Ys* all map, among other things, the potential of artistry to rise above discriminating politics and transcend the limitations imposed upon Blacks of African descent. The quest –poetic and political –becomes the reclaiming of black traditions and the reaffirmation of black ontology.

Lastly, there is call and response. One of the most important characteristics of the griot is the ability to engage with his/her audience. In the poetry of the griot, audience involvement is fundamental. The four poets discussed in this dissertation opted to speak to, for, and about African Americans. They all chose to take their poetries to the people as a way to include them in the poetic, political, and fundamentally etymological “journey back” to black ontology. Their respective poetic projects are constantly engaged in conversations and dialogues with one another in ways that reproduces the antiphonal framework between African and African America. Moreover, each poetic project is dialogically linked with the black cultural traditions as means of reaffirming the continuums that have historically upheld black humanity.

...

(To be sung softly)

A continuum of uplifting voices. A continuum of militant artists. A continuum of musical visionaries. A continuum of political revolutionaries. A continuum of self-determined black women. A continuum of jazz architects. The changing same. Intersecting continuums forming a circle. Nommo. A love supreme. Black life vibrating in a jazz gestalt.

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