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ALL BLUES: A STUDY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN RESISTANCE POETRY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in

The Department of English

by

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation is, in actuality, the fruition of a seed that my father planted in my mind years ago. After my enlistment in the Army, I attempted to establish a relationship with him (my parents were divorced when I was a young boy). His daily lectures on the history of modern jazz became more than a supplement to my freshman classes. They were blues-tinged fragments of information that sparked my fascination with African-American culture and helped me to discover my identity. So to my father I say, thank you.

My mother displayed her love, strength, and courage by refusing to give up on me. In her most desperate moments, she would often tell me, "Boy, you better straighten up. You're gonna need that education one day. You're gonna need a bachelor's degree; you'll probably need a master's degree; in fact, by the time you grow up you'll probably need a Ph.D.!!" Needless to say, she was quite prophetic.

I would also like to thank my late aunt, Mary Brown, who helped me to change the direction of my life when I was a youth. I will never forget the aroma of her buttered waffles and pancakes on Sunday mornings and the tone of disapproval in her voice when she admonished me for failing in school.
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To all of you I want to extend my sincerest gratitude!
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ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, critics of African-American poetry have disagreed vehemently about poetic form. Some, like J. Saunders Redding, for instance, have expressed skepticism about poetry based upon oral forms. Others, like Sterling Brown, have argued that a viable poetics can be developed from black expressive forms.

This dissertation analyzes the debate over black poetic form and traces the development of modernist and postmodernist poetics that have been shaped by the specific contours of African-American vernacular culture. Yet this study is not merely formalistic. Although "All Blues" describes a blues aesthetic by examining intertextual relationships between the poetry and oral forms, it also examines the role of poetry in cultural politics.

While previous studies of African-American poetry have focused primarily upon content, "All Blues" assumes the challenge posed by Black Aesthetic critics and, later, Sherley Anne Williams. At the same time, this study demonstrates that it is possible to discuss the specificity of African-American style in the work of Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, Margaret Walker, Amiri Baraka, and Jayne Cortez without resorting to chauvinism. By examining the creative process in the blues tradition, we can observe a strategy among the poets that bears
close resemblance. More specifically, we can identify three main bodies of blues poetics. Some poets riff upon, that is, mimic black oral forms; some poets fuse their dedication to vernacular culture with a concern for literary conventions; and some poets incarnate blues musicians. In addition, "All Blues" calls the form-versus-content opposition into question. Form becomes the blues poet's distinct method to contribute to the quest for African-American cultural autonomy. The reconceptualization of the notion of form allows critics to assess the work of a largely ignored poet like Kalamu ya Salaam who has used rhetoric as a poetic medium. Thus, "All Blues" charts the infusion of new forms into American literary discourse.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: ALL BLUES / NEW ORLEANS STYLE

One night in New Orleans about fifteen years ago I went to see the Dirty Dozen Brass Band perform at a local bar called The Glass House. Located uptown on Saratoga Street, the bar lay in the heart of a working-class black community. As I recall, the entrance fee was two dollars with a two drink minimum. Inside, the air was thick with cigarette smoke. I remember feeling cramped. There was little leg space, and the chairs were small and uncomfortable. There was even a local drunk who had to be told that the woman sitting next to me was my wife. But the beauty of the music made me forget these trivialities.

The Dirty Dozen plays what might be called postmodern New Orleans street music. That is, the music is a unique New Orleans style of jazz. The band plays classics like Thelonius Monk's "Blue Monk," but it superimposes the rhythmic structure of New Orleans marching bands on modern jazz melodies. The result is a funky music that retains the complexity of jazz compositions while also compelling one's feet to move. And as if to underscore the primacy of dance, the band had a cadre of dancers who performed along with the music.

I sat there oblivious to the smoke and cramped conditions, enraptured by the performance that featured, at one point, an eight- or nine-year-old black boy who

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demonstrated his competence by playing trumpet with one hand. After a stellar performance of Miles Davis's "All Blues," one of the dancers noted my enjoyment and said, "Now that's some music. That's some real music. I ain't never heard that song before in ma life--an I'm twenty-three years old--but that's some music."

In addition to testifying to the creativity of the blues idiom, the dancer's comments call attention to the importance of style in African-American performance. Though he performed his traditional New Orleans dance (known as the second-line) to the rhythms of a song composed before his birth, he could appreciate it because it was played in a style that he recognized and understood. But while many studies of African-American style have focused upon music, there are relatively few that concern themselves with black poetics. There is a strong tie between African-American music and poetics, and as blues music lends itself to infinite variations, so black poets are equally diverse stylistically.

The following study is a new poetics that attempts to address the problem of form that has befuddled critics of 20th century African-American poetry. The study does not claim to address all of black poetry. Rather, the project focuses upon poets who have used vernacular expressive forms as models for their poetry. Some poets, like Countee Cullen, for instance, have displayed little interest in black cultural forms. Such poets
conceptualize poetry in relation to established literary conventions, and sufficient critical attention has been given to these poets to demonstrate their contributions to literature. With the exception of Stephen Henderson, whose *Understanding the New Black Poetry* was published in 1972, however, few critics have devoted books to poets who have endeavored to depict the experiences of African-American workers and peasants.

As the first writer to create a poetics for what I call blues poetry, Henderson faced a monumental task. Though he was familiar with the poetry and the black folk tradition, Henderson was unable to anticipate the trap of nationalist politics. Consequently, his model is informed by a chauvinist vision, and his language is often offensive for some readers. Despite his political limitations, however, Henderson was correct in his basic contention. The most innovative black poets have returned repeatedly to the well of the black oral tradition—both in its musical and verbal manifestations. But Henderson did not support his thesis with sufficient examples.

While many black poets understood the truth of Henderson's position, few had the time or interest required for a full study of the subject. On the other hand, it is not surprising that many academic critics chose to avoid the issue altogether, since the discussion of form had been framed in nationalist rhetoric,
suggesting wrongly that nationalism and black poetry are inextricably linked.

Unable to envision an alternative to nationalism, critics tended to avoid politics in subsequent studies. Eugene Redmond's *Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry*, published in 1976, is a kaleidoscopic survey from the 18th century through The Black Arts Movement. The book is extremely valuable for its historical and biographical information, and since Redmond was influential as a Midwestern poet during the movement, *Drumvoices* is especially useful as reflecting a participant's viewpoint. But while it is clear that Redmond identifies with the folk tradition in *Drumvoices*, his book is more anecdotal than theoretical.

Sherely Anne Williams, another poet-critic, attempts to formulate a comprehensive theory of black poetry in her 1979 essay, "The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry," which is a revision of Henderson's ideas in *Understanding the New Black Poetry*. Following Henderson's example in claiming formal ties between black music and poetry, Williams points out that critics might better appreciate black poetic style if they understood that blues music lies beneath the surface of most black poetic texts. But while Williams's essay is insightful, it does not consider a broad range of poetic styles based on the oral tradition. In addition, "Blues Roots" is narrowly formalistic. Williams does not give
consideration to the political implications of the content or style of the poetry.

Few studies of poetry were done in the 1980s. Two exceptions were Marcellus J. Blount's 1987 dissertation, "Broken Tongues: Figures of Voice in Afro-American Poetry," and Houston A. Baker's Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance which also appeared in 1987. Both writers continue the line established by Henderson. Blount proposes that the black sermon has more potential for critics than black music because it constitutes a vernacular form of poetry. However, Blount makes the mistake that Williams makes in "Blues Roots." While the sermon can be a useful tool to interpret many poems, it is not sufficient to encompass the entire vernacular tradition.

Baker avoids the mistake made by Blount and Williams by establishing the premise that sound generally can be an important indicator of group expression. However, Baker's "deformation of mastery" trope is more problematic than his premise. Baker states that black form appears deformed to the outside (read white) observer. But in referring to the poetry as "deform[ed," he misrepresents it and undercuts the thrust of his argument. More importantly, Baker's insider/outsider dichotomy reflects a manichean perspective that propels readers back to the chauvinism of the 1960s.
More recently, Craig Hansen Werner has described an African-American version of modernism in *Playing the Changes* (1994). Werner is particularly effective in illustrating how African-American literature generally is informed by a blues aesthetic. And yet his decision to treat of both poetry and fiction does not allow for the indepth analysis that poetry requires.

The most perceptive observer of black poetry since Stephen Henderson is undoubtedly Aldon Lynn Nielsen, whose *Writing between the Lines* and *Black Chant* have supported Henderson's thesis: black poetic texts are intertextually related to black vernacular forms. Unlike Henderson, however, Nielsen has supported his thesis with close readings that demonstrate these relationships. In so doing, he has achieved the critical breakthrough of analyzing the poetry in terms of sound, which, in turn, has permitted him to deconstruct the insider/outsider schism. By focusing on the poetry and the cultural history that informs it, Nielsen moves the interpretation of African-American poetry out of the narrow confines of nationalism toward internationalism.

In addition to these wide-ranging theoretical studies, such a text as Steven Tracy's *Langston Hughes and the Blues* makes an important contribution. As Cheryl A. Wall has noted, "studies of individual poets" often "precede the design of broader paradigms."¹ Tracy's book offers an excellent analysis of the intertextuality
between Hughes's poetry and blues music. In so doing, Tracy anticipated Nielsen's work and proved, once again, that Henderson was essentially correct. My own blues performance has been enhanced by all of these scholars, but I am equally indebted to the late Larry Neal, who was the first critic to conceptualize a blues metaphor and understand its potential for critical observation.

While "All Blues" might be said to elaborate upon Williams's "Blues Roots," I have attempted to avoid what I see as a vulgar formalism, which is merely a reactionary response to an overemphasis upon content. From the time of Hughes's Weary Blues on, the most innovative black poetry, at its very core, has been subversive. Failure to address the political conditions that help spawn the poetry amounts to a diminished criticism. Though Williams is right when she says that readers have been able to decipher the content of the poetry, it is equally true that critics have made their analyses from a bourgeois or nationalist position. The failure to imagine an alternative to these positions has led to a stalemate, and it is not surprising that most critics have theorized about narrative forms since the conclusion of The Black Arts Movement.

At issue is the inability of critics to understand the centrality of class politics in America. While conservative critics like J. Saunders Redding have solidified white supremacy by insisting upon the value of
assimilation, nationalist critics like Haki R. Madhubuti have created manichean models that are ultimately reactionary because they are mere reversals of the colonizer. What is necessary for the interpretation of African-American poetry is an internationalist poetics that focuses sharply upon specific cultural experiences here in America, while simultaneously demonstrating how the African-American situation is linked to other marginalized groups globally. In other words, "All Blues" is a poetics that addresses the politics of colonialism and various responses to it through the medium of literary discourse.

Chapter 2 is a survey of critical attitudes regarding the relationship between black poetry and vernacular forms. It provides a historical context for the project by demonstrating that the debates between Black Arts writers and academic critics was preceded by similar debates earlier in the century. The central question for my investigation is how does each critic approach the problem of representation in poetry? After brief remarks about William Braithwaite and Benjamin Brawley, I analyze essays that span a period of 40 years, beginning with James Weldon Johnson's preface to The Book Of American Negro Poetry in 1922 and coming down to Amiri Baraka's "Myth of a Negro Literature" in 1962.

Chapter 3 is the theoretical component of the project. After an analysis of Black Arts criticism, I
examine Henry Louis Gates's signifying trope and explain why it is an inappropriate model for African-American poetry. Then I demonstrate how a poetics based upon blues music is more suitable for black poetry because, as an American expressive form, it contains inscriptions of style and resistance that are unique to the African-American experience. Beginning with a definition of blues music and an examination of the qualities that are unique to the form, I provide examples that illustrate how apparently innocuous lyrics constitute instances of cultural resistance. Afterwards, I argue that the formal relationship between black poetry and folk art is similar to the position of blues music vis-a-vis other aural forms. Just as blues musicians revise musical forms created by the folk, so poets revise verbal folk forms. My research has led me to the conclusion that African-American poets who revise folk forms can be categorized loosely in three ways. Some poets mimic such folk discourses as blues lyrics or black English; others adapt the oral tradition to literary conventions; and a third group attempts to incarnate the blues musician. The latter poetic style has proven to be exceedingly difficult for critics. In fact, discussion of the rhetorical poetry that became popular during The Black Arts Movement has become virtually taboo for critics. In this respect, my study differs markedly from previous studies. While critics have either ignored or attacked
rhetorical poetry as anti-poetry, I demonstrate that rhetorical poetry constitutes a specific type of craft, rather than a lack of it.

Chapters 4 to 6 are in-depth studies of individual poets, designed in each instance to demonstrate how the blues metaphor might be applied to a specific body of poetry. Chapter 4 examines Sterling Brown's handling of folk material in *Southern Road*. Chapter 5 focuses upon Langston Hughes's *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. Here, I illustrate how Hughes fuses his attraction to bebop music with visual techniques associated with Anglo-American modernism. Chapter 6 analyzes Jayne Cortez's *Coagulations*, demonstrating how Cortez's poetry realizes the Black Arts poets' dream of a popular sound-based poetics.

In addition to showing how my blues theory can be applied in critical practice, the studies of Brown, Hughes and Cortez also trace a progression in the development of blues poetry. Of course, I do not want to suggest that most contemporary poets employ the rhetorical style introduced in the 1960s. African-American poetic forms are as diverse as the cultural experiences that inform them, and it is important to note that some poets parody, that is, signify upon, Anglo-American poets. My argument is that, while poets like Cortez represent the avant-garde in blues poetics, all black poets who revise oral/aural forms—even those who
mimic and parody—are operating in a distinct tradition that begins with Hughes and Brown. Just as the Dirty Dozen's version of "All Blues" illustrates that the blues idiom can be infused into an infinite variety of local traditions, so African-American poets continue to create new shades of blues poetry that will become models for future generations of poets.
NOTES

CHAPTER 2
TROUBLE IN MIND: THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY IN EARLY AFRICAN-AMERICAN CRITICISM

When William Dean Howells wrote that Paul Laurence Dunbar's dialect poems were "delightful personal attempts and failures for the written and spoken language,"¹ he was blissfully unaware that his statement would haunt African-American poets and their critics like a specter for a century. Howells's patronizing tone reflects a benevolent albeit blatant racist ideology. As Marcellus Blount has said, "Howell's introduction bears all the trappings of the authenticating preface to the typical slave narrative: the volume is 'written by himself,' and Howells can testify that not only is Dunbar black, but he knows that he writes without the benefit of white blood coursing in his veins."² As the recipient of such a rude compliment, there is little wonder that Dunbar would later tell a friend that Howells had harmed him as a writer. Having been praised for his achievement in dialect, Dunbar feared that he could only satisfy readers by continuing to write in that form. As he explained to his contemporary James Weldon Johnson, "I've got to write dialect poetry; it's the only way I can get them to listen to me."³

Dunbar's comments summon the image of young black tap-dancers who once performed for passersby on the corners of Bourbon Street in New Orleans. After
concluding a performance during which there was invariably a painted smile, the dancer would extend his hat in hand to members of the predominantly white crowd who usually responded by dropping a few coins into the hat. Like the tap-dancers, Dunbar never imagined that his medium could have become the basis for the sophisticated artistic expression that he wished to create. As part of the first generation of post-slavery African-Americans, Dunbar was unable to question the hegemony of Anglo-American culture and therefore unable to envision alternative notions of sophistication.

In the years subsequent to Dunbar's death, critics have expressed strong but conflicting opinions about form in African-American poetry. Some critics have defined form in relation to mainstream literary conventions. Almost invariably, these critics have denounced poets who have experimented with black cultural forms. Others have supported the incorporation of oral/aural forms into literature, while differing among themselves about cultural and/or political issues.

This chapter examines these opposing viewpoints regarding vernacular-based forms in black poetry. I will briefly discuss early critics, such as William Braithwaite and Benjamin Brawley; then I will focus on essays that specifically address the relationship between vernacular expression and literary style, particularly in relation to poetry, beginning with essays written during...
the Harlem Renaissance and concluding in 1962 at the dawn of the Black Arts Movement. Central to my discussion will be the problem of hegemony or what W.E.B. DuBois called the double-consciousness. I hope to demonstrate that categorical denunciations of black poets who have challenged literary conventions constitute an opposition to the development of an Afrocentric redefinition of modernism, as well as a quest for literary authority in terms of that redefinition.

William Stanley Braithwaite was the first African-American writer to gain a reputation for criticism. Braithwaite complained that Dunbar succeeded "only in interpreting a folk temperament." Given the ease with which he rejects folk culture, it is not surprising that Braithwaite, the son of Jamaican immigrants, seldom wrote about African-American writers. Braithwaite chose instead to devote his critical attention to literature written by Europeans and Anglo-Americans. He edited an annual anthology of poetry from 1913 to 1929, and published a book of criticism, The Poetic Year; in addition to a biography of the Bronte sisters, Braithwaite also edited anthologies of British literature.

While Braithwaite was the first successful African-American critic, Benjamin Brawley was the first African American academic critic of major importance. Like Braithwaite, Brawley wrote about British literature, beginning to publish criticism in the early twentieth
century. Unlike Braithwaite, however, Brawley demonstrated an interest in African-American writers. In 1929, Brawley published the third edition of his most important book, *The Negro in Literature and Art*, which was originally published in 1910, but in that first edition focused more narrowly upon visual art than literature.

In *The Negro in Literature and Art*, Brawley reflects a Darwinian influence, and presumes that various types of genius are biologically determined. According to this logic, Brawley identifies aesthetics as the unique gift of African-Americans. He cites as evidence the fact that by the early twentieth century, African-Americans had made contributions in various fields of art: music, painting and poetry. Even the unlearned peasants on the plantations, according to Brawley, evince a strong appreciation for beauty: "find[ing] no better picture" available, the peasant "will paste a circus poster or a flaring advertisement on the walls."  

Despite Brawley's wrongheadedness, he was the first critic to identify a genuine folk tradition, and, albeit with limited success, he attempted to analyze this tradition in relation to black poetry. Brawley points out that Paul Laurence Dunbar's popularity rested, in part, on his success as a performer of his poetry. After citing "When Malindy Sings" as Dunbar's masterpiece in the dialect form, Brawley goes on to list other poems in
dialect form, including "The Party," "that proved unusually successful, specially at readings" (72). Finally, Brawley quotes Brand Whitlock who comments upon the power of Dunbar's poetic voice: "That last evening he recited--oh! what a voice he had ... I can hear him now" (70-71). In addition, Brawley recognized the tension between sound-based poetics and literary conventions. Again discussing Dunbar, he says that "[t]he dialect poems suffer by quotation" (71).

Brawley's crude formulations were superseded by James Weldon Johnson, whose famous poem "The Creation" marked the first successful attempt by a black poet to create serious literature based upon vernacular culture. According to Johnson, the key question for African-Americans was how to achieve "intellectual parity" (9) with the larger American culture.

The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced. The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art. No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior. The status of the Negro in the United States is more a question of national mental attitude toward the race than of actual conditions. (9)

Johnson ignores the dilapidated shacks in the Mississippi Delta and the shabby apartments in the cities that Richard Wright would later describe in Native Son. But even though the demands of monopoly capitalism have caused many people today to define "great[ness]" in terms
of technology, Johnson is nonetheless correct in emphasizing the importance of great art. While black artists have not altered prevailing stereotypes, they have helped to improve African-Americans' self-image. For Johnson, writing in 1922, the question becomes: what are the prospects of such a development? As one might expect, Johnson responds optimistically, and in order to establish a basis for his response, he turns his attention to black folk culture.

In his discussion, Johnson presents a panoramic view of various art forms created by African-Americans. Johnson's basic premise is that black artists have been the primary creators of the art forms that have been identified as American. The implication, of course, is that black vernacular forms can comprise the basis of a great literature, just as such black dances as the cakewalk, turkey trot and eagle rock have been revised in theaters and mainstream American dance. Though Johnson may overstep his bounds in claiming African-American authorship—the origins of ragtime, for example, can be traced to Europe—he anticipates the idea that literatures and discourses of marginalized peoples are sources of genuine artistic and cultural expression.

Johnson makes his most important observation in his discussion of literature. Unlike Brawley, he understood the racist ideology inscribed in Dunbar's dialect. In his now famous comment, Johnson describes dialect as "an
instrument with but two full stops, humor and pathos" (41). Though Johnson's refusal to use African-American vernacular English in *God's Trombones* suggests a distrust of the black speaking voice as a medium for poetry, Johnson does not object to such poetry in his critical work. But he does call for new poetic forms that elaborate upon vernacular forms in order to capture the full complexities of African-American culture (41).

While Johnson correctly points out the limitations posed by the dialect form, his criticism suffers from a lack of clarity. Like Howells, Johnson fails to make the distinction between dialect as literary discourse, on the one hand, and specific oral forms, on the other, which could be used by poets as models for written poetry. Johnson's inability to distinguish between vernacular forms and dialect can perhaps be explained by the fact that, Johnson's own "The Creation" notwithstanding, there existed in 1922 no established literary styles that could serve as an alternative to the dialect form. Thus, as a critic, Johnson was in the unenviable position of attempting to articulate a poetics for which there were no practitioners. However, nine years later in 1931, African-American poets had discovered the potential that vernacular forms offer. Johnson realized a clear response to his call for an alternative to the dialect form, and praised the accomplishments of Langston Hughes
Sterling Brown, who employed the "authentic speech of the Negro in certain phases of real life" (4).

What Johnson recognized was nothing less than the beginning of a national poetics. However, many early critics did not share Johnson's passion for black cultural forms. When Langston Hughes published *Weary Blues* in 1926, Countee Cullen, who had published *Color* the year before, was among the first to criticize Hughes. In a 1926 review, Cullen writes,

> Never having been one to think all subjects and form proper for poetic consideration, I regard these jazz poems as interlopers in the company of the truly beautiful poems in other sections of the book. They move along with the frenzy and electric beat of a Methodist or Baptist revival meeting, and affect me in much the same manner. The revival meeting excites me, cooling and flushing me with alternate chills and fevers of emotion; so do these poems.... "The Cat and the Saxophone" knocked me completely on the side of bewilderment, incredulity.... but is it a poem? ... In the face of accomplished fact, I cannot say This will never do, but I feel it ought never to have been done.....

Note the irony here. Cullen does not deny the effectiveness of Hughes's poetry. On the contrary, he demonstrates a clear understanding of blues poetics. Cullen points out the emotive quality of the poetry, and quite appropriately compares the feelings they arouse to a revival meeting. Yet Cullen interprets Hughes's formal innovation as a basis for critique.

At issue here is cultural authority. In the "Foreword" to his anthology *Caroling Dusk*, Cullen outlines the critical standards that undergirded his
condemnation of poetry based on vernacular culture. According to Cullen, there should be no distinction between black poets and British poets because the task of African-American poets is to uphold the British literary tradition. Cullen bases his reasoning on the fact that African-Americans are inheritors of the English language. For this reason, according to Cullen, black poets benefit more from studying British and mainstream American poetry than straining "atavistic[ally]" for "African inheritances" (ix).

Cullen is right to point out the ludicrousness of transposing pre-twentieth century African forms onto twentieth century American culture, but there is a crucial flaw in his reasoning. Although Cullen notes the obvious—that African-Americans are speakers of English—he ignores the cultural violence which contextualized the imposition of the language. In other words, there is no opposition between American art and "African inheritances." Cullen's bourgeois politics precluded his being able to understand the value of cultural fusion. Though he presumably abhored such racial atrocities as lynchings, Cullen could not challenge the hegemony of the dominant culture and thereby participate in a more fundamental type of resistance.

A few months after Cullen's review, Hughes defended his efforts in his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." Responding specifically to George Schyler's
denial of the existence of African-American culture, Hughes compares the legacy of African-American ancestry to a mountain that black artists must climb in order to produce genuine art. At the same time, he retaliates against Cullen by signifying upon him in the opening sentence: "One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, 'I want to be a poet--not a Negro poet,' meaning, I believe, 'I want to write like a white poet'; meaning subconsciously 'I would like to be like a white poet'; meaning behind that, 'I would like to be white.' "

In foregrounding the problem of the double-consciousness, Hughes identifies a manichean perspective in the families of privileged blacks who interpret negative behavior as "be[ing] like niggers" (167). On the other hand, children are encouraged to view white men as models of positive behavior (167). Thus, Hughes suggests that such families are veritable incubators of self-hatred. Since such blacks can only view poor blacks with derision, they are not able to see the beauty in the expressive forms they create.

The ironic tone in which Hughes describes well-to-do blacks gives way to a celebratory tone in his assessment of folk culture. But Hughes does not praise poor blacks simply because of their economic status. According to Hughes, working-class blacks "furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because
they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations" (168, my italics). Hughes suggests, then, that black spokespersons bypass valuable opportunities in de-emphasizing black culture in their efforts. In so doing, they become mere imposters. "Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectuals," Hughes writes, "until they listen and perhaps understand" (172).

Despite the elegance and perspicacity of "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," the question of form in black poetry would require a more in-depth analysis than Hughes was prepared to give. The metaphorical mountains that black artists must climb are not racial but cultural. Though Hughes successfully lampoons the misrepresentation of African-American art, he does not expound upon the issues of class and nationality in relation to black poetry. One writer who did address such issues was Alain Locke. While many reviews denounced Hughes's next book, Fine Clothes to the Jew, Locke praised the book for "[i]ts open frankness." A year earlier, Locke had praised The Weary Blues for exactly the same reasons that Cullen criticized it. According to Locke,

[Hughes's poetry] seems to be saturated with the rhythms and moods of Negro folk life. A true "people's poet" has their balladry in his veins; and to me many of these poems seem based on rhythms as seasoned as folk songs and on moods as deep-seated as...
Although Locke also confuses race with culture, he demonstrates an awareness of opposing camps in African-American poetry that already existed in 1926, and thereby anticipates the argument of this dissertation. In making a distinction between "Negro poets" and "Negro poetry," Locke suggests that poets like Cullen who employ models from mainstream culture in their poetry are African-Americans who write poetry. African-American poetry, on the other hand, refers to verse that attempts to capture or evoke some aspect(s) of black culture in the writer's poetic style. Of course, Locke's distinction is a faulty one, and his failure to account for the possibility of a combination of forms reveals a limitation of his vision. Nevertheless, Locke's distinction is important because it is perhaps the first recognition of the competing conceptualizations of African-American poetics.

More specifically, Locke's distinction suggests that he understood that a national poetics must be predicated on African-American expressive forms because they are veritable storehouses of styles that can be appropriated for literary discourse. The obstacle that has prevented black writers from adopting this point of view, according to Locke, is the bugaboo of class politics. In a 1936 essay "Propaganda--or Poetry?" Locke notes that African-American poets after World War I protested racial
discrimination, and attempted to promote group solidarity based on race. But while this marks a significant improvement upon the vision of eighteenth century poets like Phyllis Wheatley, Locke observes,

"[F]or a long while it was quite possible for the Negro poet and writer to be a rebel and protestant in terms of the race situation and a conforming conventionalist in his general social thinking.... The average Negro writer has thus been characteristically conservative and conformist on general social, political and economic issues, something of a traditionalist with regard to art, style and philosophy, with a little salient of racial radicalism jutting out in front ... (55)"

Claude McKay's poem "If We Must Die" provides Locke with a case in point. According to Locke's standards, the poem is problematic because the virulent opposition inscribed in the poem is trapped within the dominant culture's ideology of form.

"In contrast, Locke felt that Sterling Brown's poetry reflected a sense of cultural maturity. In his essay "Sterling Brown: The New Negro Folk Poet" (1934), Locke suggests that the key to Brown's success in Southern Road is his ability to capture the folk when they are conversing among themselves." Locke correctly points out that Brown is able to reveal the complexity of the folk experience to readers through the medium of the people's own speech patterns (256). In Brown's work, readers do not see the kind of minstrels that occupy Dunbar's poetry but rather thinking individuals who negotiate their lives with their own homespun wisdom. In this way Locke
suggests that Brown's poetry is an effective form of propaganda because it illustrates the people's material conditions in a discursive form that they might recognize themselves.

In his critical essays, Brown is equally supportive of a folk-based poetics. Indeed, his concern for an African-American aesthetic is a recurrent theme in his essays. In "Dunbar and the Romantic Tradition" (an essay included in his 1937 survey, Negro Poetry and Drama), Brown addresses the controversy over dialect form. Brown observes that pre-World War I poets who rejected the dialect form were correct in their "refusal to perpetuate stereotypes of Negro life and character." But Brown points out that in their quest for an alternative to dialect, few poets "challenge[d] the existing order" (58), and most of them rejected identification with African-American peasants and workers: "The pressure of their times inclined them to stifle originality: the Negro leader or spokesman excelled in proportion to his resembling the favored white elite" (58). Turning his attention to modern black poetry, Brown calls Hughes's "The Cat and the Saxophone: 2 a.m." a "metrical revolt" (78).

Needless to say, Brown disagreed entirely with Cullen's ideas about poetry. Brown believed, as did Locke, that literature could used as propaganda to challenge hegemonic discourses. However, he did not
specifically address the issue of nationality or the relationship between art and politics. Though these problems are subtexts in his essays, Brown focused his attention on the creative process itself, and followed Johnson in formulating critical ideas based upon his own revisionary process. But while Johnson was ambivalent about the black speaking voice, Brown suggested that such ambivalence reflected the poets'--not the people's--incapacities. In his now famous statement, Brown writes:

Dialect, or the speech of the people, is capable of expressing whatever the people are. And the folk Negro is a great deal more than a buffoon or a plaintive minstrel. Poets more intent upon learning the ways of the folk, their speech, and their character, that is to say better poets, could have smashed the mold. But first they would have to believe in what they were doing. And this was difficult in a period of conciliation and middle class striving for recognition and respectability. (43)

Note the unsubtle attack on Cullen and Johnson for their statements regarding the limitations of African American vernacular English as a poetic language. What is particularly interesting here is Brown's clear implication that class politics was the obstacle barring a flourishing of poetry based upon the African-American oral tradition. Brown points out that black poets' disassociation from the African-American peasantry led to their attempt to profit from the commodification of dialect which, in turn, resulted in an inability to perceive its limitations as a form of literary discourse. Since they did not "believe in what they were doing,"

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observes Brown, these poets felt no compulsion to study black cultural forms to detect the wisdom inscribed therein. Consequently, poets wrote either banal imitations of traditional poetry or misrepresentations of black culture.

Brown's essays suggest that the most astute approach to the problem of African-American poetics is to call into question the assumption that Western literature and black cultural forms are binary opposites. Brown realized that the whole notion of poetry could be reconceptualized if poets could fuse the European idea of written literature with the styles of black oral forms. By incorporating the technology of the dominant culture into the implicit poetic styles of African-American culture, Brown believed that poets could create a radical poetics that could resist and counter misrepresentation:

I became interested in folklore because of my desire to write poetry and prose fiction. I was first attracted by certain qualities that I thought the speech of the people had, and I wanted to get for my own writing a flavor, a color, a pungency of speech. Then later I came to something more important--I wanted to get an understanding of people, to acquire an accuracy in the portrayal of their lives.18

Like Brown, Richard Wright also envisioned literature as an effective form of propaganda. But while Brown merely implied the political ramifications of literature, Wright, like Locke, foregrounded the issues of class and nationality. Unlike Locke, though, Wright's participation in the Communist Party led him to view his theoretical
formulations as strategies for class struggle. Yet his position is more difficult to pinpoint since it seemed to change in his later years. Houston Baker has criticized Wright\textsuperscript{19} as an assimilationist critic. However the term assimilation connotes a conservatism that does not describe Wright's vision. I intend to demonstrate that an accurate reading of Wright's later ideas reveals an outline for an internationalist, creolized literature that championed the cause of world-wide democracy.

In his 1937 essay entitled "Blueprint for Negro Writing," Wright echoes many of the ideas of Locke and Brown. Suggesting that black writers "accept the nationlist implications"\textsuperscript{20} of African-American culture, Wright lays the groundwork for a vernacular-based poetics by suggesting that the black oral tradition reflects a distinctive African-American culture, and attempts to fashion a poetics for black workers. As the title suggests, the essay is really a "[b]lueprint" for building and mobilizing a black working-class audience. Wright believed that if black writers understood the oral tradition, they could displace the black church and "create values"\textsuperscript{318} because "the Negro has a folklore which embodies the hopes and struggles for freedom" \textsuperscript{318}.

However, Wright did not view nationalism as a revolutionary model but rather a concept that black writers must transcend \textsuperscript{320}. The irony, he suggests, is
that "in order to transcend it, they must possess and understand it" (320). Of course, it is now well known that Wright embraced a Marxist vision. My point here is that it is important to remember that he interpreted nationalism as a component of the American class struggle. This is important to remember because when "The Literature of the Negro in the United States" was published in 1957 in his book White Man, Listen!, he did not focus heavily upon the literary potential of black folklore. In his only reference to black English, for instance, Wright contrasts it with the speech of "white people [who] spoke flawlessly," (215) and refers to it as "broken speech" (215). For this reason, Baker terms the essay assimilationist. But though exile may have clouded his vision, Wright's analysis of vernacular culture provided a skeleton of the model that Stephen Henderson would later employ in Understanding the New Black Poetry.

Dividing black cultural expression into two groups, Wright describes oral forms as The Forms of Things Unknown, and describes written literature as The Narcissistic Level. Of the former, he comments pejoratively,

This division in Negro life can be described in psychological as well as in class terms. It can be said there were Negroes who naively accepted what they were, lived more or less unthinkingly in their environment, mean as they found it, and sought escape either in religion, migration, alcohol, or in what
I've called a sensualization of their sufferings in the form of jazz and blues and folk and work songs. (My italics, 210)

Obviously, the tone of this passage contrasts sharply with "Blueprint." Note also the determinism in the words "accepted" and "unthinkingly." In addition, Wright misreads the spiritual "Steal Away," arguing that it signifies "a paradoxical note of defeat" (210). But the term "steal" implies stealth—not subservience. As John Blassingame points out, references to Canaan or heaven frequently signified freedom.22 It should be emphasized, however, that Wright does not discourage vernacular-based poetry. He illustrates how vernacular forms can serve revolutionary purposes, and repeats his idea from "Blueprint" that these expressive forms depict not only the material conditions in which the slaves and their descendants lived but also their responses to them. "Even at the very bottom of Negro life," he writes, "there existed a knowledge of the dual existence they were forced to live" (214).

Thus, the question becomes: what is the source of Wright's ambivalence? My contention is that Wright advocated a vulgar Marxism, and envisioned a global audience for a radical internationalist poetics that address the concerns of all marginalized peoples. In such a revolutionary movement, African-Americans would be "the most representative voice of America and of oppressed people anywhere in the world" (226). Where Wright had
wanted to bridge the gap between black workers and writers in 1937, in 1957 he theorized a link that extended beyond national borders. He did not emphasize vernacular culture because he underestimated the problem of hegemony in colonial situations. Since hegemonic discourse represses and/or misrepresents the colonized, any viable notion of a radical poetics must necessarily address the problem of form.

Baker's statement that Wright applauded "the vanishing of Afro-American expression qua Afro-American expression" (71) is technically correct, but it fails to consider both the dynamic nature of the black oral tradition and the creativity of black writers. Whereas oral performers used rhyme in the dozens and signifying, for instance, hip hop rappers today revise traditional ballads and the soul music of the 1970s by creating rhyming narratives that function like instrumental solos, while DJ's help establish dance-beat rhythms by sampling, that is, spinning records hip hop style. Wright did not discourage folk forms in poetry; he simply ignored the question of form because he was most concerned with content. He cites Margaret Walker's "For My People" and Brown's "Old Lem" as examples of radical poetry. Wright also states that African-Americans created "original contributions in terms of form and content" (210) and that his "conviction [is] that the subject matter of
future novels and poems resides in the lives of these nameless millions" (212).

Wright understood that the demise of legal segregation would have an impact upon African-American culture. Though he misinterpreted the ramifications of the 1954 Supreme Court decision, he was correct in his prediction that the increased contact between blacks and whites would yield new forms. "At long last," Wright writes, "maybe a merging of Negro expression with American expression will take place" (228). While this statement can be read as assimilationist, I would argue that Wright is actually advocating a more fluid process of creolization. As poets such as Kamau Brathwaite and Jayne Cortez (whose work I will discuss in detail in chapter 5) have demonstrated, an infusion of European culture does not necessarily constitute a negation of black culture. Rather, the question hinges upon the terms of cultural borrowing.

Baker's charge of assimilationism can be more aptly brought against J. Saunders Redding, whose 1939 publication, To Make a Poet Black, marked the first attempt to provide a detailed analysis of African-American poetry. Although Redding acknowledges the radical politics in which black poetry is engaged, he expresses discomfort about orally-based poetry. He writes from the premise that black writers have produced literature in order to promote the cause of liberation, but he
demonstrates little concern for the problem of class. Consequently, his analysis is problematic in several respects. Like Cullen, Redding sees black vernacular forms in negative terms. He mistakes anti-hegemonic discourse" for buffoon[ery]" (50-51) and assumes that there is such a thing as "pure English" (36).

Redding's faulty logic can be seen most clearly in his comments about form in the Harlem Renaissance and his reading of individual poets. Redding effectively illustrates the mindset that prevented Renaissance poets from creating new forms, but fails to recognize the negative implications of such a vision. Observe his explanation, particularly his notion of "common sense":

In his anxiety and relief he did not reflect that he was pouring new wine into old bottles... He was afraid of being a fad, the momentary focus of the curiosity of dilettantes, charlatans, and student sociologists. It was common sense for him to attempt to establish himself on something more solid than the theatrical reputation of Florence Mills ... New forms were faddish froth ... (106)

Despite his concern for new forms, Redding is curiously ambivalent toward vernacular-based poetry. In his discussion of Johnson's God's Trombones, Redding commends Johnson for his advancement beyond the dialect form. Citing Johnson's "Preface" as an important landmark in African-American aesthetics, Redding notes "Johnson's acknowledgement of his debt to the folk material, the primitive sermons, and the influence of the spirituals" (122). According to Redding, the importance of
*God's Trombones* stems directly from its formal revision of the black sermon form.

But in his analysis of Hughes's experiments with blues culture, Redding reveals an arbitrary critical methodology buttressed by conservative politics. He praises Hughes's ability to evoke "black soul" (115), but he undercuts his argument by rejecting the artistic models that arouse such feelings:

Certainly none of the Blues, no matter how full of misery, and none of the Shouts, no matter how full of religion, ever get beyond a certain scope of feeling. He can catch up the dark messages of Negro feeling and express them in what he calls "racial rhythms," but it is as the iteration of the drum rather that the exposition of the piano. He feels in them, but he does not think. (116)

One is reminded here of Johnson's implication in his "Preface" regarding the purported limitations of black vernacular English. Redding, like Brawley and Cullen, sees little potential in the blues because he considers the blues as a limited, "superficial" form. (120)

Needless to say, Redding's position is reactionary. While folk forms are not ipso facto revolutionary, they have a unique potential for revealing the material conditions in which the people live, as well as their psychological and emotional reactions to these conditions, because they are produced by the folk themselves. But for critics to fully appreciate a poetics based upon these forms, they must embrace a radical politics and develop an understanding of colonialism.
Since Redding was a classic assimilationist, he could only envision social change--and a poetics that promoted it--in terms of bourgeois ideology. Thus, he criticizes "the iteration of the drum" in favor of "the exposition of the piano" (116). It should be noted, however, that the drum, too, is capable of complexity. He resorts to nostalgia, and calls for black writers to return to the South because black lore has "arisen from a loving bondage to the earth" (124), but ignores the "bondage" that black migrants sought to escape by pouring into America's cities.

In the 1950s few critics wrote about poetry. Two women who did were Margaret Butcher and Margaret Walker. In her book *The Negro in American Culture*, Butcher focuses on content, and does not take a position on form. However, Walker addresses the issue in an essay entitled "New Poets" where she discusses African-American poetry from the Harlem Renaissance through the 1940s. Using her sketch of the 1920s as a backdrop, Walker analyzes the poetry of the 1930s and 1940s in detail. Like Wright in "The Literature of the Negro in the United States," she neither discourages nor encourages orally-based poetry. Yet despite her formal revisions of black folk forms in *For My People*, she is unable to question the hegemony of traditional notions of craft in her critical essay.

Walker sees a dichotomy between the poetry of the 1930s and 1940s. She interprets the earlier poetry in
terms of its radical content, then focuses upon form in the later poetry. But while there are certainly differences in style between the two periods, Walker's opposition ignores important poetic achievements. She correctly points out that Brown's "'Slim Greer Series' are some of the finest [ballads] in the annals of American poetry." However, she reads "Old Lem" as merely an expression of social protest, and ignores Brown's representation of the black voice and his revision of the slave secular (which I will discuss in detail in Chapter 3) in her discussion of "Old Lem." Similarly, Walker cites the last two stanzas of her own "For My People" as protest poetry, but ignores the creativity of her imagery, stanzaic structures and use of repetition. Finally, while Walker rightly celebrates the craftsmanship of Robert Hayden's "Middle Passage" and "Runagate Runagate," which were published in 1945 and 1949 respectively, she ignores the radical vision that shapes the poetry.

Like Wright, Walker interpreted internationalism in Eurocentric terms (95). Responding to "the long hue and cry of white writers that Negroes as poets lack form and intellectual acumen" (97), she comments that "[t]he new poetry has universal appeal coupled with another definite mark of neo-classicism, the return to form" (96). Note that the word "return" suggests reaction--not progression. It is ironic that Walker's Eurocentric model
of universalism prompts her misreading of O'Higgins's poetry. After defending Gwendolyn Brooks against the charge of obscurantism, Walker suggests that the following passage is more deserving of the criticism:

But that day in between
comes back with two lean cats
who run in checkered terror
through a poolroom door
and bolting from a scream
a keen knife marks with sudden red
the gaming green
... a purple billiard ball
explodes the color scheme. (98)

A careful reading of the passage demonstrates that Walker misses an opportunity to identify an experimental poetic style. While there is certainly ambiguity here, the poem reflects an attempt to create poetry that fuses modernist techniques with language that is particularly resonant in African-American culture.

The passage ostensibly describes a fight between "two lean cats"--that is, slender black men in a poolroom (recall Hughes's "The Cat and the Saxophone: 2 a.m."). Yet it is really a poetic illustration of urban marginalization. The phrase "in between" in the first line suggests the confinement of ghetto reality. The checkers image reinforces the idea in the previous line, by suggesting the surreality of a color-coded society and foreshadowing the bleeding that will occur. The "scream" is what I call a term of (re)memory. That is, while it refers here to pain from a knife wound, the term has been used to describe the sound of black musicians who
interpret the culture instrumentally. O'Higgins skillfully employs irony in his use of poolroom symbolism. Though the men are victims of a "color scheme," they do not understand that the implications of pool rules reify white supremacy. The object of the game, of course, is to use the white cue ball to knock the black eight ball into a pocket. The explosion image suggests gunshot. But rather than "explod[ing] the color scheme," O'Higgins suggests that the men have behaved according to the plans established by society's rulers.

O'Higgins's attempt to reconcile modern literary conventions with the black oral tradition anticipates the concerns of Amiri Baraka. Writing in the dawn of the Black Arts Movement in 1962, Baraka, then LeRoi Jones, repeats Johnson's call for an orally-based poetics, foreshadowing many of the ideas that became current during the period. Like his Howard University mentor, Sterling Brown, and like Alain Locke, Baraka astutely identifies the problem of hegemony as the main obstacle to a national literature:

To be a writer was to be "cultivated" in the stunted bourgeois sense of the word... It had nothing to do with the investigation of the human soul. It was, and is, a social preoccupation rather than an aesthetic one. A rather daring way of... gaining prestige in the white world for the Negro middle class. And the literary and artistic models were always those that could be socially acceptable to the white middle class, which automatically limited them to the most spiritually debilitated imitations of literature available.
What is interesting here is Baraka's position regarding white literary models. While he is now criticized for the racial chauvinism of the Black Arts Movement, the Baraka of 1962 does not attack black writers for selecting Western models per se. Rather, his charge is that many black writers have created a vapid literature because of their inability to question bourgeois ideology and because of their obfuscated view of art. Since they have mistaken social "cultivat[ion]" for art, they are unable to see the value of writers like James Joyce and Herman Melville and musicians like Bessie Smith and Charlie Parker.

Baraka also echoes Wright's 1937 idea that black writing should be meaningful to working-class African-Americans. He points out that popular culture produces most black cultural heroes. However, he is more specific in his discussion of the gap between writers and working-class black people. According to Baraka, the people feel alienated by their writing, and this has prompted their preference of athletes, particularly boxers like Jack Johnson and Sugar Ray Robinson, over literary artists (109). The implication here is clear, of course. In order to make literature more meaningful in the everyday lives of African Americans, writers must create a literature that more closely resembles their expressive forms.

Yet Baraka does not call for a romanticized version of African art but one informed by an African-derived
sensibility that constitutes a genuine alternative to the literature championed by the literary establishment:

Africanisms still persist in the music, religion, and popular cultural traditions of American Negroes. However, it is not an African art American Negroes are responsible for but an American one. The traditions of Africa must be utilized within the culture of the American Negro where they actually exist, and not because of a defensive rationalization about the worth of one's ancestors or an attempt to capitalize on the recent eminence of the "new" African nations. Africanisms do exist in Negro culture, but they have been so translated and transmuted by the American experience that they have become integral parts of that experience. (111)

Though he had not in 1962 attempted the formal experiments for which he is now famous, Baraka provides a blueprint for a blues poetics. He does not mention the importance of style specifically, but he clearly implies the importance of style when he suggests that black art should reflect the people's emotional responses to the American experience (109). Note the reference to "Africanisms." The "transmutation" that Baraka refers to bear a striking resemblance to Brown's comments regarding the black voice. Like Brown, Baraka suggests that "better poets" can create new American literary forms if they can develop a revolutionary consciousness that will enable them to understand the potential of these forms.

Baraka's blueprint for a blues poetics is important because it anticipates the later emphasis upon jazz as a formal model of performance as well as a source of inspiration. At the same time, it anticipates the
strident tones of the debate over black poetic form. Though Baraka is not prescriptive here, many writers, including Baraka, became quite prescriptive in their conceptualizations of nationality, and this ultimately undercut the effectiveness of the movement. To engage in a radical—and even didactic—poetry is one thing. To insist or imply that all others must follow suit or risk excommunication is quite another. In any case, it is important to remember that there has never been harmony among critics of black poetry. Notes of discord were trumpeted as early as 1922 when Johnson criticised dialect. But as Cheryl Wall has suggested, the debate actually started with poets themselves, and the first rumblings were emitted when Dunbar referred to dialect as a "jingle in a broken tongue."
NOTES


"about 100 pages of trash," Rogers said that it made him "positively sick," and Gay said that it "disgusts me."

12 Alain Locke, qtd. in Arnold Rampersad, The Life of Langston Hughes, p. 145.


PART I INTRODUCTION

After Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, Alain Locke, Richard Wright, and Amiri Baraka challenged the hegemony of Anglo-American poetics, Black Arts critics continued that challenge by postulating a black aesthetic. Based on the idea that African-Americans have distinct artistic traditions, critics attempted to formulate theories that illustrated the beauty of black art. However, "blackness" proved difficult to define. In the following chapter, I demonstrate that the search for "blackness" was misguided. Critical investigations would have proven more fruitful if critics had examined traditional African-American forms in relation to poetic styles.

I wish to extend the insights of Black Arts critics to create a new poetics for African-American poetry. The chapter, which may be likened to a suite, is divided into four components that address the problem of contemporary black poetic form and examine the effectiveness of various theoretical approaches. The chapter begins with an analysis of Black Arts theory. Thereafter I examine Henry Louis Gates's theory of signifying and explain why it is not a suitable model for African-American poetry.

Next, I propose my own theory based upon a blues metaphor. In a two-part segment, the essay analyzes the
role of blues music in African-American cultural politics, and discusses specific qualities of the music that renders it suitable as a trope for black poetry. My thesis is that blues music constitutes a form of resistance, and provides the cultural observer with important tools to examine psychological responses to marginalization in America. Central to my argument is the idea that blues musicians are the preeminent artists in African-American vernacular culture, and I demonstrate how blues musicians revise other oral/aural forms.

After the blues section, I illustrate the parallels between blues musicians and African-American poets. Like blues artists, black poets revise oral forms. My theory is that black poets who revise oral forms exhibit three stylistic tendencies. Some poets mimic oral forms; some poets fuse oral forms with literary conventions; and some poets become, that is, incarnate oral performers. For each stylistic category, I conduct readings to demonstrate how my theory should be applied.

PART II THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT: A DREAM OF A POPULAR POETRY

While the Black Arts Movement has been criticized by ideological rivals such as Henry Louis Gates, few critics have examined in detail the question of form in Black Arts poetry. For instance, Eugene Redmond, in *Drumvoices*, and Houston Baker, in *The Journey Back*, both provide historical analyses, but ignore form. Baker is
more successful in *Moderism and the Harlem Renaissance*, positing correctly that a criticism that acknowledges poetic sounds can be developed from his deformation of mastery trope. However, Baker's trope leads to an insider/outsider opposition, and bestows privilege to group membership. Another exception is Marcellus J. Blount who, in a 1987 dissertation, asserts correctly that if contemporary poets are committed to creating a poetic language that achieves the elegance of the black oral tradition, they must confront the challenges presented by Black Arts poetry (196). However, Blount says that Baraka—and by logical extension, Black Arts poetry in general—has failed to create true jazz poetry" (213). According to Blount, Baraka's poetic language only reflects his reading of Anglo-American poetry. But while Blount is correct to point out Black Arts poets' debt to Anglo-American poetry, he ignores the implications of Baraka's improvisational scatting during his performances.

The problems related to cultural nationalism notwithstanding, the critical silence about Black Arts poetry is particularly disturbing, since the neglect of the period has also led to disinterest in African-American poetry in general. More than twenty-five years have elapsed since the close of the movement. Yet no book has been written on the movement. Consequently, questions of audience, poetic language and cultural autonomy have
been occluded. Since most blacks do not read poetry even today, the significance of these issues becomes intensified, given black poets' troublesome search for an audience and the role of cultural production in describing a group's experiences from its point(s) of view.

Anticipating a revolution that seemed imminent, black poets questioned the hegemony of traditional literature, and attempted to fashion a poetry based upon oral/aural forms that was designed specifically for the sensibilities of working-class African-Americans. But in their attempt to create a viable audience, Black Arts poets found few models in black literary history. There were the examples of Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown, but Black Arts poets ignored their accomplishments, presumably because they were part of a generation that wrote primarily for an Anglo-American audience. Needless to say, this error would haunt them in later years.

At the same time, the poets were keenly aware that other black cultural figures did not share their problem. The black preacher and singer, for instance, both dwelled in the province of language and performed before ample audiences. Many poets felt misgivings about organized religion, and they criticized popular groups such as the Supremes because their emphasis on romantic love often precluded an analysis of reality. But though the Supremes avoided lyrics with political connotations, it should be
noted that romance and reality are not mutually exclusive. Billie Holiday dealt with "reality" even while singing popular songs. But the poets understood the mass appeal that singers have in black communities. Though they objected to the manner in which the sermon and popular song was used, the poets realized that much could be learned about the nature of performance by observing such cultural figures. One of the earliest attempts to analyze the consequent poetry was made by Haki Madhubuti.

*Dynamite Voices* was the first book-length study of the new poetry. However, Madhubuti's arbitrary critical standards illustrate many of the problems related to the poets' political philosophy of cultural nationalism. Madhubuti asserts that the new poetry was based solely upon African-American vernacular forms (30). He forecloses any possibility of a formal relationship to Anglo-American poetry, and claims instead that Black Arts poets developed a polyrhythmic poetry whose unique "syntax" bears kinship with "the language of the street," (33) citing as evidence various ways in which the word "muthafucka" (34) has been used by poets to achieve a specifically African-American poetic form.

However, Madhubuti fails to identify these features and explain how they function in the poetry. His claim of a poetics uninfluenced by Anglo-American writers is, as Blount says, bogus. Many poets wrote in a style that was popularized by e.e. cummings. In addition, though it is
true that many poets did use expletives, Madhubuti does not provide evidence to support his claim that only blacks use such terms as he lists. Madhubuti also fails to analyze the musical aspects of the poetry he claims to be present. For instance, though David Henderson actually sang parts of his poem "Keep on Pushin'" (after the song of the same title by Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions), Madhubuti ignores the poem and praises instead Ebon's "Legacy: In Memory of Trane," (42) which is linked thematically to John Coltrane, but does not reflect any of the rhythmic qualities associated with music.

Madhubuti's critical failure stems from a distorted consciousness of race that reflects a manichean vision. Black critics must write for black people, he advises, because blacks and whites are "natural opposites" (19). Madhubuti's inability to understand racism as a symptom of a larger class struggle leads him to the construction of a hierarchy not unlike that which he purports to raze.

Like conservative critics, such as Benjamin Brawley, Countee Cullen and J. Saunders Redding, Madhubuti believes in a hierarchy of forms. He dismisses Henderson's Felix of the Silent Forest as "underworked, over-hipped, pseudo-intellectual" (67) poetry. However, a cursory glance at the poem reveals Madhubuti's misreading:
by twilight the clubs released their exotic lures
Sylvia's
Blue Morocco sheds blue light both neon & real on
side
walks and cobblestones between Shabazz Beauty
Parlor
& Denzil's Fabulous candystore
Velvet Blue drapes hang ceiling to floor and all to be
seen inside is the spotlighted face of the singer the
dim
blue faces of the music the soloist the master of
ceremonies—heads truncated in blackness (67)

Madhubuti complains: "[Henderson] speaks of music but
doesn't show it in his poetry" (67). Madhubuti's comment
illustrates his intolerance for diversity. He is correct
that the poem is not musical in the way that Madhubuti's
best poems are. However, the objective of the poem is not
to recreate the sound of music but rather to capture the
ambience of the nightclub by recording, in a photo-like
manner, the actual scenery of the place. Thus, like the
academic critics that Black Arts writers abhored,
Madhubuti uses orally-oriented standards to discuss a
script-styled poem.

Madhubuti's gender politics are also problematic. He
does not reserve compliments for male poets and speaks
positively about the poetry of Carolyn Rodgers and Sonia
Sanchez. Rather, it is the terms of his compliments that
are questionable. Quoting editor and critic Hoyt Fuller,
whose language reveals a male-centered sensibility that
undercuts the praise he bestows upon her poem, Madhubuti
states: "[her poetry] is like her own frame, slim and
straight, and as subtly feminine as a virgin's blush"
(55). Madhubuti, like Fuller (who faced some ostracism

52
because of his homosexuality), describes Rogers's physical beauty in the guise of analyzing an artistic endeavor.

In addition, though Madhubuti rejects academic critics, his criticism reflects the same craft-versus-orality opposition that is present today in academic circles. Madhubuti criticizes Carolyn Rodgers's satire of the Black Power movement: "yeah, i is uh revolutionist/ and i belongs to uh revolutionary / group What GOT funDED (!) ... I write poetry since day befo yesterday" (58). Madhubuti attacks Rodgers because of such misspellings as "dun." But the poem pokes fun at the relatively low standards of the movement and at many writers' conflation of typographical tricks with the creation of genuine literature. On the other hand, Madhubuti praises a poem written by Rodgers in standard English that commends the achievements of Hoyt Fuller. According to Madhubuti, "for h.w. fuller." is praiseworthy because it demonstrates a "commitment to craft" (60).

While Madhubuti's critical ideas represent the most reactionary aspects of the movement, Carolyn Rodgers herself was one of the period's more insightful critics. Although she did not produce a book-length study, she wrote several essays about poetry. One of the unfortunate consequences of the critical silence regarding the Black Arts Movement has been the neglect of poet and critic Carolyn Rodgers, who harbored few insecurities about
criticizing the weaknesses of the movement. Rodgers's importance as a critic stems from her anticipation of Stephen Henderson and Henry Louis Gates. Rodgers's attempt to create a critical approach designed specifically for African-American poetry anticipates Henderson's *Understanding the New Black Poetry*. Her concern for style and her belief that vernacular culture could form the basis for literary criticism anticipates Gates's *The Signifying Monkey*.

Rodgers's essays demonstrate a potential for a criticism outside of academic institutions, but they also illustrate many of the pitfalls of the period. In an essay entitled, "Black Poetry--Where It's At," Rodgers attempts to describe the diversity in black poetry. She lists ten different categories of poetry:

1. signifying
2. teachin/rappin
3. coversoff
4. spaced
5. bein
6. love
7. shoutin
8. jazz
9. du-wah
10. pyramid (8)

It is significant that Rodgers employs vernacular terms in her taxonomy. She confronts the problem of audience by employing language that is directed to a popular readership. Potentially, such a criticism could create a community of writers, readers of primary texts, and critics. Rodgers's problem, however, is that she does
not consider the dynamic nature of African-American vernacular English. For instance, Rodgers calls the following poem a spaced poem:

A broke dead genius
moved on to dust
will touch you one night ...
... and the stacked dust of a gone brother will hunch you
some father you needed who left you ...

According to Rodgers, a spaced poem involves positive and negative vibrations that return African-Americans to "our Egyptian/African forefathers" (10). However, a vibration is an effect—not a technique. In addition, African-Americans do not descend from Egypt, even though it is located in Africa. And finally, Rodgers's pyramid image "(getting us together/ building /nationhood)" demonstrates a reactionary politics. Like Madhubuti, Rodgers presents a mirror-image of the colonizer in black face.

Rodgers's 1971 essay, entitled "Uh Nat'chel Thang--The WHOLE TRUTH--US,"\(^6\) represents her best effort for a non-academically-oriented criticism. In her preface, she states: "This will not be a traditional prose, poetry or essay piece" (4). While one is hardpressed to distinguish between "prose" and "essay," Rodgers nonetheless presents a style that can accommodate a popular audience. Rodgers states: "I can relate to dope addicts and their feelings. Because Nadinola bleaching cream, a straightening comb, an education (educated tongue) and Vaseline for a
shininess was my dope" (10). Rodgers's infusion of autobiography into her criticism serves two functions. First, it encourages writers to analyze the conditions of blacks who come from working class backgrounds and/or engage in tenderloin activities by suggesting that the difficulty of many black writers to accept their identities as colonized artists is similar to imagining life without dope: neither is free. Second, Rodgers' autobiographical style foregrounds the African-American voice.

Rodgers also attacks the superficiality of the movement, which she interprets as a reluctance to study vernacular culture. Rodgers points out that excessive attention was placed upon the concept of blackness. She states: "We must not create unrealistic super-black ideals for people to live up to, which are a reactionary extreme opposite to super-slave ideals" (7). And while she is still trapped in cultural nationalism (she accepts the false opposition between the English language and "an African emotional experience" (7), she criticizes poets whose only technique was shouting. She states: "Style is important. Style is how. Who you are is how and why you speak" (7). Here Rodgers distinguishes, on one hand, between a politicized art that functions as propaganda and, on the other, sterile propaganda that makes pretensions as art. She suggests that a genuinely popular poetics can only be developed by talking to workers in
the streets, in bars, and in the sanctified churches
"[w]here people shout, and dance and speak in tongues,
and the holy ghosts come to visit" (7). Failure to study vernacular culture, she says, culminated in a counterfeit poetics: "After all, there are only so many ways you can write a word on paper and play with spellings" (9).
Rodgers's reference to "spellings" recalls James Weldon Johnson's criticism of dialect poetry which, in turn, illustrates the difficulty of developing a poetics in which orality is fused with the notion of literature.

Perhaps the best known critic of Black Arts poetry is Stephen Henderson. In *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, Henderson asserts that African-American poets have been largely misinterpreted by both Anglo-American and African-American critics because these critics have employed Anglo-American models to analyze the poetry (3). In an attempt to develop what he sees as a corrective theory to counter the misjudgements of critics of black poetry, Henderson observes correctly that aesthetic values are heavily influenced by a given people's cultural and historical experiences, so that their art forms--that is, their perception of beauty--are ultimately related to their own view of themselves (4).

Henderson suggests that the misinterpretation of black poetry can be traced to academia. He understands that academic institutions help determine the contours of the discourse on matters pertaining to art. Because these
institutions have traditionally been occupied by critics, both black and white, who are largely indifferent to alternatives to Anglo-American standards of art, many black poets have been excluded from critical discourse and university classrooms, thereby implying that what has been understood as African-American poetry is a misrepresentation (4).

Faced with the problem of creating a new critical approach, Henderson, like Madhubuti, suggests that critics look to oral and aural sources. Like Rodgers, Henderson lists eight categories in a section entitled "Black Speech as Poetic Reference" (31). Henderson's categories seem arbitrary; however, he himself notes that they are merely "suggestive." He lists them as follows: a) Virtuoso naming and enumerating; b) Jazzy rhythmic effects; c) Virtuoso free-rhyming; d) Hyperbolic imagery; e) Metaphysical imagery; f) Understatement; g) Compressed and cryptic imagery; h) Worrying the line (33-41).

Henderson displays a thorough understanding of the techniques employed in these forms. However, like Madhubuti, he rarely illustrates how they function in the poetry. In the category of "Compressed and cryptic imagery," (40) for instance, Henderson supports his idea by citing a passage from Invisible Man.

In his section "Black Music as Poetic Reference," (46) Henderson is more effective in identifying musical
references in the poetry. According to Henderson, the various musical references include:

1. The casual, generalized reference
2. The careful allusion to song titles
3. The quotations from song titles
4. The adaption of song forms
5. The use of tonal memory as poetic structure
6. The use of precise musical notation in the text
7. The use of an assumed emotional response incorporated
8. The musician as subject/poem/history/myth
9. The use of language from the jazz life
10. The poem as "score" or "chart" (47)

In each category, Henderson indentifies musical references in poems. However, the identification of one device does not explain how the music informs the poetic style. While he allows for the idea that a given poem may incorporate more than one of these devices, he does not demonstrate how a poem may be informed by a variety of these devices. Moreover, while Henderson's taxonomy provides a base upon which to build, it is not, as Henry Louis Gates has pointed out, a theory. Had Henderson gone further and established formal relationships between the poetry and vernacular forms, he would have, as Gates says, "revolutionized black literary criticism." The most important feature of all, though, is the "score" (60). While earlier poets transcribed musical forms onto the page, the poetic score constitutes the most radical formal experiment of the Black Arts movement. According to Henderson, the concept of the score allows the poet to emphasize performance by deemphasizing the written text. The written poem provides
merely a suggestion of what will actually be communicated during the performance. Henderson explains: "[There is] a lack of concern with permanence in the Western, Platonic sense of IDEAL FORM. A poem may thus differ from performance to performance just as jazz performances of 'My Favorite Things' would" (61). But while Henderson provides what is perhaps the best description of the scored poem, he, like Madhubuti, does not account for how critics might approach such poetry.

Henderson's most troublesome idea, however, is his notion of mascon words which refer to "a massive concentration of Black experiential energy which powerfully affects the meaning of Black speech, Black song, and Black poetry" (44). Henderson posits that African-American cultural history is replete with repetitions of particular words, such as "jook" and "jelly" (44). According to Henderson, such words, given their repetition, carry special meanings for African-Americans: the title of Faye Adams' song from the fifties, "Shake a Hand, Shake a Hand" is repeated as a line from Gladys Knight's "Friendship Train" in the seventies. But while it is true that these words carry special meaning for African-Americans, Henderson makes the mistake of suggesting that this form of repetition is specifically African-American. Rather, as Gates suggests, the more astute questions are, what is the cultural significance of a given term, and how does it

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function in the poem? Henderson's concept of mascon words therefore leads him into a cultural nationalist trap. Like most earlier black critics, Henderson thinks only in racial terms in his reaction to the criticism of the movement, and it is not surprising that he asserts that only blacks can interpret the poetry.\textsuperscript{11}

Although Henderson is the best known critic of the period, the late Larry Neal was perhaps the most perceptive. Like Rodgers, Neal criticized the superficiality of the movement, and correctly observed that poets had ignored the importance of style in African-American culture. According to Neal, any claim to a black aesthetic would have to be bolstered by a genuine understanding of vernacular culture.\textsuperscript{12}

Like Rodgers, Neal anticipated many of the recent achievements in African-American critical theory. David Lionel Smith has pointed out the folkloric kinship between Shine, who provides a metaphor for Neal's essay, "And Shine Swam On" (7-23), and Gates's \textit{The Signifying Monkey}.\textsuperscript{13} Also like Rogers, Neal rejected much of the wrongheadedness of the movement, such as the idea promoted by Maulana Karenga and Haki Madhubuti that the blues represented subservience and resignation (107). In contrast, Neal saw the blues as a folk literature that, in its ability to preserve the group's history and values, has functioned as a means of cultural resistance.
Neal states: "[T]he blues are basically defiant in their attitude toward life" (108).

But in order to understand the full implications of the relationship between culture and literature, Neal believed that the African-American writer must understand his/her position as a colonized artist. Such an understanding, according to Neal, allows the artist to question the hegemony of dominant forms and create new ones (25). Though Neal identified himself as a nationalist, his interpretation of nationalism allowed for more diversity than his contemporaries'. Unlike Madhubuti, Neal recognized the trap of manicheanism, which leads not only to reversal of privileges but also to bourgeois politics.

We reversed the Manichean dualism that placed the symbolism of blackness on the side of Evil, and whiteness on the side of Good.... [This] led to some contradictions, the most important of which was that our nationalism could not exist primarily in contradiction to white nationalism. We could never hope to develop a viable concept of self if that concept were purely based on hating ... If we made the mistake of constantly addressing scorn and venom to white people, we would fall into the moribund category of the Negro leaders who seemed to be constantly affirming the black man's humanity to white people ... (130)

Not surprisingly, then, Neal disagreed with Madhubuti's call for an art that defined African-American identity in terms of rats and roaches, and insisted upon an oppositional poetics that could stand as excellent art (52).
Neal developed a blues metaphor in his attempt to theorize about a revolutionary poetics. According to Neal, black writers had two basic options in this regard. One could excel in the idioms of the dominant culture, achieving a mastery that allowed the artist to redefine the idiom itself. Or the artist could create a completely new instrument. Neal explains: "[I]f you can sing through that instrument, you can impose your voice on the world in a heretofore-unthought-of manner" (53). Neal called upon black poets to reconceptualize the idea of craft by experimenting with music and the sermon:

Listen to James Brown and Malcolm X. We can learn more about what poetry is by listening to the cadences of Malcolm's speeches than from most of Western poetics. Listen to James Brown scream. Ask yourself, then: Have you ever heard a Negro poet sing like that? Of course not, because we have been tied to texts, like most white poets. The text could be destroyed and no one would hurt in the least by it. The key is in the music. (20-21)

Here Neal proposes his famous injunction: the destruction of the text. That is, Neal dismisses the written text and emphasizes the human voice. He directs the poetry toward a post-modern poetics in which the human voice becomes an instrument and is elevated above the text, so the very notion of poetry itself is transformed. He Neal states: "Poets must learn to sing, dance, and chant their works," Neal writes, and "be a kind of priest" (22).

Yet it is ironic that in his search for models for a black aesthetic in poetry, Neal turned to Invisible Man, a novel. Citing critic Albert Murray, Neal calls
Ellison's narrative a blues expression par excellence (45). I do not disagree. But in his neglect of Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes and Margaret Walker, Neal demonstrates an unfamiliarity with his own forebears. All three poets experimented with blues forms, and Hughes even wrote rhetorical, agit/prop poetry in the 1930s. Thus, it is not surprising that many poets simply engaged in shouting and/or expletives or resorted to white poets like e.e. cummings for models. In this regard, many of the poets revealed the weaknesses of nationalism. That is, while nationalist intellectuals and artists claimed a distinct culture and tradition, their claims were often bogus maneuvers to mask their own bourgeois visions.14 Both Askia Toure and Amiri Baraka have admitted that they were unfamiliar with the African-American literary tradition.15

Moreover, though I agree that song and sermon can provide exciting possibilities for poetry, it should be noted that T.S. Eliot's poetry was instrumental in some African-Caribbean poets' discovery of conversational tone that led to an emphasis upon vernacular forms.16 Thus, Neal repeats the same Manichean maneuver that he opposes. Another problem concerns the issue of the artifact. Neal failed to recognize that his negation of the artifact deprives literature of its basic function, which is not only to inscribe a group's historical experience from its viewpoint but to preserve it as well. Note, for instance,
that James Brown's music is accessible only because it has been recorded. Thus, Neal's failure to consider the importance of an artifact proved self-defeating. Today, there are few examples of Black Arts poetry available in audible form.

Also, many poets, in neglecting to study the culture, failed to understand why black performers are so compelling to audiences. For instance, James Brown's scream, as well as his spell-binding dances, are the result of countless hours of rehearsals. Similarly, as a trained preacher who had been an active participant in hipster culture, Malcolm X understood the oral tradition, in particular the sermon well enough to politicize it. Most poets did not.

Neal's statement that a poetics can be built upon Malcolm X's sermon technique also raises the complex issue of rhetoric as a medium of artistic expression. Henry Louis Gates represents the views of many critics when, in his dismissal of Madhubuti and Amiri Baraka, he suggests that rhetoric and poetry are mutually exclusive. However, I want to argue that rhetoric can form the basis of an exciting poetry. As Barbara Harlow argues,

[T]he tendency to dismiss much of Third World poetry derives in fact from the attempted universal legislation of what is a very local or regionally-based definition poetry, one which, following Aristotle's script in the Poetics and the Rhetoric, sees in metaphor the essential ingredient of poetic language.
Similarly, D.H. Melhem points out that though modernist and post-modernist poets responded to the corruption of language in the early decades of the 20th century by generating a distrust of abstractions, this perspective, in its extreme manifestation, is itself a kind of dogma.19

But in their attempt to acknowledge the suffering and beauty of urban black vernacular, poets created their own dogma. The following passage from Sonia Sanchez's "on watching a world series game"20 is instructive:

\begin{verbatim}
WHO that flexing his wite muscles.  
   oh god yes. another wite hero to save us from total blk/ness.  
Carl YASTRZEMSKI  
yastruski. YASTROOSKI.  
ya - fuck - it. yeh. it's america's most famous past time and the name of the game ain't baseball. (36)
\end{verbatim}

Sanchez justifiably points out the racism of professional sports, which serve as a metaphor for the larger society. The Boston Red Sox, in particular, have been traditionally reluctant to hire black players. However, Sanchez's expletive is based upon ethnicity. The combinations of spellings display more invective than wit.

However, the failure to use rhetoric imaginatively does not discount the notion of poetry as performance. Thomas himself explains:
I think of poetry as performance, and one studies one's craft for the purpose of being able to perform well.... [Poetry's] like music in that the practice and the artifact are the same thing. They should get better as time goes on.... So the individual poem is not going to change the world unless you believe there are magical sounds which, when uttered, have efficacy in the real world ... But then one spends one's time practicing until one is able to produce those sounds effectively.21

The question, as Melhem points out, is not whether rhetoric can be poetic but rather in what manner is it poetic?22 My argument, which I will develop later, is that poetry that approximates the sounds of musicians and/or preachers is best described as incarnations of secular priesthood. In this light, much of Black Arts poetry represents an aborted attempt to create an avant-garde poetry that actually approximates the sounds of the preacher and/or musician.

PART III HENRY LOUIS GATES AND THE LIMITS OF SIGNIFYIN(G)

Since the close of the movement, most critics have avoided the challenge of creating new theories about poetry. Led by Henry Louis Gates, most critics have either ignored poetry altogether or denounced the movement because of its rhetorical nature. But while Gates is correct to point out that many poets failed to create good art, he is mistaken when he implies that the movement has no historical value. Gates is correct to attack the questionable politics that many writers displayed. However, when he parodies the possibility of a politicized, popular poetry, he is masking his own
aesthetic agenda as an ultimate truth. As Houston Baker has said,

[A]ll accounts of art ... are indisputably functions of their creators' tropological energies. When such creators talk of "art," for example, they are never dealing with existential givens. Rather, they are summoning objects, processes, or events defined by a model that they have created (by and for themselves) as a picture of art.23

Gates complains that in their zeal to deliver messages to their audiences Black Arts poets deprived poetry of figurative language. But his comment misses the point: the basic impulse of the movement involved challenging the very standards that emphasize figurative language. Though there are no recordings of live performances, there is evidence that, when performed well, audiences enjoyed this poetic style. For instance, Rodgers, in "A Nat'chal Thang," points out: "I have noticed Black people's reaction to [Askia Toure's] poems ... The people can hardly stay in their seats, hardly control their feelings" (8).24

The fundamental opposition between Gates and Black Arts poets is their disagreement over the question of audience.25 When Gates says that he and other critics write for other critics,26 he is expressing a conceptualization of cultural production that embraces the status quo.27 It is not surprising, then, that Gates invokes metaphor as the sole criterion for successful poetry, and thereby displays indifference towards the sensibilities of many black audiences. His decision to
criticize the poetry on the basis of its style without examining it also repeats a pattern of attacks on black poetry that recall similar assaults on Langston Hughes. While part of the problem certainly stems from the poets' confusion about poetic form, a more substantive approach would be to analyze the work on its own terms to illustrate why it does not constitute good art. As George Kent argues, "the writer is permitted to step whereever he wills, and, as humble critic, my job is to hang loose and follow.... and stand by holding a flashlight to see what rhythms he can make visible and throbbing."^28

Another reason why it is difficult to accept Gates as a credible observer of the movement is that he implies that a critical model for narrative can be suitable for the study of all of African-American literature. Like the critics and writers he attacks, who ignored the possibility of performative narratives, Gates engages in an act of exclusion when he fails to point out that his theory applies to narratives only. He states:

Rather than a selective history of Afro-American literature, then, *The Signifying Monkey* is an attempt to arrive at a theory of this tradition. Precisely because I could have selected numerous other texts as exempla, I hope to draw on the premises of this book to write a detailed account of the *Afro-American* literary tradition. (xxii, italics mine)

Gates must certainly be applauded for developing a theory based upon African-American vernacular culture, but it is important to understand that signifying cannot address the problem of form in African-American poetry. Gates's
description of the speakerly text notwithstanding, Signifyin(g) is most useful in describing formal relationship between written texts. More importantly, signifying, in the lexicon of the vernacular and the sense in which Gates employs the term, implies parody. But while some poets do employ parody in their revisionary process, many others do not.

The propensity for parody in Signifyin(g) is directly related to the use of indirection in vernacular narrative forms. This is readily apparent in the signifying toasts themselves. Gates himself states: "[The monkey] succeeds in reversing the Lion's status by supposedly repeating a series of insults purportedly uttered by the Elephant about the Lion's closest relatives ..."29 The monkey's use of indirection constitutes a (trickster) style of repetition. That is, the Monkey fools the Lion into believing the wrong narrative.

Yet the force of the toast is based upon insult. Gates goes to great lengths to argue against linguists who corroborate this point, (58) but the Monkey's success lies in his ability to use language as a weapon to compensate for his diminutive size. Gates himself admits that the Lion understands that "the naming ritual" is "his most crucial threat" (57). For "naming ritual," read insult. Of course, I am not suggesting that signifying only means insult. My point is that insult is much more important than Gates admits. For instance, Geneva
Smitherman states: "Signification ... refers to the verbal art of insult in which a speaker humourously puts down, talks about, needles--that is, signifies on--the listener." Smitherman's comment suggests that naming is one of various types of insult. Gates cites H. Rap Brown, who distinguishes between playing the dozens and signifying, asserting that signifying "could either make a cat feel good or bad" (73). But in Rodgers's essay "Black Poetry--Where It's At," (which Gates calls "interesting" in his reference to it to support his idea that signifying is central to the black tradition), Rodgers herself equates signifying with aggression. She states: "Signifying is very often a bloody knife job, with a vocal touch" (15). Further, in her own discussion of signifying, Rodgers, quoting a passage from Richard Wright's Black Boy, equates the dozens with signifying. She states: "[T]o me they are the same" (15).

Given signifying's capacity for aggression, then, the term hardly seems appropriate for describing the formal relationships between poetry and vernacular forms. As I will argue in detail later, the blues tradition provides several tropes that are more helpful as descriptions of black poetic form. Gates is correct to point out that signifying is common in the blues tradition. However, in his effort to persuade readers that signifying is central to vernacular culture, Gates oversimplifies. He uses the
term signifying to describe the process of revision among blues musicians. But in vernacular lexicon, this phenomenon is better known as riffing. Albert Murray explains: "[M]any [riffs] consist of nothing more than stock phrases, quotations from some familiar melody, or even cliches that just happen to be popular at the moment." Gates also states: "Improvisation ... is 'nothing more' than repetition and revision," which he identifies as signifying. But again, the musicians themselves equate riffing with improvisation. For instance, Louis Armstrong, after a stellar improvisational performance, states: "Boy, if I ain't riffing this evening I hope something." Thus, when Gates states that the "riff is a central component of jazz improvisation and Signifyin(g)," he uses sleight of hand. The truth is just the opposite: signifying is a component of riffing.

Still, I do not want to suggest that Signifyin(g) does not occur at all in African-American poetry. The trope is a useful tool for examining the relationships between written texts. Observe, for instance, William Carlos Williams's "The Locust Tree in Flower":

```
Among of green stiff old bright broken
```
branch
come
white
sweet
May
again

Now compare Baraka's "Biography":

Hangs.
whipped
blood
striped
meat pulled
clothes ripped
slobber
feet dangled
************
laughs
bonnets
wolfmoon
crazyteeth

hangs

hangs
granddaddy
granddaddy, they tore

his
neck

In his use of typography, Williams creates an image of a locust tree in bloom. Ostensibly a poem that describes the beauty of spring, the poem is actually about the ironies of life and its constant renewal: from the old comes the new. Though the branches appear to be lifeless, they produce fresh green leaves.

In his poem, Baraka repeats Williams's typography and tree image. But in his repetition, Baraka Signifies upon Williams by repeating Williams's green leaves image and inverting it with a strange fruit, that is, a lynching
image, which is a sign of a specifically American type of colonization. The addition of the speaking voice, "granddaddy / granddaddy, they tore / his neck," accentuates Baraka's point that the lynching image represents a censored chapter of the American historical narrative. Nonetheless, the vast majority of the technical innovations in black poetry owe more to vernacular culture, as I will now demonstrate.

PART IV THE FREEDOM SUITE: BLUES MUSIC AND THE CRITICISM OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN RESISTANCE POETRY

My title foregrounds the issue of cultural autonomy. In 1958, saxophonist Sonny Rollins recorded The Freedom Suite, named after a composition that encompassed the entire side of the album. On the liner notes, Rollins pointed out that though blacks had helped to create much of America's popular music, they had not received much recognition. The owners of Riverside Records removed the album from the shelves, and reissued it with the title Shadow Waltz. On the new liner notes, Orrin Keepnews, the producer and half-owner, explained that the album had little concern for African-Americans.³⁸ Needless to say, Keepnews's action recalls a long history of censorship of black expression that calls attention to the specific nature of marginalization of African-Americans. Though Rollins does not advocate outright revolution, his comment, title, and composition exemplify the capacity for resistance in the blues tradition, that is, the
ability to express feelings of candor in an idiom especially suited to the sensibilities of African-Americans. On the other hand, Keepnews's action constitutes an attempt to impose authorship on black expression.

Like their counterparts in music, African-American resistance poets, that is, blues poets engage in expressive acts of cultural resistance. However, since the phrase resistance poets generally refers to colonized poets who are active in resistance movements, I want to emphasize that resistance poetry here refers to a poetry that demonstrates an identification with the repressed colonized culture by its revision of vernacular forms. Like blues musicians, blues poets use these forms to describe and respond to black experiences in styles that challenge conventional definitions of poetry and thereby resist ideological domination. "[P]oets of resistance," Barbara Harlow writes, "are attempting to elaborate out of their specific experience new methods and cultural priorities for confronting their historical situation." Like resistance poets in other colonized areas, blues poets understand that the most devastating effect of colonization is the destruction of a people's history and culture. Since many colonized peoples communicated most effectively in oral/aural forms, resistance poets understand that a poetics based upon music can be an effective tool in assisting readers to kill the colonizer.
within their own psyches.\textsuperscript{43} The internal death allows both poets and audiences to participate in collective resistance against misrepresentation.

My selection of blues music as a trope for a critical model of African-American poetry represents my attempt to examine black poetic form without a vulgar formalism or a nationalist trap such as Manicheanism. Though blues music (as distinct from having the blues, i.e., feelings of sadness)\textsuperscript{44} is concerned with the specific experiences of African-Americans, it rejects binary opposition. Instead, blues music expresses an urge for expansion, that is, a preference for the word \textit{and}. Thus, it is an excellent model for an oppositional criticism whose recognition of marginalization moves the critical procedure beyond nationalism to internationalism.\textsuperscript{45} In this context, racism does not constitute colonization itself, but rather a specific type. Hence, internationalism allows the critic to acknowledge the value of other traditions of resistance and thereby participate in a universal struggle for liberation.

However, in order to clarify the parallels between the music and the poetry, I must engage in my own critical version of a blues performance.

\textit{(BLUES MUSIC AS CULTURAL NETWORK)}

Any discussion of the blues must begin with a definition of the blues. Yet the very description of the blues is difficult because it can refer to a wide range
of different things: "emotion, a technique, a musical form, and a song lyric."

The word blues, in its original sense, seems to have come from the despondent mood associated with having a fit of "blue devils" that anyone could experience. The phrase "blue devils" can be traced to Elizabethan England, and during the nineteenth century, people such as Lord Byron, Washington Irving and Thomas Jefferson employed both the word blues and blue devils in their writings.

Most standard definitions of blues music begin by referring to an AAB pattern in which twelve bars are divided into four sections that consist of three lines. The first line is repeated (often with some variation), and the last line rhyme with the first. In addition, there are other stanzaic patterns common in blues songs, including AAA, AAAB, AB and AB with a refrain.

However, blues music cannot be described adequately by stanzaic patterns alone. Much of the blues' emotional force comes from its instrumentation. It is important to understand blues songs as lyrical expressions, yet a deeper significance of the music lies in its propensity for synthesis. As an amorphous form, the blues are characterized by both subsumption and infusion. In fact, the blues are themselves products of hybridization. In addition to the ballads' capacity to resolve contradictions (God/Devil, bad/good), which stemmed
from the spirituals, the blues absorbed other forms that include:

... fables, metaphors, and melodies. Field hollers supplied vocal techniques and tonality. More than likely the "blue notes" had their origins in the arhoolies. Worksongs supplied antiphony, cross-rhythms, and important thematic material.51

Thus, blues music is a model of dynamism and creolization, constantly assuming new shapes and forms while preserving its distinctiveness.

Herein lies the special nature of blues music. While the blues performer may sing songs from various genres, blues music maintains an ability to render a particular configuration of sound that listeners recognize as the blues. Blues music constitutes a meta-style, that is, a style of styles. Although blues music certainly includes songs performed according to the stanzaic patterns listed above, my conceptualization of the music encompasses nearly the entire black oral/aural tradition, ranging from earlier forms, such as ballads and arhoolies, to jazz. My inclusion of jazz as a blues expression is not an arbitrary maneuver. As I will demonstrate later, the blues comprise the very basis of jazz. But before I discuss the relationship between blues and jazz, I would like to discuss the blues' relationship to their forerunners.

During slavery, the aural component of the black oral tradition was manifested most often in spirituals. But though the spirituals preceded the blues, their
contribution to the blues was not musical. Instead, spirituals preserved the oral tradition, and they provide important clues to blues music's psychology and creative process. For instance, though there were thematic similarities, spirituals differed according to region, just as Mississippi Delta blues differ from Texas blues.

More importantly however, spirituals, like other antebellum forms, supplied the blues with source material for formal revision. Just as bluesmen revised ballads like "John Henry," many, according to Jon Michael Spenser, revised spirituals. "Trouble in Mind," "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," and, especially, "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" were favorites. But whereas sacred singers sang,

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,
Nobody knows my my sorrow.
Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,
Glory Hallelujah!

Blues singers sang about misfortunes with women. In "Pleading Blues," Eurreal Montgomery sang about a no-good woman and concluded with the line "Nobody knows but the good Lord and me." Red Nelson, in "Crying Mother Blues," sang, "Nobody knows my troubles but myself and the good Lord," and in 1939 Jimmy Rushing, who performed with the Count Basie Orchestra, substituted the Lord's name with "baby": "Nobody knows but my baby and me."

Other blues songs, such as "Go Down Sunshine," "Shorty George" and "Section Hand Blues," were based upon
well known worksongs (Looking Up, 143). Note the absence of repetition that informs the conventional blues in "Section Hand Blues."

If my captain ask for me,  
Tell him Abe Lincoln set us free,  
Ain't no hammer on this road,  
Gonna kill poor me.

This ole hammer killed John Henry,  
But this hammer ain't gonna kill me.

I'm headin' for my shack,  
With my shovel on my back,  
Although money's what I lack,  
I'm goin home. (Looking Up, 143)

The usual practice of separating blues and jazz is misleading because it denies the historical basis of jazz.55 Jazz musicians were responsible for establishing the twelve-bar blues as a standard form (Looking Up, 40). Bessie Smith fired her pianist to hire Fletcher Henderson. Early New Orleans musicians did not often make distinctions between the two words (Looking Up, 186). Buddy Bolden, the first great jazz virtuoso, was popular largely because of his band's blues performances. Dude Botley, for instance, does not mention the word jazz in his recollection of Bolden's music:

[F]or a while [the music] sounds the blues, then like a hymn. I cannot make out the tune, but after a while I catch on. He is mixing up the blues with the hymns. He plays the blues real sad and the hymn sadder than the blues and then the blues sadder than the hymn.... I close my eyes, and when he the blues I picture Lincoln park with all them sinners and whores shaking and belly rubbing. Then, as he blows the hymn, I picture my mother's church on Sunday, and everybody humming with the choir. The picture in my mind kept changing with the music as he blew. It sounded like a battle between the Good Lord and the Devil. Something

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tells me to listen and see who wins. If he stop on the blues, the Devil wins. (Visions, 108-09)

And Jelly Roll Morton, who, according to Albert Murray, "seems to have been ragging, stomping, jazzing, and riffing everything within earshot at least as early as 1900," implies that Bolden played dance music when he says,

I remember we'd be hanging around some corner, wouldn't know that there was going to be a dance out at Lincoln Park. Then we'd hear old Buddy's trumpet coming on and we'd all start. Any time it was quiet at night at Lincoln Park because maybe the affair hadn't been so well publicized, Buddy Bolden would publicize it! He'd turn his trumpet around toward the city and blow his blues, calling his children home, as he used to say. (Stomping the Blues, 144. italics mine)

Finally, saxophonist Buster Smith, who played in Benny Moten's band in Kansas City, recalls jazz in Dallas in the 1920s: "We usually called our music barrelhouse or gutbucket ... We didn't use the word jazz very often" (Looking Up, 133). Smith's statement suggests that the distinction between the two terms did not come from the musicians themselves. It also provides a basis for understanding why instrumentalists have become the dominant stylists of blues music.

Smith's statement is important because the Kansas City bands of the 1930s produced a fusion of blues and jazz. Moten's band, which became Count Basie's after Moten died in 1935, featured legendary saxophonist Lester Young and blues singer Jimmy Rushing. The largely unfettered collaborations between blues singers and jazz
musicians, in clubs and late jam sessions, created a new riffing style that allowed more solo space and foregrounded the vocal techniques of blues singers (*Looking Up*, 247). Barrow notes: "Effects such as vibrato, pitch variation, tremolo, and slurring and sliding notes were all commonplace among the city's horn players" (*Looking Up*, 247). Basie's blues-oriented innovations prefigured the bebop of the 1940s.

The Kansas City fusion of blues and jazz suggests that jazz is an urban manifestation of the blues idiom, that is, a more sophisticated elaboration of blues music. Tracy explains:

> From the beginning of jazz performing, it has been obvious that the jazz musician plays the blues differently from the blues musician. The jazz musician has a tendency to be more sophisticated, to improvise in a more complex manner and at greater length, and to de-emphasize the words of songs and subordinate them to instrumental expressiveness and variations, though the jazz musician often imitates the human voice.58

Tracy's statement suggests that the terms blues and jazz are useful in acknowledging varying levels of musical complexity in the blues. However, if one accepts my description of blues music as a dynamic form, the passage does not contradict my thesis that jazz is an expression of the blues idiom. Eric Hobsbawm, echoing Charlie Parker's statement about the relationship between jazz and blues, notes: "The blues is not a style or phase of jazz, but its heart."59
The personal nature of blues music allows for the expression of a group experience to be mediated through individuals. Consequently, critics have mistakenly assumed that the blues songs are autobiographical. Howard Odum and Guy Johnson, writing in the 1920s, said that the blues are "the wail of the despondent Negro lover." Roughly thirty years later, Ralph Ellison echoed Odum and Johnson, stating that the blues are "an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically." Yet it is important to understand that the autobiographical mode often functions as an artistic device that maximizes the effectiveness of the blues singer's narrative. As secular priests, blues singers are firmly committed to their audiences. Though they may be relatively quiet in private life, blues singers present public selves, that is, personas that perform in public. For instance, some blues singers are quiet in private life, but become performers in public who sing about others' troubles in first person. B.B. King explains: "I've seen many people hurt, homes broken, people killed ... so I sing about it." And former blues artist Reverend Rubin Lacy recalls that his composition "Mississippi Jailhouse Groan" was not inspired by his own experience in prison: "Sometimes I'd propose [lyrics] as [if] it happened to me in order to hit somebody else, 'cause everything that happened to one person has at some time or other happened to another one. If not, it
In their ability to express the concerns of the community, the blues function as a cultural matrix. Baker explains: "A matrix is a womb, a network, a fossil-bearing rock ... a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit." I agree with Baker's idea, but the word matrix suggests a womb or origins. The blues are undoubtedly both "womb" and "origins," in relation to postbellum forms; however, the term matrix denies the historical importance of spirituals, ballads and other antebellum forms.

Consequently, I have selected the phrase blues network to describe blues music's central position in African-American vernacular culture. As a trope for critical inquiry in black poetry, the blues network functions as a junction, a (super)conductor, intersecting classes, cultures and continents. To be privy to a performance of the blues network is to claim witness to a dialogue of creative recipes that render the stuff of art. Here the critical observer discovers the quintessence of collaboration: Baptist preachers and rappers of the profane, spiritual and gospel singers alongside the blues, and jazz virtuosos listening for a riff.
My conception of a blues network follows the examples provided by the blues singers themselves. "[T]here were," according to Barrow, "numerous informal networks, 'extended families,' or 'schools' of blues musicians" (40). Blues "schools" or networks usually depended on the prominence of a local musician who, in turn, influenced other (often younger) musicians. In the Mississippi Delta blues, for example, a blues network revolved around Charley Patton.

Patton recorded fifty titles, including thirty-five blues, ten religious songs, three ballads and two ragtime song (Looking Up, 37). The son of a lay preacher, who received guitar lessons from members of the Chatmon family, then in its third generation of performing music, Patton was heir to a rich oral tradition, (Looking Up, 37) which preserved an African approach to musicianship involving the merging of voice and instrument. Although Patton could simulate the human voice on his guitar, he often experimented with his own voice. Consequently, many of his lyrics are unintelligible. Richard Palmer observes:

Patton often seemed to alter the stresses of conventional speech for purely musical ends. In his recording of "Pony Blues," for example, he stretches certain syllables and inserts split-second pauses between words in order to achieve a desired rhythmic effect. "Come a sto-orm last night and to-o-re the [pause] wire down," he sings, stretching the "down" into the next measure and ... alternately constricting and relaxing his throat muscles.... These vocal techniques ... are basic attributes of superior Delta blues singing. 68
Patton's direct influence on the blues can be seen in the music of three men who played with him—Willie Brown (who was married to Josie Bush, one of the few women country blues singers), Tommy Johnson, and Son House.

Johnson became a great showman, playing his guitar behind his back and head, like Patton. Delta blues performer Houston Stackhouse observes: "He'd kick the guitar, flip it, turn it back of his head and be playin' it, then he'd get straddled over it like he was ridin' a mule; pick it that way.... People loved to see that" (Looking Up, 42). Brown's reputation rests largely upon his guitar playing. Though Brown sang the blues—his "Future Blues," for instance, revises Patton's Moon Going Down" (Looking Up, 40)—younger guitarists were drawn to his approach to the guitar which involved new instrumental interpretations of the blues. But while Brown had produced innovations in blues rhythms, Son House was one of the first blues musicians to master the bottleneck technique of guitar playing. The bottleneck technique is important because it represents an improvement over the knifeblade technique that musicians employed to produce a whining sound.

The merging of voice and instrument became one of the hallmarks of blues music. One recalls Louis Armstrong's scat-singing, for instance, or Ella Fitzgerald's. Similarly, though she did not scat, Billie Holiday described her singing as synonymous with horn blowing.
Today, singer Dee Dee Bridgewater continues the voice/instrument approach. On Bridgewater's rendition of Horace Silver's composition, "Doodlin," she improvises a wordless solo that approximates the sound of a trombone.69

Conversely, blues instrumentalists, beginning with Buddy Bolden, have continued the blues whine or cry. In the 1960s, musicians such as John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, and Eric Dolphy attempted to create a new jazz sound. Critics attacked it as anti-jazz, but Dolphy disagrees:

This human thing in instrumental playing ... has to do with trying to get as much human warmth and feeling into my work as I can. I want to say more on my horn than I ever could in ordinary speech.70

Dolphy's account of this approach suggests that African-American culture is still primarily an oral culture, despite the presence of advanced technology in the United States.

Of course, all cultures are oral in the literal sense of the term, since speech and song are unique to the human species. My use of the phrase oral culture refers to the great emphasis that is placed upon speech and/or song as mediums of communication. Though all cultures use verbal communication, some cultures rely more on oral forms to convey ideas. While script-oriented cultures use writing to store information, other cultures tend to
communicate via performance or demonstration. As Ben Sidran says, "[H]e becomes the information."\textsuperscript{71}

The propensity for the physical assimilation of sound suggests the real significance of the voice/instrument approach. Deprived of the educational opportunities necessary to theorize in writing about their colonized situation, blues singers demonstrated their feelings in a medium of sound. Though literal content is certainly important, it is also clear, as Richard Bauman points out, that people respond to sounds that escape denotation.

\textit{In artistic performances of this kind, there is something going on in the communicative interchange which says to the auditor, "interpret what I say in some special sense; do not take it to mean what the words alone, taken literally, would convey."}\textsuperscript{72}

Bauman's comment suggests that vocal techniques, such as melisma in blues singing and the preacher's chant in sermons, should be understood not only as examples of technical virtuosity but also attempts to solidify their relationships with their audiences. Though blues lyrics describe the experiences of the community, the bluesman's success is based upon his ability to produce sounds which evoke the experiences of the community. Jeff Titon, quoting Blues singer Baby Doo Caston, observes:

"Blues is a sound.... \textit{[I]t's a feeling that a sound would put you into." A downhome blues song locates downhome as a feeling in the listener's mental landscape ... In the city, downhome blues ... remind listeners of the feeling of life down home.}\textsuperscript{73}
Similarly, John Coltrane has said, "I recognize an individual when I see his contribution; and when I know a man's sound, well, to me that's him, that's the man."74

The statements by Caston and Coltrane attest not only to the importance of sound but also to the personal nature of the blues tradition which, in turn, allows for infinite variations of the blues. Mutt Carey's account of his first experience hearing Louis Armstrong exemplifies this quality of blues music:

I let Louis sit in my chair. Now at that time I was the "Blues King" of New Orleans, and when Louis played that day he played more blues than I ever heard in my life. It never did strike my mind that blues could be interpreted so many different ways. Every time he played a chorus, it was different and you knew it was a blues. Yes, it was all blues.... (Looking Up, 191)

Carey's description of Armstrong's performance illustrates the capacity of blues music for diversity in the collective experience.

Thus, blues music constitutes itself as an omni-democratic form. Though it is a response to racist conditions and attitudes, blues music does not lend itself well to knee-jerk reactions of chauvinism. Blues music describes conditions that are specific to African-Americans, but it is performed by people of other cultural groups as well. In this way, the blues constitute the American form of national liberation in song.
BLUES MUSIC AS RESISTANCE

Q. What did God make you for?
A. To make a crop.
Q. What is the meaning of "Thou shalt not commit adultery"?
A. to serve our heavenly Father, and our earthly master, obey our overseer, and not steal anything.

This catechism demonstrates the slave holders' attempt to dehumanize slaves and render them totally subservient. Though slaves suffered horrible physical hardships, their quest for self-definition was even more difficult. In the attempt to remove any viable means of developing an independent African-American self, slave holders banned African drums and suggested that freedom was as remote as Africa. But the majority of the slaves never believed it. In "Oh Freedom," the slaves sang,

Oh Freedom! Oh Freedom!
Oh Freedom, I love thee!
And before I'll be a slave,
I'll be buried in my grave,
And go home to my Lord and be free.

Other songs, such as "No More Auction Block For Me" and "Go Down Moses," also expressed the desire for liberation. Yet most spirituals are not direct expressions of their hatred of slavery. At times, slaves used songs as codes, as did Harriet Tubman in participating in the underground railroad:

You might be Carroll from Carrollton
Arrive here night afo' Lawd make creation
But you can't keep the World from movering around
And not turn her back from the gaining ground.

While these lyrics seem relatively innocuous, the words "not turn her" demonstrate that this is a praise-song for
Nat Turner. Most often, though, "slave music," as Lawrence Levine argues, "presented the slave with a potential outlet for his individual feelings even while it continually drew him back into the communal presence and permitted him the comfort of basking in the warmth of the shared assumptions of those around him." 78

Similarly, most of blues music is not directly political. Rather, the political significance of blues music stems from its capacity for communicating certain feelings and ideas, as well as its inscription of African-American style. As Sidney Finkelstein points out, the ear apprehends the configuration of certain sounds as human images that describe a people's experience in a society. 79 Blues critic Samuel Charters explains:

Whatever else the blues was it was a language, a rich, vital, expressive language that stripped away the misconception that the black society in the United States was simply a poor, discouraged version of the white. It was impossible not to hear the differences. 80

As part of the black oral tradition, blues music expresses ideas in a manner that describes an alternative style of life that, as Fredric Jameson says, constitutes a conceptual challenge to the dominant social order:

We may suggest that ... ideology is not something which informs or invests symbolic production; rather the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic form ... is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal "solutions" to unresolvable social contradictions. 81
Disfranchised and illiterate because of the economics of slavery, African-American communities preserved an African-derived oral tradition that led to the development of various expressive forms, including musico-sermons that preachers used to captivate audiences. Recall the fact that both Martin Luther King and Malcolm X were preachers. Similarly, the blues musician's pervasive influence in his or her community stems from his or her role as a secular priest. Though blues music has been described as secular spirituals, here I am not referring to an adherence to any set of organized philosophical principles. Rather, I am referring to the musicians' exalted position in rural and working-class African-American communities. This deep respect is based upon the musicians' ability to testify to the truths of the people's experiences. Again, this performative style, as Ben Sidran points out, is prefigured in the spirituals.

The Preacher took the role of lead singer, the group actionality was generated by the vocal and rhythmic response of the congregation ... and the musical-religious ritual became the important single experience in the daily life of the slave, much as it had been in pre-slavery Africa.

After slavery, the church could not provide adequate responses to the questions posed by the ex-slaves' new socio-economic status. The theology of the spirituals is displaced by references to everyday life: hence, the
original designation of the blues as the "reals" (*Looking Up*, 326).

The combination of the church's failure to address important social issues and the preservation of the oral tradition allowed blues musicians to assume a measure of leadership in the black community. "[T]he off-duty blues musician," according to Murray, "tends to remain in character much as does the Minister of the Gospel, and as he makes the rounds he also receives a special deference from the Saturday Night Revelers equivalent to that given off-duty ministers by Sunday Morning Worshippers" (*Stomping the Blues*, 230). Gene Gilmore's "The Natchez Fire" provides a case in point. As Jon Michael Spencer points out, Gilmore's song functioned as a eulogy for two hundred victims of a fire in Natchez, Mississippi in April 1940: "Lord, I know, I know how you Natchez people feel today; some of them thinking of the fire that took their children's life away."\(^8^6\)

Many blues musicians were from religious backgrounds, and an equal number became preachers either before or after their experiences as blues musicians. But most importantly, many musicians themselves describe their performances as religious experiences. For instance, New Orleans guitarist and banjo player Danny Barker describes Bessie Smith's effect on her audience:

> She could bring about mass hypnotism. When she was performing you could hear a pin drop.... When you went to see Bessie ... [i]f you had any church
background, like people who came from the South, like I did, you would recognize a similarity between what she was doing and what those preachers and evangelists from there did, and how they moved people.... Bessie did the same thing on stage. (Looking Up, 170-71)

Similarly, we are told, (King) Buddy Bolden played his cornet in a manner that sounded "just like you were in church" (Looking Up, 189). And though their music became much more complex, modern jazz musicians maintained this perception of their music. Pianist Thelonious Monk, for instance, was known among jazz enthusiasts as The High Priest, and trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie says, "The message of our music runs the same way as the message of religion."87 Hence, Coltrane's description of his composition "A Love Supreme" as a sort of prayer.88

In their roles as secular priests, blues musicians create and reflect an African-American sensibility. Yet blues music, as Albert Murray argues, "is a by-product ... of all cultural elements that brought that sensibility into being in the first place."89 Blues music exemplifies a process of creolization in which an African-derived sensibility is merged with an Anglo-American concept—a synthesis that creates an omni-American form. Yet the styles it has created and reflected have been consistently ignored or repressed by the institutions of the dominant society. Thus, antipathy toward blues styles constitutes not only an exclusion of alternative interpretations of Anglo-American ideas, but it represents, more fundamentally, a reluctance to accept
a different conceptualization of American identity. As Miles Davis says,

I don't see why our music can't be given the respect of European classical music. Beethoven's been dead all these years and they're still talking about him, teaching him, and playing his music. Why ain't they talking about Bird, or Trane, or Monk, or Duke, or Count, or Fletcher Henderson, or Louis Armstrong like they're talking about Beethoven? ... We're all Americans now, and sooner or later whites are going to have to deal with all the great things that black people have done here.90 (italics mine)

Note that Davis does not advocate a nationalist position of ignoring Beethoven's music. Rather, he favors teaching Beethoven and blues music.

The eroticism of African-American dance can be interpreted as an enchanting celebration of both the physical body and the creation of life. Similarly, blues music deals in ritual and incantation—even while it expresses a European concept, i.e., the blues. The desired effect conjoins flesh and spirit, and compels physical movement, as pianist James P. Johnson says, "Man, if they ain't patting their feet, you ain't swinging and ain't nothing happening ..."91

As a secular priest, the blues musician's unique configuration of sound stimulates emotional rejuvenation, which, in turn, helps to explain one of the most misunderstood aspects of the blues. While the popular view of the blues connotes sadness, blues music, even in the most ostensibly sad songs, arouses pleasure in its audiences. This is possible because blues music
emphasizes passion and desire in its dealings with the world of flesh, so that the central aim of the music is to stimulate sensations. "[B]lues music," Murray writes, "almost always induces dance movement that is the direct opposite of resignation."92

Further, the propensity for incantation illustrates an important function of the blues as a form of resistance. The soothing feelings that the music generates allows audiences to affirm their own sense of humanity by reaffirming the peoples' values and preserving their cultural memories in a medium of sound. Since all styles of blues music can locate specific, corresponding geographies in the listeners' mental landscape, the music can evoke the feeling of the lifestyle that is remembered.93

Resistance is sometimes demonstrated in lyrics of direct protest. For instance, in "Alabama Prison Blues," Jesse Wadley sings,

Judge read my verdict, rocked in his easy chair; Judge read my verdict, rocked in his easy chair.

Said, "I'm sorry, Jesse Wadley, you can't have no mercy here."

Mr. Whitney come got me, Dad Campbell carried me down for trial; Mr. Whitney come got me, Dad Campbell carried me down for trial.

Ollie hung her head and cried like a baby chil'.94

Similarly, in "Matchbox Blues," Blind Lemon Jefferson employs a matchbox metaphor to describe his poverty:
I'm settin' here wondering will a matchbox hold my clothes
I ain't got so many matches, but I gots so far to go.95

In her masterpiece of social criticism, Bessie Smith sings,

Poor man fought all the battles, poor man would fight again today,
Poor man fought all the battles, poor man would fight again today,
He would do anything you ask him in the name of the U.S.A.

Now the war is over, poor man must live the same as you,
Now the war is over, poor man must live the same as you,
If it wasn't for the poor man, Mr. Rich man what would you do?96

Sometimes the singers point out contradictions in the justice system.

Lord, they accused me of murder, murder, murder,
I haven't harmed a man,
Ohh, they accused me of murder
And I haven't harmed a man.
Oh, they accused me of forgery,
And I--I can't even write my name,
Lord, they accused me of forgery
I can't even write my name. (Looking Up, 76)

Or:

Mah friend committed suicide, whilst I'se away at sea.
They wanted to lock me up fo' murder in first degree.97

Most often, though, blues songs are not overtly political. The songs provide no solutions to the people's problems, but the persona presents him or herself in the conventional role of mistreated victim.98 The mistreater
is most often a lover, but blues singers also sing about the misdeeds of authority figures.99

I'm a hard-working prisoner, sent up without a trial
I'm a hard-working prisoner, sent up without a trial
My heart is almost breakin', must be that last long mile.100

Despite the stereotype of the passive blues singer, the blues are a music of confrontation.101 As David Evans observes, "The blues feeling ... is caused by a struggle to succeed combined with an awareness of overwhelming difficulties."102 The adversity compels the persona to act, which often means departing. Thus, it is not surprising that freedom is a dominant theme in the blues lyrics.103

The overwhelming desire to flee mistreatment helps to reinforce the blues musician's exalted position in African-American communities. Since the blues persona is always a victim of a bad situation, the decision to leave and consequent freedom represent a victory over the mistreater. In this context, the blues song represents a celebration of this victory.104

Despite the lack of direct protest and even though blues songs are not coherent narratives, the corpus of blues lyrics can be read as history.105 As a phylogenetic form, blues lyrics can reflect both the ex-slave's living conditions and his/her emotional responses to them. For instance, the following couplet became part of many blues songs: "Ought's a ought, figger's a figger / All for the
white man, none for the nigger."  Bill Broonzy provides a more detailed description of the black peasant:

I was a plow-hand for forty years, I swore I would never plow no more, (twice)
Now I'm a married man now, oh Lord there ain't no more so and so.

I'm going back to my plow, now a woman is the cause of it all, (twice)
Now she said "If you you don't raise no cotton, oh Lord, Bill, we'll earn no money in the fall."

"Farming is all right, little girl if you knows just what to do, (twice)
'Cause it killed my old grandpap, oh Lord, I declare I'm going to make it kill me too."  

Here the persona reflects the blues' unique ability to contain contradictions. Having vowed to maintain his freedom by avoiding labor as a plow-hand, the persona testifies to his greater commitment to his family, despite the almost certain consequence of early death. Though the singer himself perceives the woman as the source of his confinement, it is clear that she, too, is a victim of Southern aristocracy. Since males could rarely define freedom in terms other than mobility, broken families were not uncommon: "Lord, I had to run off and leave my children and my wife."  

The ability to express contradictions in blues music stems from an African-American worldview that is often opposed to rigid categorization. In African-American lexicon, the term bad also means good. Jean Toomer during his sojourn in Georgia. In Cane, Karintha is the proverbial sinner. Though "[s]he stoned the cows, and
beat her dog, and fought the other children," people are so attracted to her beauty that "[e]ven the preacher, who caught her at mischief, told himself that she was as innocently lovely as a November cotton flower." That blues music was considered by church folk as the Devil's music seems to have only intensified audiences' attraction to it. In fact, one of the most popular blues musicians, Peetie Wheatstraw, described himself as the Devil's Son-in-Law, the High Sheriff from Hell.

The propensity for contradictions in blues lyrics can lead to a heightened sense of social consciousness that is expressed in humorous self-mockery and irony. Big Bill Broonzy, for instance, sang: "Yeah, poor me's down so low, baby, Big Bill is lookin' up at down" (Looking Up, 304). The persona finds the term down insufficient to describe his emotional state. More importantly, the phrase illustrates, in microcosm, the absurdity of the African-American historical experience. Similarly, Lonnie Johnson sang:

People ravin' 'bout hard times, I don't know why they should,
People ravin' 'bout hard times, I don't know why they should,
If some people was like me, they didn't have no money when times was good.110

Johnson's song recalls the blues musician's role as a secular priest. In spite of the lack of material comfort, the musician can still induce feelings of mirth and help listeners to impose, if only temporarily, their own sense
of order upon their emotional predicaments. As Paul Garon says, "In the blues ... we are able to discharge and master our own painful emotions ... associated with repressed material—and this process of discharge and mastery is pleasurable."\textsuperscript{111}

Blues lyrics also reflect the hypocrisy of religious and judicial institutions:

They say we are the Lord's children, I don't say that ain't true,
They say we are the Lord's children, I don't say that ain't true,
But if we are the same like each other, ooh, well, why do they treat me like they do?\textsuperscript{112}

Yet even a seemingly innocuous verse can be read allegorically by transposing the mistreater into a figure of political authority:

You done cause me to weep, baby, now, swear you done cause me to moan.
You done cause me to weep, baby, now, swear you done cause me to moan.
Well, you know by that, rider, I ain't gonna be here long.\textsuperscript{113}

By transposing the mistreater into a political figure, the passage can be easily read as an expression of the conflicting feelings that many African-Americans may harbor toward America. In this context, the decision to leave can be read as a comment upon blacks' alienation.

Similarly, blues women used blues lyrics to address mistreatment by black men. When men sang lyrics like these,

If you got a little woman, don't never hit her too hard.
If you got a little woman, don't never hit her too hard.
She'll swell up like doughnut when you throw it in the lard.114

Women like Victoria Spivey responded with songs like "Blood Hound Blues":

Well, I poisoned my man, I put it in his drinking cup,
Well, I poisoned my man, I put it in his drinking cup,
Well, it's easy to go to jail, but lawd, they sent me up. (Black Pearls, 81)

On other occasions, women signified on their men. In "I Hate a Man Like You," Lizzie Miles criticizes her man's hypocrisy:

I hate a man like you, don't like the things you do,
When I met you, I thought you was right,
You married me and stayed out the first night.

Just like a woman you're always carrying tales,
Trying to make trouble, wanna get me in jail,
Then you can't find no one to go my bail.
Lawd, I hate a man like you. (Black Pearls, 87)

By signifying on male mistreaters, blues women attempted to discourage mistreatment while simultaneously "communicat[ing] to women listeners that they were members of a sisterhood that did not have to tolerate mistreatment" (Black Pearls, 89).

Finally, the blues persona's ability to confront personal tragedy and chaos illustrates a toughness of spirit that generates, in turn, a sense of confidence reflected in the line, "I got the world in a jug / the stopper in my hand."115 Just as the ballads told of legendary badmen like Stackolee, so blues lyrics present a bodaciousness that defies both constraint and
resignation: "I got the blues but too damned mean to cry." Or:

I'd rather drink muddy water, sleep in a hollow log,
I'd rather drink muddy water, sleep in a hollow log,
Dan to stay in dis town, treated like a dirty dog.

Note the suggestion of rowdiness and non-conformity here. Though no violence is implied, there is an unmistakable tone of anger. The rejection of sentimentality and status quo, respectively, illustrate the oppositional nature of blues music. That is, the determination to seek improving conditions, in spite of rigid social barriers, can be interpreted in political terms as a struggle for meaningful change.

(KINDS OF BLUES)

In designating the blues network as a trope for African-American poetry, I am suggesting that black poets approximate the role of the blues musician in several respects. The adulation that is bestowed upon blues poets closely resembles that which is accorded blues musicians. The best poetic performances elicit vocal responses and/or physical movements not unlike Sunday congregations. Also, though it is not common for blues poets to mock or parody vernacular forms, they do, like blues musicians, incorporate vernacular forms into the poetry. Moreover, some poets employ paralinguistic techniques that are either reproductions of blues techniques or approximations of them, such as singing,
scatting, screaming, melisma, chanting and voice inflection.

Blues poets also engage in cultural syncretism by interpreting the Western concept of literature within the context of African-American vernacular culture, thereby extending both traditions, while simultaneously redefining notions of both poetry and artifact. But when professional critics attack or ignore blues poets because their forms illustrate an alternative set of aesthetic values, they reify Anglo-American privilege by suggesting that one cultural perspective is inherently more valuable than another.

At the same time, it is important to note that, also like blues music, there is no one dominant approach to the poetry. All blues poets write poems that should be read aloud, and all demonstrate some type of formal relationship to vernacular culture. Yet they do so differently. Some poets transcribe oral forms almost directly onto the page, while others attempt to fuse vernacular forms with literary conventions, and others employ voice/instrument technique. Yet even blues poets themselves do not always write blues poems. Consequently, the question for critics is: what kind of blues poem is it?

I have selected three blues-related terms as metaphors that describe how vernacular culture informs African-American poetry. These tropes do not signify
rigid categories (some poets use a combination of approaches), but they do offer critical tools that give readers new perspectives about black poetic forms. They are: A) RIFFING AND THE CHANGING SAME; B) EPISTROPHY: OR, THE PERFORMANCE OF CULTURAL (RE)MEMORY; C) CUTTING SESSIONS: THE INCARNATION OF SECULAR PRIESTHOOD.

A) RIFFING AND THE CHANGING SAME

Before blues singers developed the twelve-bar, AAB structure, many blues songs, like the earlier hollers and shouts, were formed by the repetition of a single line. In jazz, the repeated phrase is called a riff. Riffing is also present in the black church tradition. Thus, Mahalia Jackson was as popular among blues enthusiasts as among church-goers (despite her refusal to sing blues lyrics). In the song, "How I Got Over," Jackson riffs on the phrase, "I feel like shoutin," repeating it with different stresses and tonal inflections. The riff is also present in the call and response of the black sermon:

Solo-call: On the mountain.
Congregation: I couldn't hear nobody pray.
Solo: In the valley.
Riff: Couldn't hear nobody.
Solo: On my kneehees.
Riff: Couldn't hear nobody.
Solo: With my Jesus.
Riff: Couldn't hear nobody.
Solo: Oh, Lord.
Riff: I couldn't hear nobody.
Solo: Oh, Lordahawd!!!
Riff: Couldn't hear nobody pray.
Everybody: Way down yonder by myself
I couldn't hear nobody pray.119

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While there are sometimes subtle changes in the riff, the repeated phrase can be recognized clearly.

One clue to how riffing functions as a trope can be observed in vernacular culture. On a tune entitled, "Blue Monk/Stormy Monday," the Dirty Dozen Brass Band uses both pianist Thelonius Monk's tune Blue Monk and the popular blues song Stormy Monday as bases for "improvising new melodies over old rhythms." The originality of "Blue Monk/Stormy Monday" stems largely from the band's ability to perform the two pieces simultaneously within the context of the New Orleans marching band tradition. What is most distinctive about this style of performance is the striking similarity between the antecedent tunes and the revised performance.

As a trope, then, riffing refers to a kind of mimetic pastiche. The revisionary text is, in form, a thinly disguised version of another expressive act or form. In other words, creative artists who riff tropologically create near-replicas of aural/oral forms. Recall Murray's statement that riffing includes the repetition of "stock phrases." Tropologically, saxophonist John Handy's "If We Only Knew" can be viewed as a riff on John Coltrane's "Spiritual," since he repeats many of Coltrane's phrases. Similarly, Baraka points out that "many bop "originals" were really rephrased versions of popular songs like Indiana, I Got Rhythm, Honeysuckle Rose, Cherokee, etc."
Such formal relationships are also common in the tradition of black song. Note, for instance, these lines from an antebellum minstrel song:

My ole Missis promise me
When she die she'd set me free;
Now ole Missis dead an' gone,
She lef' ole Sambo hillin' up corn.125

Now compare these lines heard during the depression:

My ole mistress promised me
Before she died she would set me free....
Now she's dead and gone to hell,
I hope the devil will burn her well.126

While the latter speaker's anger contrasts sharply with the first speaker's self-deprecatory language, it is clear that both versions stem from the same formula.

In African-American poetry, riffing involves transposing vernacular expressions into written poetry by repeating them (sometimes with subtle and not so subtle changes) onto the printed page. One detects an early example of riffing in Paul Laurence Dunbar's "When Malindy Sings," which riffs upon the sound of black vernacular English. Later, James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes built upon Dunbar's achievement by riffing upon the sermon and blues forms respectively. Similarly, Margaret Walker's "Kissie Lee" attempts to represent the speaking voice by riffing on both the ballad form and black vernacular.

Toughest gal I ever did see
Was a gal by the name of Kissie Lee
The toughest gal God ever made
And she drew a dirty, wicked blade.127
More recent examples of riffing include Alvin Aubert's "My Name Is Arrow," Sherley Anne Williams's "Say Hello to John."

In "My Name Is Arrow," Aubert riffs on a couplet that black roustabouts sang to ease the burden of their physical labor and to provide for themselves an outlet to express their candid feelings about their socio-economic status: "Oh Lawd, I didn't know/I had to bow so low." Aubert's poem reads:

my old man bent down  
so long so low  
he turned into a bow.  

In his use of parody, Aubert's riff becomes a signifying riff. While the speaker in the song speaks autobiographically, Aubert's speaker speaks biographically. He riffs upon vernacular expression, "Oh Lawd," by using colloquial language: "My old man."

Aubert repeats the worksong's image of black male servility. The grueling labor the men perform, which is suggested in the song, is alluded to clearly in the poem. The line "my old man bent down" not only suggests servility, but also evokes the experience of field labor, which calls attention to a collective historical experience that has effectively precluded any visible indications of resistance. Aubert's bow image in the final line implies immutability, and accentuates the difficulties that African-Americans have encountered in achieving social change. Further, Aubert captures the
essence of the song's appeal by simulating its very sound. Note that the song and poem share a similar rhyme scheme and the key word "low." Like many of the early blues artists, Aubert creates a poem whose form cannot be identified without the readers' ability to recognize the sound, that is, the lyrics of the revised expressive form.

Of course, it is not always possible to find a specific song that serves as a creative model. There may be a number of reasons for this: 1) many albums have gone out of print; 2) the poet may have revised a form rather than a particular song; or, 3) the poet may have selected the human voice as a creative model. In Williams's "Say Hello to John," the reader who is familiar with black speech patterns is struck by the success with which the poet is able to represent the spoken voice. Having informed the reader of her earlier inability to recognize the symptoms of her imminent delivery, the pregnant young woman now says,

Second time it happen, even she
got to admit this mo'n pee.
And the pain when it come, wa'n't bad
least no mo'n I eva expect to see.¹³⁰

Note that "happen" is the vernacular equivalent for the standard English word happened. The omission of the -ed reflects a tendency among black speakers to indicate tense within the context of a sentence.¹³¹ As Geneva Smitherman points out, context signals time: "[T]he same
verb form serves for both present and past tense, as: *The bus pass me up last week,* but also: *The bus pass me up every day.*" In addition, the deletion of the /r/ sound in "mo'n pee" and the /s/ sound in "wa'n't bad" reflect the speech patterns of many black speakers. Thus, the poem's appeal is based upon the extent to which the poem approximates what readers identify as the sound of the speaking voice.

B) EPISTROPHY: THE PERFORMANCE OF CULTURAL (RE)MEMORY

Because of the specific type of pastiche that characterizes this category, I have chosen epistrophy as a trope for this kind of formal revision. Epistrophe refers to the "repetition of the same word or expression at the end of a succession of phrases, clauses, or sentences for rhetorical effect." My decision to spell the word differently is prompted by pianist Thelonious Monk's tune, "Epistrophy," in which he provides listeners with what might be an instance of musical self-reflexivity wherein the pianist repeats certain sounds at the end of a phrase or riff. In "Epistrophy," the riff, which comprises a significant portion of the tune, is antiphonal. The response part of the riff is a slightly different version of the call or first phrase. The word epistrophy suggests a unique African-American style of cultural production that is both vernacular and sophisticated. For instance, the dances Monk performed counter-clockwise around the piano suggest a familiarity
with the ring shout, an antebellum religious ceremony that continues today in black churches. Yet Monk's musical ideas, which were often expressed in rhythmic patterns that seemed out of tune, were as complex as any of his contemporaries. Though Monk was a self-taught musician, he was still able to create a new approach to the piano that emphasized percussive effects: sometimes he even pounded his forearms on the piano. Wynton Marsalis explains:

[Monk] invented an entire technique for the piano because the European approach was not sufficient for what he wanted to do. Monk was focused on the sound that has its basis in the blues, and everything he did took direction from that.

Marsalis's comment demonstrates the admiration that black musicians have for Monk's style, yet it is interesting to note that, like many blues poets, he has been criticized for having poor technique.

As a trope, epistrophy involves a different kind of pastiche. Rather than imitating particular forms or expressive styles to create poems, epistrophy refers to a creative process that reflects and refracts African-American cultural experiences by combining a wide range of forms, images, titles, lyrics, quotations and names to create a poetic collage. An important component of epistrophy involves words that are particularly pertinent to African-American history. But while Stephen Henderson calls such terms "mascon words," I prefer to call them terms of cultural (re)memory. "Certain words and
constructions," Henderson writes, "seem to carry an inordinate charge of emotional and psychological weight, so that whenever they are used they set all kinds of bells ringing, all kinds of synapses snapping, on all kinds of levels."137

Epistrophy subsumes riffing. Though the poets sometimes repeat forms or phrases, they are merely part of the larger poetic tapestry. Poets who employ epistrophy attempt to achieve artistic complexity by fusing their commitments to vernacular culture with their concerns for literary conventions. Like the poetry in the riffing section, epistrophic poetry is double-voiced: it renews the cultural (re)memory in both script and performance. However, epistrophies place more demands upon readers and listeners because of its compressed, allusive style. In blues music, one finds a similar artistic approach, as Gates explains:

When playing the blues, a great musician often tries to make musical phrases that are elastic in their formal properties. These elastic phrases stretch the form rather than articulate the form.... [A] dialogue [occurs] between what the listener expects and what the artist plays. Whereas younger, less mature musicians accentuate the beat, more accomplished musicians ... feel free to imply it.138 (italics mine)

As in riffing poetry, epistrophies assume an informed audience, but here the cultural memory is summoned via suggestion. Forms and/or songs are often simulated, just as African-American quilt makers have simulated antiphony with clashing colors. By using various techniques to
establish rhythm, the poet, as Alvin Aubert observes, "plays the rhythm ... contrapuntally against the remembered cadences of [the] folk source."  

Robert Hayden's "Runagate Runagate" provides an early example. The title of the poem is itself epistrophic. The poet creates tension by employing an oxymoron that combines two terms that are essential to African-American cultural memory: runaway and gatekeeper. The poem begins by describing the experience of escaping the plantation: "Runs falls rises stumbles on from darkness into darkness."  

The absence of commas establishes a rhythm that suggests the anxiousness of escaping. Images of cultural memory, such as "hunters pursuing and the hounds pursuing," and "the night cold and the night long," (120) help to reinforce the runaway's anxiety and to maintain the rhythm established in the first line of the poem. The repetition of /h/ and /p/ sounds, as well as the repetition of "night," suggests the repetition that characterizes the black oral tradition.  

Rather than riffing upon song forms, Hayden suggests various spirituals by fusing key words into the poem. The phrase "the river to cross," (120) evokes "One More River to Cross." "Many thousands rise and go" and "no more driver's lash for me" (121) recall "No More Auction Block," and "And before I'll be aslave / I'll be buried in my grave" (121) are lines from "Freedom Song."
Hayden also repeats, albeit ironically, notices of slave owners.

If you see my Pompey, 30 years of age, new breeches, plain stockings, negro shoes; if you see my Anna, likely young mulatto branded E on the right cheek, R on the left, catch them if you can, but it won't be easy. (121)

The brand images, as well as the words "my Pompey" and "my Anna," indicate both the slave's chattel status and the poet's opposition to such marginalization. The phrase "likely young mulatto" suggests both rape and the mythology of white supremacy. Her worth as a slave is based upon her potential to supply sexual pleasure, yet the term mulatto (from the Spanish term mula, which means "she-mule"141) directs readers' attention to the myth of white supremacy. Given that mules cannot bear offspring, the term mulatto illustrates an attempt to maintain the so-called purity of the white race by convincing Americans of purported dangers of interracial marriages.

African-American vernacular English is also prominent in Hayden's poem—in the second section, for example, where the poet explores the runaway's psyche in a language that blends Standard English with the vernacular.

Moon so bright and no place to hide, the cry up and the patterollers riding, hound dogs belling in bladed air. And fear starts a-murbling, Never make it, we'll never make it. Hush that now, and she's turned upon us, levelled pistol glinting in the moonlight: Dead folks can't jaybird-talk, she says; you keep on going now or die, she says. (122)
The first line of the passage, with its zero-copula, captures the rhythm of black vernacular, and the term "patterollers" is drawn from that lexicon. The line "no place to hide," in addition to repeating the title of Sterling Brown's unpublished volume of poetry, suggests not only the trauma of the attempted escape; it serves as a metaphor for the larger African-American historical experience. However, the phrase "belling in bladed air" illustrates Hayden's attempt to explore the English language in its most diverse manifestations. In this light, the concluding lines of the poem are especially significant. The word "mean," which is repeated for both musical and rhetorical effects, denotes both determination and vexatiousness, two necessary qualities for a successful escape. In addition, Hayden's use of the zero copula evokes the sound of the black speaking voice, yet the repetition of /e/ sounds attests to Hayden's quest for a written art that simultaneously follows literary conventions while exploring the depths of African-American vernacular culture.

A more recent example of epistrophy can be observed in Amiri Baraka's "Speech # 38 (Or Y We Say It This Way)." The poem opens with a list of key terms related to bebop.

OoBlahDee
Ooolyacoo
Bloomdido
OobopShabam
Perdido Klacto-
Veestedene
Salt Peanuts oroonie
McVouty
rebop (258)

The passage, which is preceded by a dedication to Dizzy Gillespie and his song "Be Bop," reads like a foreign language to those who are unfamiliar with bop, and illustrates the boppers' quest for autonomy. Gillespie recalls: "People who wished to communicate with us had to consider our manner of speech ... As we played with musical notes, bending them into new and different meanings that constantly changed, we played with words."

Similarly, Baraka attempts to use bop argot as a source of poetic diction. The first line, whose meaning escapes this writer, is nonetheless a common expression among jazz enthusiasts. Baraka establishes a rhythm by repeating /u/ and /b/ sounds and alluding to key titles and of Gillespie recordings, such as "Ool-ya-koo," "Oop-Bop-Sha-Bam," "Bloomdido," "Perdido" and "Salt Peanuts." "oroonie/McVouty" alludes to both saxophonist Jack McVey and Bulee (Slim) Gaillard, who coined the phrase. Including the epigraph, "bop" appears thrice, lastly in "rebop," which of course denotes bebop. In this way, Baraka approximates the angular rhythm of modern jazz.

The boppish rhythm, however, is not maintained throughout the poem. Beginning in the tenth stanza, the poem turns more conventional in syntax, and it becomes clear that Baraka is narrating a poetic history of modern
jazz, while simultaneously creating a myth based upon that history.

We dreamt Paradise
w/ you
Naima (259)

"Naima," a ballad named after Coltrane's first wife, is personified here as a sort of goddess of love who provides a soothing feeling similar to that experienced by the listener of the tune.

As Baraka constructs his myth, one finds more allusions to various people and places associated with jazz.

Brownie Red
Hollywood Hi Noon
Trane Lights
Yr heart
in Repetition
de Milos (259)

Here one finds allusions to Coltrane, who played in Gillespie's band during the early 1950s, and trumpeters Clifford Brown and Miles Davis, respectively. But "Brownie Red," also refers to Gillespie's recording of "Sweet Georgia Brown" during which Gillespie discovered that he could play "high B-flat."144 Most specifically, though, "Brownie Red" refers a tour of southern California during which Gillespie engaged in his famous fistfight with singer Bulee (Slim) Gaillard for allegedly calling Gaillard an Uncle Tom.145 The reference to Davis is particularly interesting. Since "Milos" denotes sorghum and suggests the syrup made from it, the passage
is very likely a reference to the love shared by Davis and Coltrane's former wife for the saxophonist, who left Davis's band to form his own before marrying harpist Alice Coltrane.

In the next sentence, Baraka contrasts historical personalities Thelonius Monk and Harry Truman to describe the cultural differences between whites and blacks.

Monk's Shades  
made the tru/man  
of a Hairy  
Square  
symbol  
in faded corniness. (260)

The passage reflects Baraka's belief that blacks have responded to marginalization by creating new forms of expression to compensate for their lack of access to American social institutions. While the comparison may seem unlikely at first glance, we should recall the blues musician's role as secular priest. As house pianist at Minton's Playhouse, Monk asserted great influence on the jam sessions that led to the formation of bebop. The sunglass image suggests alternative aesthetic standards that are better suited for the representation of an African-American style of life. Baraka suggests that because blacks have been excluded from the official historical narrative, they have described their experiences through music: "Horns/of our/description" (260).
As the poem progresses, the reader encounters the poet, reflecting upon the nightmare of the "Imperial Ghost," (260) that is, American imperialism and the "ignorance" (261) required to maintain it. The ghost image suggests the obscurantism and perpetuation of myths that are manifested in the construction of an American identity that denies the contributions of African-Americans, Native Americans, Latinos and women. Here the rhythm changes again, and Baraka, in a self-reflexive maneuver, refers to his own "Scatting" and preference for a poetics that emphasizes performance.

Rhythm
Rapping, capping
hand
slapping

Black Poet
Chanting
to the 1st fire. (262)

Like his bebop heroes, then, Baraka has developed an alternative aesthetic to meet the needs of his audience. Rather than a script-oriented poetry that occludes the human voice, Baraka's poetry "Boogie[s]" (262). To underscore his point, Baraka engages in epistrophy, that is, he employs two words from the African-American vernacular: "[r]apping" and "capping" (262). While most readers are familiar with the word rapping, which, in the sense that Baraka uses it, denotes talking, capping may be more elusive. As a form of signifying, capping involves censure. "The point," according to Smitherman,
"is to put somebody in check, that is, make them [sic] think about and, one hopes, change their [sic] behavior." In this light, one can argue that "Speech" caps upon the American literary establishment. Which is to say, Baraka wants the members of the literary establishment to reconsider their concepts of poetry so that poetry that "Boogie[s]" can be included. Hence, Baraka's reference to "Chanting" (262).

C) CUTTING SESSIONS: THE INCARNATION OF SECULAR PRIESTHOOD

The decision of many blues poets to use voice/instrument techniques constitutes the most radical challenge to literary conventions in the history of black poetry. However, since critics have been unable to imagine an alternative to a script-oriented poetics, they have largely ignored it. Such indifference reflects a class bias that has a distinct history. As Raymond Williams points out, literature has always been associated with social privilege:

In its first extended sense ... it was a definition of 'polite' or 'humane' learning, and thus specified a particular social distinction....[that expresses] a certain (minority) level of educational achievement. This carried with it a potential and eventually realized an alternative definition of literature as 'printed books'... [But] if literature was reading, could a mode written for spoken performance be said to be literature, and if not, where was Shakespeare?

The implications here for black poetry should be clear. Since literature, as a property reserved for the elite, signified the consumption and, later, production of
printed books, how could writers create literature for a colonized people who communicate ideas most effectively in oral/aural forms?

Many blues poets have responded by following Neal's injunction to develop a poetics based upon African-American music and sermons. Rather than a poetics characterized by pastiche, like other blues poetry, the poetry I will describe here constitutes an incarnation of the blues musicians and preachers. Even poets who have matured after the movement and expressed ambivalence toward many of its precepts have written blues poetry of this type that defies traditional criticism, which fails to take into consideration the function of voice in performance. New methods of criticism are necessary to examine this poetry adequately.

However, before I describe my the critical approach I will adopt, I want to make some general remarks about the poetry and its relationship to the concept of a secular priesthood. Given the blues musician's role as a secular priest in black communities, blues poets' attempts to appropriate techniques from the blues tradition represent a quest for leadership executed in the style(s) of the black oral tradition. Melhem explains:

Common to all are the strong incursions of Black music and the Black sermon, its poetry of the pulpit. Most of these poets have written prophetic works. At times they meld poetry and prose ...
My concept of a secular priesthood trope is also based upon the enthusiastic responses from audiences and the great respect accorded to these blues poets. Yet, just as blues musicians develop personal styles, so blues poets here vary in style. All the poets utilize voice/instrument techniques, but differ in the manner in which they employ them. Some blues poems show almost no regard for readers, while others resemble the poetry described in the epistrophy section, with comparatively little emphasis on voice. Some poets, such as Amina Baraka and Quo Vadis Gex-Breaux, sing. Others, like Kalamu ya Salaam in his solo performances, use approximate the sounds of instruments. Still others, like Jayne Cortez and Askia Toure, rely upon tonal inflection and rhythmic patterns, just as preachers and rappers do in their performances.

Because of the aural nature of this poetry, I have found it useful to incorporate Smitherman's concept of tonal semantics into my model. Tonal semantics refers to an African-American type of paralinguistics, which is a term that performance scholars use to describe means of communication that cannot be conveyed adequately in print. As Bauman points out, "Paralinguistic features, by their very nature, tend not to be captured in the transcribed or published versions of texts ..."
Among African-Americans, paralinguistic features, according to Smitherman, are employed to transmit various types of feelings and/or ideas through sound:

In using the semantics of tone, the voice is employed like a musical instrument with improvisation, riffs, and all kinds of playing between the notes. This rhythmic pattern becomes a kind of acoustical phonetic alphabet and gives black speech its songified or musical quality. Black rappers use word sound to tap their listeners' souls and inner beings in the same way that the musician uses the symbolic language of music to strike inward responsive chords in his listeners' hearts.154

Smitherman's comments recall Finkelstein's observation that music can communicate ideas.155 For this reason, I have selected the phrase cutting sessions156 as a trope to provide a critical tool to examine how the poets use specific performative techniques to incarnate musicians and/or preachers.

The history of cutting sessions extends back to antebellum dance competitions at festivals where observers expressed their approval of dance couples by urging them to continue their dancing. These contests and the particularly high standards set by the onlookers anticipated the cutting sessions in which blues musicians later participated.157

In the lexicon of blues musicians, cutting sessions or contests refer to duels between musicians in the heat of jam sessions. As Mezz Mezzrow says,

The colored boys prove their musical talents in those competitions called cutting contests, and there it really is the best man wins, because the Negro audience is extra critical when it comes to music and
won't accept anything second-rate. These cutting contests are just a musical version of verbal duels.\textsuperscript{158} (italics mine)

While "cutting" implies an adversarial relationship between musicians, the term denotes superior performance in the heat of a competitive battle that is itself a more intensified segment of a jam session. Miles Davis, for instance, recalls being "cut" by trumpeter Kenny Dorham. Fearing that he had been upstaged, Davis sought confirmation in the audience from fellow musician Jackie McClean, who said: "'Miles, tonight Kenny is playing so beautiful you sound like an imitation of yourself.'"\textsuperscript{159}

The comments by Mezzrow and McClean suggest the possibility of a critical practice from the perspective of a unique African-American sensibility. Mezzrow's reference to "verbal duels" implies an isomorphic relationship between musicianship and oral performance. Davis sought critical appraisal from McClean who, as a fellow blues musician, possessed the critical tools to interpret Davis's performance. That is, McClean was an informed observer.

Similarly, critics of the blues poetry under consideration here should envision themselves as informed members of the (writer's) audience. While it is important to attend live poetry readings (recall Kent's account of the critic's role as outsider), I am really referring to a mode of interpretation wherein critics attempt to
examine the effectiveness of oral/aural/ techniques. Why, critics should ask, is the poetry appealing?

Haki Madhubuti was one of the most popular poets of the Black Arts Movement. His poem, "But He Was Cool," represents an attempt to transpose jazz into poetic form. "But He Was Cool" satirizes pseudo-revolutionary black males who gave pretenses to nationalist philosophy by ignoring social change while focusing instead on accoutrements. The subtitle, "or: he even stopped for green lights," indicates a lack of progression that, in turn, implies a reactionary politics. The first two stanzas are prosaic, but the poet uses an ironic tone and black urban language for effects. In the next stanza, however, Madhubuti uses blues-related techniques to establish rhythm and augment his parody.

wooooooooooo-jim he bes so cool & ill tel li gent
cool-cool is so cool he was un-cooled
by
    other niggers' cool
    cool-cool ultracool was bop-cool/ice
box
    cool so cool cold cool
    his wine didn't have to be cooled, him
was
    air conditioned cool
    cool-cool/real cool made me cool--now
    ain't that cool
    cool-cool so cool him nick-named
refig-
    erator. (24)

The poet improvises riff-style upon the word "cool." That is, Madhubuti repeats it with various twists and changes, building upon each repetition until a peak of creative virtuosity and emotional intensity is achieved.
Despite its brief duration, Madhubuti's riff-style improvisation demonstrates the sheer power of the best poetry of the Black Arts Movement, and gives testimony to a viable poetics based upon the blues tradition. But it is also important to note that Walker's "For My People" is a more extended version of the same style, though it does not require the same degree of vocal dexterity to perform.

At the same time, though, "But He Was Cool" must be situated within the context of its nationalist politics. Though the poem criticizes the pretensions of the psuedo-revolutionary, it is itself trapped within a vision that undercuts the thrust of its critique. The poet says:

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after detroit, newark, chicago &c.,
we had to hip
  cool-cool/ super-cool/ real cool
that
to be black
is
to be
very-hot. (25)
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Locked inside his own construction of Manicheanism, Madhubuti can only see value in a "black" man who participates in violence. But this definition ignores the contributions of Martin Luther King and other people in the Civil Rights Movement in the South. Like Saunders Redding in his criticism of Langston Hughes, Madhubuti confines his definition of African-American identity to one facet of the black experience, that is, the urban North.
Madhubuti also implies that the urban uprisings constituted revolutionary actions. But while it is important to understand the uprisings as acts of resistance, spontaneous violence is not intrinsically revolutionary. Though violence can be a cleansing force in colonized people and instill a desire for liberation, the failure to channel the emotional fervor, that is, focus upon the meaning of the violence leads only to chaos.161

Madhubuti's "But He Was Cool" marks a transitional moment in the development of an incarnation of secular priesthood. The recent work of Quo Vadis Gex Breaux demonstrates a full realization of this poetry. Though her poetry closely resembles that which is described in the epistrophy section, her style of tonal semantics requires a criticism that examines the function of voice, and it exemplifies a blues poetry that is truly liberating in its concerns for race, class and gender.

In her poem "Jazz Rain,"162 Gex-Breaux describes a jazz vocalist's experiences in narrative form. The title recalls a special feature of the blues tradition, that is, the ability to evoke a local experience within the context of personalized style. The combination of the words "jazz" and "rain," respectively, suggest both the musical tradition as well as the natural environment of New Orleans. Gex-Breaux's ability to evoke a specific geography approximates one of the hallmarks of the
country blues singers. The poem opens with oxymorons that reflect blues lyrics' ability to contain contradictions:

She had a kind of classy coarseness
like raw silk
a kind of open earthiness
without being dirt (22)

The singer's "classy coarseness" suggests the raucous quality of blues music whose premium on style lends itself to elegance. The reference to "earthiness" implies a funkiness that is also dignified.

Gex-Breaux's use of tonal semantics begins in the third stanza where onomatopoeia evokes the New Orleanian landscape:

She grew up with water sounds
split splat splat
on tin roofs
soft tappings on bare window panes
tip tip tip
after heavy cloudbursts (22)

The alliteration of /sp/ sounds and repetition of the "tip" image simulate the pitter-patter of rain drops. But in addition to recalling the climate of New Orleans, Gex-Breaux also uses the rain imagery to simulate the percussive quality of blues music. Note the music suggested by "water sounds" upon "tin roofs" and "window panes." The intricate patterns recall the sound of jazz and induces "laughter / that fell like jazz rain." In addition, the "tin roofs" image signifies the economic deprivation against which the singer and her community must struggle. Like blues singers, Gex-Breaux does not offer solutions to the economic problems, but describes
the experience in a manner that seduces her audience to question traditional accounts of American democracy.

Like blues music itself, the singer's songs have been misunderstood. When "she sang her own harmonies,"

Choice few could hear her music read the notes to which she danced hers was too cloistered an intellect to teach steps meant only for the select (22)

Here Gex-Breaux uses irony to subtly address the problem of gender. Though the singer's aesthetic is oriented toward mass appeal, few people hear the symbolic message of her song. Just as singers like Billie Holiday "danced alone and empty for hours," so Gex-Breaux implies an unwillingness in the audience to appreciate experiences particular to women.

Gex-Breaux's decision to employ tonal semantics in her blues poetry stems from her belief in the poetry's potential to produce "human transformation" by touching her audience's spirit. At times, however, words are not sufficient; hence, her recourse to tonal semantics, as in the description of her own (blues) character: "plish, plish, plish / do wa-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a.

Though Gex-Breaux has expressed an antipathy for the use of expletives and slogans that characterized much of Black Arts poetry, her approximation of scatting represents a fruition of Neal's dream of a popular poetry that describes the black cultural experience in a style that illustrates its distinctiveness.
Kalamu ya Salaam illustrates another version of an incarnation of secular priesthood. Salaam's poetry reflects both an oppositional politics and a radical challenge to literary conventions. Some critics would term his poetry pamphleteering, but insofar as the word implies that Salaam has no idea of craft it is quite incorrect. Salaam has a distinct artistic method, but he reconceptualizes definitions of both poetry and artifact by collaborating with musicians on compact disc. Since Salaam considers the words of his poem as lyrics, I have transcribed passages of the poem in a manner that suggest the rhythms and actual sounds of his voice. I have italicized the words or syllables of emphasis, and spaced words and lines to provide a clearer idea of the actual sound of the poem.

The poet opens by stating his title, "Congo Square," a historic site so named by the Bakongo and other Africans who comprised the majority population in New Orleans. There slaves were allowed to perform music and dances that were prohibited elsewhere in America. First, Salaam acknowledges the presence of Native Americans, who were displaced by African-Americans: "The colonizers came and pushed aside our hosts / And introduced us in chains." The stress upon "chains" attracts listeners' attention, and helps Salaam seduce listeners into confronting the history of slavery. Yet Salaam's belief that the slaves never fully accepted
their objectification as chattel is reflected in the lines:

we somehow and the how of our somehow persuasive methodologies is not clear at this moment, the how is not clear, the how of our persuasive methodologies worked is not clear at this moment, but nevertheless, even as slaves, we crafted and created a space, where we could be free to be we

Salaam creates a riff-chorus by repeating "how." The word also reflects Salaam's belief that genuinely oppositional cultural production cannot be based solely upon content. Style, too, is important in challenging the dominant social order. Note that the phrase "persuasive methodologies" is prosaic, and illustrates Salaam's unabashed mission of propaganda. For most critics, this posture would disqualify the piece as a poem, and in written form, it bears no resemblance to conventional poetry.

However, Salaam employs tonal semantics, and plays the inflection of his voice against the rhythms of the drummers. As the riff-chorus intensifies, the conga players, whose collective voice as accompanists had functioned to accent the lyrics, begin to intensify their playing, building in emotional intensity until soloist and rhythm section become an ensemble by the end of the passage.

In his effort to reconstruct the colonized African-American self, Salaam suggests the viability of a style of life that emphasizes emotion and spirituality that has
been repressed, ironically, by religious forces. More specifically, he employs a pun to emphasize the political implications of the cross symbol, which recalls: 1) the memory of the middle passage; 2) the imposition of Christianity; 3) the development of capitalism. Salaam describes capitalism as an economic system that required the destruction of so-called primitive religions and languages. Thus, it constitutes a betrayal of humanity—the penultimate "cross" that intersects the preceding "crosses" that culminate in herrenvolk democracy:

which refuses to recognize
the spirituality of life
which refuses to recognize
the spirituality of life
and celebrates death
with crosses and crosses
double and triple crosses, the middle passage
the first cross
Christianity, the double cross
and capitalism, the ultimate triple coupe de grace
cross
of our captivity.

Again, Salaam uses the riff-chorus to establish rhythm. As in the sermon, Salaam employs hemistich phrases that may appear irregular in scripted form but sound regular when heard. Equally important, Salaam's use of tone inflection belies the apparent simplicity of the passage.

While much of conventional literature relies upon subtlety, which requires repeated readings for understanding and memory, Salaam strives for an affective poetics not unlike affective preaching, which allows the listener to experience the poem sensually and thereby
gain a sense of understanding through memory. As Gerald Davis argues,

The power of the performance moves beyond the walls of the auditorium ... As in church, the spiritual essence ... of the performance may well be carried into the days and weeks following the actual performance as those who experienced [it], or those who have reports of [it], discuss it, evaluate it, and relive it.\textsuperscript{169}

Similarly, the ideal poetic performance moves the audience to physical and/or audible response not unlike a blues musician. (Audience members at the 1996 Black Arts Festival in Atlanta, for instance, responded to Salaam's performance, which was filled with paralinguistic approximations of the saxophone, flute and piano, with a standing ovation.)

Salaam's singular achievement in "Congo Square" stems from the fusion of two local vernacular traditions: Salaam, who was expected to replace his grandfather in the pulpit,\textsuperscript{170} extends the oral tradition, while the conga players preserve a local drumming style. Thus, Salaam achieves a new level of complexity, since interacting with musicians increases the difficulty of performing poetry. In perhaps the most controversial point in the poem, Salaam and the drummers reach a pinnacle of emotional intensity when Salaam ends a sentence with "drums":

\begin{quote}
our african \textit{gods}
have not been \textit{obliterated}
they have merely \textit{retreated retreated} in side the beat
of us, until
\end{quote}
we are ready to release them into
a world we're creating. A world heralded by the
beat
beep, beat being beating being, of black heart
drumssss. Heart beat, heart beat, heart beat, heart be
at
this place, at this place, be heart be be be
we beating, place in new world space, beating

When Salaam changes his inflection and establishes a
different rhythm by punning, the drummers respond by
decreasing their tempo, while Salaam creates a riff upon
the word "be," varying the sound and rhythm in an
antiphonal manner. It is also noteworthy that Salaam's
riff represents self-reflexivity. Here he demonstrates
his belief that the most effective means of mobiliz-
ation—and hence, social change—is to incarnate the
musician. Hence, in Salaam's conclusion, "beat, be, be,
beat / rememba, rememba, rememba," even his language,
that is, the deletion of "er" reflects an African-
American style of expression.

The political import of the foregoing passage raises
another issue. A superficial reading might render a
mythology of nationalism, that is, a romantic past that
neglects the construction of Africa as a concept and an
adherence to an outmoded religious system. However,
Salaam's passage is a blues statement par excellence.
Like Larry Neal, he interprets the emotion and
spontaneity in black music as summonings of orishas.171
Though he does not know his specific ancestral lineage
because of the history of slavery, Salaam understands

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that his method of artistic expression would not exist without African religious practices, such as the possession phenomenon. For Salaam, the black oral tradition to which he is heir exemplifies an African-derived sensibility that is manifested in "new world space."
NOTES


3Don L. Lee, Dynamite Voices: Black Poets of the 1960s (Detroit: Broadside, 1971). Hereafter referred to as Haki Madhubuti. All further references to this work will appear in the text.


6Carolyn M. Rogers, "Uh Nat'chel Thang--The WHOLE TRUTH--US," Black World, September 1971. All further references to this work will appear in the text.


9Gates, Figures in Black, p. 32.

10Gates, Figures in Black, p. 34.


Gates, Figures in Black, p 32.


Sonia Sanchez, We A BaddDDD People (Detroit: Broadside P, 1970), p. 36.


Twenty-five years later, I observed a similar response to Toure's poetry. At one point in his performance, members of the audience literally jumped out of their seats.


32 See also Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, p. 71. Gates says that the dozens are a "subset" of signifying.


34 Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, p. 102.

35 The confusion over the terms riffing and signifyin stem from Gates's argument that signifying functions as a master trope in vernacular culture. While I agree that it is significant, it cannot subsume all vernacular forms. See Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, p. 105, where he quotes Ralph Ellison's "On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz," Saturday Review, July 20, 1962. Ellison's comment corroborates my point that signifying is a component of riffing.


40 Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, p. 60.


44 Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, p. 45.

45 See Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind*, p. 103.


49 Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, p. 82.


53 See Jon Michael Spenser, *Blues and Evil*, p. 44.


56 Morton, quoted in Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, p. 86.

57 Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, p. 57.

58 Tracy, *Langston Hughes & the Blues*, p. 245.


60 Tracy, *Langston Hughes & the Blues*, p. 97.


Rubin, quoted in Jeff Titon, *Early Downhome Blues*, p. 43.


Dee Dee Bridgewater, *Love and Peace* (Verve Records 314 527 470-2)

Eric Dolphy, in Nat Hentoff, "Liner Notes," on *Far Cry* (Fantasy OJC-400 (NJ-8270))


Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, p. 33.


82 I am borrowing Houston Baker's phrase here.


84 Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, p. 112.


87 Dizzie Gillespie with Al Fraser, *to BE, or not ... to BOP* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1979), p. 488.

88 John Coltrane, "Liner Notes," *A Love Supreme* (Impulse A-77)


91 Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, p. 244.

92 Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, p. 45.


100 Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, p. 191.


102 Bill Evans, *Big Road Blues*, p. 18.

103 Titon, "Thematic Patterns in Downhome Blues Lyrics," p. 323.


106 Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, p. 15.

107 Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, p. 15.

108 Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, p. 21.


112 Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, p. 44.


117 Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, p. 139.

118 Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, p. 41.

120 The Dirty Dozen Brass Band, *The Dirty Dozen Brass Band Live: Mardi Gras in Montreux* (Rounder Records 2052).


122 Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, p. 96.

123 See Kofsky, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music*, pp. 279-80. Kofsky states that Handy's *If We Only Knew* (Columbia CL 2462) so closely resembles Coltrane's *Spiritual* (Pablo Live 2620 101) that it borders on plagiarism.


125 Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, pp. 192-93.


133 Thelonius Monk, *Thelonious Monk with John Coltrane* (Riverside OJCCD-039-2).


137 Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, p. 44.


143 Gillespie with Fraser, *to BE, or not ... to BOP*, p. 281.

144 Gillespie with Fraser, *to BE, or not ... to BOP*, p. 241.

145 Gillespie with Fraser, *to BE, or not ... to BOP*, pp. 242-44.

146 Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin*, p. 121.


149 Quo Vadis Gex-Breaux, telephone interview, 6 December 1995.


152 Here I am not referring simply to hip hop rap, but to the entire tradition of black oral performers.


156 I owe this idea to Jerry W. Ward, Jr.

157 Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, p. 66

158 Mezz Mezzrow, quoted in Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, p. 70.

159 Miles Davis with Quincy Troupe, *Miles*, p. 375.


161 See Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 93. See also, Taylor, *The Narrative of Liberation*, p. 80.


163 Quo Vadis Gex-Breaux, telephone interview, 6 December 1995.

164 Quo Vadis Gex-Breaux, telephone interview, 6 December 1995.


169 Gerald Davis, *I got the Word in me and I Can Sing it, you know*, p. 33.


CHAPTER 4
GIMME A PIGFOOT: EARLY BLUES POETICS: RIFFING IN
STERLING BROWN'S SOUTHERN ROAD

Bessie Smith's recording of the tune that serves as a title for this chapter is a metaphor for Sterling Brown's approach to blues culture in Southern Road. Where previous renditions of "Gimme a Pigfoot" were mere showbiz pop tunes, Smith revised it by infusing a blues quality into it. Smith complemented her concern for style—both in terms of her sound and in her attire—with an equally impressive dedication to her audience and a sense of courage that prompted her once to confront the Klan. Like Smith, Brown revised popular forms, demonstrated a dedication to his audience, and displayed courage in championing the cause of black peasants in America.

It is fitting that Sterling Brown identified himself as a New Negro and distanced himself from the concept of the Harlem Renaissance. The focus on Harlem denied the richness of the rural black culture in the South where Brown had discovered the sources for his art. More importantly, though, the New Negro movement was one of resistance. Black soldiers had fought valiantly for democracy abroad in World War I, only to be denied first-class citizenship upon returning home. The number of lynchings approached that of the 1890s, and the Ku Klux Klan had gained in popularity. But there were also
requitals. Riots occurred in Longview, Texas, Washington, D.C. and Chicago: hence, Rollin Harte quipped, "The New Negro: "you hit him, and he strikes back." Of course, African-Americans had fought against unfair treatment since European ships arrived on the coasts of Africa. What was different in the late 1910s and 1920s was a new sense of collective consciousness and maturity. W.E.B. DuBois illustrates this new fighting spirit in an essay entitled "Returning Home":

[W]e are cowards and jackasses if now that the war is over we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land. 

We return.
We return from fighting.
We return fighting.3

At the same time, however, this consciousness was framed largely in Eurocentric terms. Conservative essayist George Schuyler's comment that African-Americans were no more than "lampblackened Anglo-Saxon[s]" was a bit extreme, but the truth is that many African-Americans despised vernacular culture, particularly blues music. Of course, the black elite's antipathy toward black music was nothing new. But this was a new age, a time for blacks to claim their rightful status as American citizens, and such a claim required sophistication—which meant the symphony, certainly not Bessie Smith or even Louis Armstrong. As Paul Oliver points out,

To the "New Negro" and most of all to the Black recently arrived from the South who was earnestly seeking to acquire the worldly Northerner's veneer of
sophistication, there were overtones of the "Uncle Tom" element in the blues. Southern blues, folk music and talk, jive speech, and other creative forms that reinforce the morale of the under-privileged signified an acceptance of segregation and may even have appeared as devices that gave it support.6

Even James Weldon Johnson, whose God's Trombones had demonstrated the poetic possibilities of black folk culture, declared in 1931 that dialect could only produce pathos and humor.7

Brown, however, was shrewd enough to reconceptualize sophistication in terms of the elegance of blues music, and he understood that the real "Uncle Toms" were those who embraced the forms of the dominant society simply because they were ashamed of the people who created the blues culture. Writing less than twenty years after The Birth of a Nation appeared, Brown, as Joanne Gabbin points out,8 understood the politics of representation: the degree to which a marginalized group is misrepresented is directly related to its subjugation in real life. Thus Brown's question was, how could he help build a literature to describe cultural history from the viewpoint of a largely illiterate people?

Brown's challenge was to create a new poetic language that captured the feelings and insights of his people. Hughes's Weary Blues (1926) and Fine Clothes to the Jew (1927) proved that vernacular expression and minstrelsy are not synonymous. However, while Hughes's poetry represented urban black culture, Brown sought to depict black folk life in the rural South. More specifically,
Brown sought to penetrate the psyche of black Southern peasantry. For Brown, this entailed experimenting with a wider selection of forms than Hughes. "Dialect, or the speech of the people," Brown said, is capable of expressing whatever the people are. And the folk Negro is a great deal more than a buffoon or a plaintive minstrel. Poets more intent upon learning the ways of the folk, their speech, and their character, that is to say better poets, could have smashed the mold. But first they would have had to believe in what they were doing.9

Brown's search for what Lorenzo Thomas calls an "authentic poetic voice"10 of Southern black peasants led to a blend of radical politics and mimetic revisions, that is, riffing on black oral and aural forms. In "Odyssey of Big Boy," Brown riffs on the black vernacular speaking voice and the ballad form to counter the misrepresentation of itinerant black workers. In his essay "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors" Brown quotes Thomas Nelson Page who says of black freedmen: "[F]or the most part, [they] are lazy, thriftless, intemperate, insolent, dishonest, and without the most rudimentary element of morality."11

As a title, "Odyssey of Big Boy" blends the name of the Greek hero with that of the bluesman Big Boy who helped initiate Brown in his first-hand study of the black lore in and around Virginia Seminary.12 In referring to Greek and African-American art simultaneously, Brown provides an important clue to his own creative process. Just as bluesmen like Big Boy spoke
English according to African grammatical rules, so Brown interprets the Western concept of literature in a uniquely African-American style.

"Oddysey of Big Boy" should be read as a praise-poem for the heroic exploits of black workers: hence, the reference to Odysseus. But given their limited social mobility in the 1930s, the very idea of finding heroism among black workers is an act of resistance. At the outset of the poem, the persona evokes folk heroes Casey Jones and Stagolee, and expresses his desire to be with men like these when he dies. The persona then begins his odyssey:

Done skinned as a boy in Kentucky hills,  
Druv steel dere as a man  
Done stripped tobacco in Virginia fiel's  
Alongst de River Dan  
Alongst de River Dan

The "skinning" image reflects Big Boy's rural locale. "Skinning," in black vernacular, often refers to swimming nude in water holes--away from man-made beaches and swimming pools. But here the term refers to mule skinning.

Brown's representation of black speech lends the poem authenticity. "Done skinned," rather than the standard English version of the phrase "I have skinned" reflects the common grammatical constructions of Big Boy's larger community. Similarly, in the repeated lines that conclude the stanza, the word "Alongst" is more appropriate than the Standard English term. The addition of the letters  

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and it might possibly be explained in two ways: 1) the people's unfamiliarity with Standard English; and/or 2) the people's zest for linguistic experiment.

In its stanzaic construction, "Odyssey of Big Boy" does not follow the typical four-line stanza pattern. While Brown uses the a b c b rhyme scheme that is typical of ballads, he riffs on the "John Henry" ballad, which consists of five-line stanzas that conclude with two repeating lines.

When John Henry was a little fellow,  
You could hold him in the palm of your hand,  
He said to his pa, "When I grow up  
I'm gonna be a steel-driving man.  
Gonna be a steel-driving man."

When John Henry was a little baby,  
setting on his mama's knee,  
He said, "The big bend tunnel on the C. & O. Road  
Is gonna be the death of me.  
Gonna be the death of me."  

In addition to enacting resistance by his reshaping of the ballad form, Brown adopts John Henry as a model for resisting misrepresentation. Part of John Henry's appeal is that he is a cultural rebel. Though he does not resist white authority, his conceptualization of his own identity compels him to engage in symbolic battle against the white world.

John Henry said to his captain,  
A man ain't nothing but a man,  
But before I'll let dat steam drill beat me down,  
I'll die wid my hammer in my hand,  
Die wid my hammer in my hand." (BP, 13)

His bulging biceps notwithstanding, John Henry is not unlike other folk heroes, such as Brer Rabbit and The
Signifying Monkey, who triumph against insurmountable odds. What is unique about John Henry is that the folk, as toilers of the soil, could interpret his victory over the steam drill as a triumph over technology and thereby reaffirm their own integrity.

Equally importantly, Brown fuses the tone of the blues song with the ballad form, creating a blues-ballad. As Brown critic Joanne Gabbin says, "[T]he blues-ballad combines the narrative framework of the ballad and the ethos of the blues." Both "John Henry" and "The Odyssey of Big Boy" celebrate the labor of black workers, and both begin by recounting boyhood experiences. Unlike "John Henry," though, Brown personalizes his poetic narrative. The result is a comico-heroic narrative whose central character is not a nebulous, mythic hero but rather Big Boy himself who describes his own heroic exploits in the context of heroic myth.

The next stanza accentuates the realism that distinguishes Brown's work from the dialect poetry of Dunbar. Although there is a strand of humor here, there is no image of the minstrel. Rather, Brown describes Big Boy's experiences without idealizing him:

Done mined de coal in West Virginia,
  Liked dat job jes fine,
  Till a load o' slate curved round my head,
  Won't work in no mo mine,
  Won't work in no mo mine. (20)

The reader or listener is caught unsuspecting by the third line, which vividly describes the physical danger
of working in a mine. Not surprisingly, Big Boy expresses his refusal to work in mines, and demonstrates some control over his life.

More importantly, Brown debunks the myth of laziness and thriftlessness. Note, for instance, that Big Boy initially *enjoys* working in mines. Brown's point is that the economics of slavery have prevented black workers from attaining economic stability. Consequently, workers like Big Boy wandered from job to job. Having worked as a dishwasher, Big Boy expresses his distaste for the job:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Done busted suds in li'l New York,} \\
\text{Which ain't no work o' mine—} \\
\text{Lawd, ain't no work o' mine. (20)}
\end{align*}
\]

Big Boy emphasizes his choice for physical labor that is performed outdoors. While he could simply be expressing his preference for a kind of work, one might note a bit of male chauvinism in Big Boy's repulsion toward dishwashing. It is not difficult to find the implication here that dishwashing is a type of labor that befits women better than men.

Big Boy's inability to find steady work makes it difficult for him to establish stable relationships with women. Roaming the countryside, Big Boy has played the role of both two-timer and two-timee.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Had stovepipe blond in Macon,} \\
\text{Yaller gal in Marylan',} \\
\text{In Richmond had choklit brown,} \\
\text{Called me huh monkey man—} \\
\text{Huh big fool monkey man.}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Had two fair browns in Arkansaw}
\end{align*}
\]
And three in Tennessee,
Had Creole gal in New Orleans,
Sho Gawd did two time me--
Lawd, two time, fo' time me--

But best gal what I evah had
Done put it over dem,
A gal in Southwest Washington
At four'n half and M-
At Four'n half and M.... (21)

While some readers may think this passage is chauvinistic, one should recall that Big Boy himself is two-timed. A more astute reading would argue that the multiple relationships are symptoms of underlying social problems that are, in turn, reflected in the people's art. Note that John Henry's status as an itinerant worker also corresponds with his inability to maintain a stable relationship. Of course, one might argue that "John Henry" reflects a male-oriented discourse. But while it is true that "John Henry" is male-oriented, it should be remarked that sexual exploits are a recurrent theme in blues songs.

Nonetheless, it is more important to understand that Brown is riffing when he catalogues Big Boy's sexual partners. Consider these lines from Bessie Smith's version of "Weary Blues," which she renamed "Mama Got the Blues:"

Brownskin is deceitful, but a yellow man is worse,
Brownskin is deceitful, but a yellow man is worse,
I'm gonna get myself a black man and play it safe at first.

I got a man in Atlanta,
Two in Alabama,
Three in Chattanooga,
Four in Cincinnati,
Five in Mississippi,  
Six in Memphis, Tennessee,  
If you don't like my peaches, leave my orchard be.16

At the conclusion of his narrative, Big Boy returns to  
the subject of death, and expresses his desire to be with  
folk heroes like John Henry when he dies, and thereby  
strives for immortality.

An' all dat Big Boy axes  
When time comes fo' to go,  
Lemme be wid John Henry, steel drivin' man,  
Lemme be wid old jazzbo. (21)

Big Boy is the quintessential secular man, an embodiment  
of the blues spirit. Though he interprets immortality as  
real, there are no religious references here. Big Boy is  
a sinner in the view of the Christian congregation, yet  
he has derived happiness from and is proud of his "sins."  
Thus, Big Boy envisions an afterlife that includes  
neither Jesus nor angels but rather such heroes as  
Stackolee, Casey Jones and John Henry.

While John Henry's heroic feats represent the  
resistance of African-American workers, Stackolee  
represents resistance as the legendary badman who is  
fearless against white authorities. In "Johnny Thomas,"  
Brown creates a counterpart to Stackolee by riffing on  
the ballad and African-American vernacular English to  
undercut the myth of the brute negro. "D.W. Griffith,"  
Brown writes, "in The Birth of a Nation made for Thomas  
Dixon a dubious sort of immortality, and finally fixed  
the stereotype in the mass-mind. The stock Negro in  
Dixon's books ... is a gorilla-like imbecile, who  

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'springs like a tiger' and has the 'black claws of a beast.'" Writing in the typical four-line stanzas with an a b c b rhyme scheme, Brown constructs a narrative wherein readers and listeners witness the incubation of the black male lumpenproletariat:

Dey sent John Thomas
To a one-room school;
Teacher threw him out
For a consarned fool. (42)

Brown foregrounds the issue of cultural authority by describing the rigidity and arbitrariness of the public educational system, which allows John Thomas little opportunity to acquire formal education. The word "Dey" is important because it suggests anonymity. The persona, who is presumably a member of Johnny's community, does not know who controls the school system. The decision-makers are a conglomerate of entities lumped into one word: "Dey." The community's occlusion from the decision-making process reflects the extent to which it is disfranchised.

Similarly, the "one-room school" reflects the stark inequities in the social system. Black children of all ages must attend school in a single room if they wish to acquire any education whatsoever. Moreover, the meager funds provided by the system can only afford an incompetent teacher who cannot pronounce the word concern. The irony here, of course, is that the teacher shows no concern for Johnny. Thus, Brown suggests that young Southern black males of the 1930s were faced with
the option of either conforming to the dictates of a
haphazard educational system, which usually meant
sharecropping, or a life of crime.

The leadership that Johnny's father provides is also
suspect. He is a drunkard who mistakes a bloody beating
for discipline:

    His pappy got drunk--
    Beat de boy good,
    Lashed his back
    Till it sprouted blood. (42)

Having been failed by both his educational and familial
institutions, Johnny becomes callous. Having internalized
the negative treatment toward him, Johnny, like
Stackolee, learns to gamble and play pool because these
activities are more appropriate "For a consarned fool."
That is, the teachers of these lessons welcome boys such
as Johnny as students.

When Johnny gets involved with a "fancy woman" whose
tastes are expensive, his desire to satisfy her financial
appetite requires Johnny to continue gambling, and he
eventually depletes his funds. Consequently, his woman
leaves him, and he is confused:

    De jack run low
    De gal run out
    Johnny didn't know
    What t'was all about. (42)

Johnny's lover agrees to come back to him on the
condition that he get more money, so Johnny begins to
steal. Unfortunately, he is less skilled as a thief, and
he is caught and placed on the chain gang:
Johnny was a tadpole,
Sheriff was a eel,
Caught him jes' as soon
As he started to steal.

Put him on de chain gang,
Handled him cruel,
Jes' de sort of treatment
For a consarned fool. (42)

At this point in the poem, the line "For a consarned fool" has become a refrain that accentuates the absurdities of Johnny's life by sarcastically echoing the sentiments of white authorities.

The mule metaphor, which prefigures Zora Neale Hurston's in Their Eyes Were Watching God, is appropriate in that it reflects the Southern aristocracy's attempt to dehumanize Johnny. Like the slaves before him, Johnny's value can only be assessed in terms of his ability to work and produce profits. Johnny's fight with the prison guard and his refusal to conform to this expectation constitutes rebellion. He is therefore "cussed" as a recalcitrant mule. But since he is neither slave nor mule, Johnny must be put to death:

Dropped him in de hole
Threw de slack lime on,
Oughta had mo' sense
Dan to evah git born. (43)

One might have thought that the poem had been exhausted of possibilities before this last stanza. After all, Johnny had already been haltered and hung. Yet the first two lines emphasize the extent to which Johnny has been dehumanized. His body is merely "in de hole" without
the dignity of a funeral. The "slack lime" suggests mortar and all of its deathly implications. The last two lines are even more powerful in that they suggest that Johnny was simply a victim of circumstances. The sarcastic tone highlights the ludicrousness of Johnny's life. Needless to say, individuals cannot choose parents, so it is utterly ridiculous to expect someone to have had "mo' sense" than to ever be born. Yet Brown suggests that this is the only way Johnny could have avoided injustice in America.

Brown's description of the chain-gang experience bears a striking similarity to bluesman Memphis Slim's account of his experience in levee camps:

Work you from can see to can't see ... You couldn't say you was tired and wanted a break 'cause they'd crack you upside your head with a club. Them straw bosses would beat you dead. Mister Charlie say, "Kill a nigger, hire another. But kill a mule you got to buy another."19

Shackles and chains are, of course, by-products of slavery. The history of the twenty-pound ball and chain, for instance, extends as far back as the 1780s in Pennsylvania. Such was the horror of the chain-gangs that men sometimes severed the tendons of their legs to avoid working on them.20 Since slave masters found that African-Americans were more productive laborers when they sang, they did not object to it. Though blues music became the most popular art form in African-American culture, the worksong continued into the twentieth
century. "Some of the worksongs," Amiri Baraka writes, "use as their measure the grunt of a man [or woman] pushing a heavy weight or the blow of a hammer against a stone to provide the metrical precision and rhythmical impetus behind the singer."21 "John Henry Hammer Song" is such a song:

Dis ole hammer -- hunh
Kilkt John Henry -- hunh
Twon't kill me, baby -- hunh
Twon't kill me.22

When one recalls that worksongs prefigured the blues and that some worksong lines resemble blues stanzas,23 it is not surprising that Brown, in "Southern Road," riffs on both forms by fusing them to create a blues work song:

Swing dat hammer -- hunh --
Steady, bo' ;
Swing dat hammer -- hunh --
Steady, bo' ;
Ain't no rush, bebby.
Long ways to go. (52)

The persona has committed murder and received a life sentence:

Burner tore his--hunh--
Black heart away;
Burner tore his--hunh--
Black heart away;
Got me life, bebby,
An' a day. (52)

The word "Burner" refers specifically to gunfire, and the last line, "An' a day," suggests the hopelessness of ever joining the outside world. But it is also important to understand that the word burn refers to deception generally. In his selection of the term, Brown skillfully
calls attention to the aggression and hot tempers that flared at jook joints where blues musicians provided a release from the pent-up frustrations from long, hard work for low wages. At times, emotions spilled over into violence between jealous lovers or angry gamblers. In *Mules and Men*, Zora Neale Hurston observes a crap game that provides a context for understanding how such violence could occur:

Office had the dice when I walked up. He was shivering the dice and sliding them out expertly.
"Hah! good dice is findin' de money! Six is mah point."
"Whut's yo' come bet?" Blue asked.
"Two bits."
"Two bits you don't six."
Office picked up the dice stealthily, shook them, or rather failed to shake them craftily and slid them out. Blue stopped them. Office threw three times and three times Blue stopped them. Office took out his switchblade and glared at Blue.
"Nigger, don't you stop mah dice befo' dey point."
"You chokin de dice. Shake and lemme hear de music."

Thus, blues people like the persona lived with the specter of violence hovering over them like dark rain clouds.

As the persona's song progresses, he describes the dissolution of his family that has presumably occurred as a result of his imprisonment. His daughter now works on "Fifth street" as a prostitute; his son "done" left home; and his wife is "in the ward" awaiting the birth of a baby who will never know his/her father. When he shifts the focus to his own condition, he displays stoicism.
Unlike John Thomas, the persona is the author of his own narrative. As Mark Sanders says, "The immediate impulse is toward survival, not resignation. By crafting a form that reshapes and recasts oppressive conditions, the speaker assumes a fundamental control over them and ultimately over his own life."  

While the vast majority of blues songs were not overtly political, work songs often were. Jean Wagner writes that "the entire spirit of revolt is snuffed out and transcended, since it is seen as useless." But while Wagner is right to suggest the impossibility of physical revolt, he is mistaken in his assertion that his rebellious "spirit" has been killed. In practical terms, the persona understands that he is "doubleshackled" with a "[g]uard behin'." But he also understands that he is member of a colonized group:

White man tells me--hunh--
Damn yo' soul
White man tells me--hunh--
Damn yo' soul
Got no need, bebby,
To be tole. (52)

The persona, like John Thomas, is "cussed," but is allowed to live because he is willing to work like a mule. Unlike John, though, the persona can claim authority for his own experiences. As a singer, he uses song to confront the truth of his life: he is a sinner who cannot expect solace by going to heaven. Rather, he is a "Po' los' boy" "evahmo'." Thus, the music is not
simply a stimulant for work, but a blues song in work song form that allows the persona to maintain his sense of identity.

Brown's formal achievement in "Southern Road" deserves further comment. While it is true that Brown revises the work song form in general, it is also true that in "Southern Road" Brown riffs on particular work songs. Compare this verse to the stanza above:

Told my captain--hunh
Hands are cold--hunh
Damn yo' hands--
Let de wheelin' roll.27

Brown displaces the metonym "captain" with its referent "White man," and performs a chiastic maneuver, reversing subject and object. Brown also substitutes "soul" for "hands" to emphasize the cruelty of white authorities. Similarly, the phrase "po' los' boy" is a riff on "Poor Boy Long Ways from Home."28

Though Brown has been criticized for simplicity, Brown's experiments with song forms have been complicated enough to confuse some readers.29 Sterling Stuckey, for instance, has called "Ma Rainey" "perhaps the blues poem" (5). But while Stuckey is essentially correct, his statement must be qualified. "Ma Rainey" is not a blues poem in form. Unlike poems such as "Tin Roof Blues" or "New St. Louis Blues," "Ma Rainey" is not written in the standard AAB blues form—or even a variation of it. Rather, "Ma Rainey" is a blues-ballad.30 But while Big
Boy embodies the black cultural spirit, here there is no central character or point of view. Instead, Brown, in his attempt to depict the collective experience of blues people, varies the point of view, narrowing the focus as the poem progresses. Brown opens "Ma Rainey" by riffing on the travel song that bluesmen like Henry Thomas sang.

Here is a passage from "Railroadin' Some":

I'm on my way but I don't know where,  
Change cars on the T.P.,  
Leaving Fort Worth, Texas,  
Going through Dallas,  
Hello, Terrell,  
Grand Saline,  
Silver Lake,  
Mineola,  
Tyler,  
Longview,  
Marshall,  
Little Sandy,  
Texarama,  
And double back to Fort Worth31

Compare the opening of "Ma Rainey" listing the various regions of her audience:

When Ma Rainey comes to town,  
Comes to town,  
Folks from anyplace  
Miles aroun'  
From Cape Girardeau,  
Poplar Bluff,  
Flocks in to hear  
Ma do her stuff;  
Comes flivverin in,  
Or ridin' mules,  
Or packed in trains  
Picknickin' fools.... (62)

The success of the section rests, in part, upon Brown's fidelity to the vernacular. The term flivver is a slang for an inexpensive car. Here Brown creates a sort of onomatapoeic verb out of the noun.

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In the next section, Brown narrows the focus on the folk themselves. When filing into the hall, they converse among themselves, "jes' a-laughin an' a-cacklin', / Cheerin lak roarin water, lak wind in river swamps" (62). The similes are characteristic of African-American vernacular English, and help to create the lyricism that is the very stuff of the blues. Consider this blues couplet:

If you use my key, well you bound to love me some, Throw your arms around me like a circle around the sun."32

Or this metaphor from Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:

"If God don't think no mo' 'bout 'em then Ah do, they's a lost ball in de high grass."33

Whereas the first section lists the cities from which the people come, the second section reveals that despite their living in cities, the folk are forced to live in "river settlements" because the only work available is located in "blackbottom cornrows" and "lumber camps."

Brown's rhythmic devices are also important. In addition to showcasing a propensity for vivid imagery, the similes help establish a lyrical rhythm, and are characteristic of black folk expression. The repetitions of "An some" function in a manner similar to a riff chorus, setting the rhythm for the last stanza of the section:

An' some jokers keeps deir laughs a-goin' in de crowded aisles
An' some folks sits dere waitin wid deir aches and miseries
Till Ma comes out before dem, a-smilin' gold toofed smiles
An' Long Boy ripples minors on de Black an' yellow keys. (62)

When the focus shifts again, we find that the persona is a member of Rainey's audience: he / she reflects its worldview. Here the poem describes the role of the blues singer in the community.

O Ma Rainey,
Sing yo' song;
Now you's back
Whah you belong,
Git way inside us,
Keep us strong (63)

The persona's response is similar to that of a congregation member in church. S/he acts as a witness who has been touched by the spirit, and thereby testifies to the emotional truth of the song. Such responses are common in audiences of both sacred and secular music. When audiences consider a song to be particularly poignant, the people, as Jeff Titon points out, respond with "shouts of 'That's right' or 'Amen' or 'Tell 'em about it.'"³⁴ Rainey's ability to serve as a priestess for her community allows her to penetrate the people's exteriors and touch them spiritually, thereby providing catharsis that keeps them strong.

In the final section, the poet himself gives his own testimony to what Wynton Marsalis calls the majesty of the blues. Here Brown, in a gesture that exemplifies the best of blues music itself, fuses anecdote, a section
from "Blackwater Blues," and his own blues creation to illustrate how Rainey's music affects her audience.

I talked to a fellow, an' the fellow say, "She jes' catch hold of us, somekindaway. She sang "Backwater Blues one day: 'It rained fo' days an' de skies was dark as night, Trouble taken place in de lowlands at night.

Thundered and lightened an' the storm begin to roll Thousan' s of people ain't got no place to go.

Den I went an' stood upon some high ol' lonesome hill, An' looked down on the place where I used to live.'

An' den de folks, dey natchally bowed dey heads an' cried, Bowed dey heavy heads, shet dey moufs up tight an' cried, An' Ma lef' de stage, an' followed some de folks outside." (63)

There were many songs written about the flood of 1927. Seven hundred thousand people were homeless. In some places, the water level rose to sixty-five feet, engulfing whole townships. Houses, cattle and mules floated in the water. Brown uses the historical tragedy as source material to illustrate the emotional bond between Rainey--and by extension, blues singers in general--and her audience. "The blues singer," Paul Oliver writes, "turn[s] his eyes on the inner soul within and record[s] his impressions and reactions to the world without." Rainey's decision to interact with the people after the performance demonstrates her communion with them, and helps us to understand her ability to attract audiences from Cape Girardeau, Missouri to Mobile, Alabama.
What is most noteworthy about this section, however, is the complexity of Brown's riff on the blues form. Just as blues singers infuse passages of other songs into their own songs, Brown frames Rainey's blues with his own blues composition. The first three lines suggest both the early blues and the talking blues. Though there is no single repeated line, Brown employs the AAA rhyme scheme that marks the early blues. But the rhyme scheme is only a device for Brown's riff on the talking blues which is, as Harry Oster says, "semi-rhythmic speaking or a mixture of speaking and singing, accompanied by rhythmic guitar." Of course, in Brown's version, there is neither singing nor guitar. But the repetition and compression in the first and second lines, respectively, point unmistakably to a blues aesthetic.

Though Gabbin claims that Brown "incorporates Bessie Smith's popular "Backwater Blues," there is evidence to suggest that Brown does not so much incorporate Smith's song as riff on it. At least one quotation of Smith's song differs from the version in "Ma Rainey":

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{It thunders an' lightnin's an' the wind began to blow.} \\
\text{When it thunders an' lightnin's an' the wind begin t' blow,} \\
\text{There's thousands of people ain't got no place to go.}
\end{align*}
\]

Brown eliminates the first word of both lines. The stanza in Smith's text is composed in the standard twelve-bar structure, but Brown's version is comprised of couplets.
Brown's version also differs in tense. While Smith song is in present tense, Brown writes in past tense. Since the poem is a blues ballad, it is fitting that Brown uses past tense here because it is better suited for the narrative qualities of the ballad.

After his riff on "Backwater Blues," Brown returns to his talking blues riff. Here, however, in the most moving stanzas in the corpus of his poetry, Brown composes his own twelve-bar blues in the standard AAB structure. The first stanza is a portrait of African-American vernacular English. Notice the repetition of the subject and the /d/ sound instead of /th/. Like many of the best blues singers, Brown improvises in his repetition of the first line. The variation creates the illusion of an actual blues performance in which instrumentation is often employed in place of vocalization.

One of Brown's most important poems is "Strong Men" which signifies upon Carl Sandburg's "Upstream" by selecting the line "The strong men keep coming on" as his epigraph and then employing it as one of the riff choruses that set the rhythm in the poem. As Charles H. Rowell has pointed out, Brown adopts the cadence of the slave secular that catalogues the injustices of the slave experience:

We raise de wheat,
Dey gib us de corn;
We bake de bread,
Dey gib us de crust;
We peel de meat,
Dey gib us de skin;
And dat's the way
Dey take us in;
We skim de pot,
Dey gib us de liquor,
And say dat's good enough for nigger.41

Now compare the first section of "Strong Men":

They dragged you from homeland,
They chained you in coffles,
They huddled you spoon-fashion in filthy hatches,
They sold you to give a few gentlemen ease.

They broke you in like oxen,
They scourged you,
They branded you,
They made your women breeders,
They swelled your numbers with bastards. . . .
They taught you the religion they disgraced.

You sang:
  Keep a-inchin' along
  Lak a po' inch worm. . . .
You sang:
  Bye and bye
  I'm gonna lay down dis heaby load. . . .
You sang:
  Walk togedder chillen
  Dontcha git weary. . . .
  The strong men keep a-comin' on
  The strong men git stronger. (CP, p. 56)

Rather than writing exclusively in blues vernacular,
Brown employs blues devices to riff on the slave secular.
The cataloging, written in standard English, functions as
a call not unlike the repeated lines in blues lyrics. The
spirituals passages serve as responses. While the lines
beginning with "We" and "They" are alternated in the
slave secular, Brown varies the rhythm, making it more
complex by playing the catalog of racial injustices
contrapuntally against passages of spirituals.
It is appropriate that Brown selected excerpts from black music to describe the collective responses to victimization. In spite of the degradation, the people create songs that not only attest to their linguistic wit, but also testify to a mental toughness that allows the folk to endure. They have been "dragged," "chained," "huddled," "broke[n] ... in," "scourged" and "branded," yet they do not despair. Buoyed by their belief in sweet Jesus, the people cling to hope of a brighter future when they will not be forced to bear such "heaby load[s]."

When the focus shifts to (then) present day conditions, there is a stark contrast in the division of labor between whites and blacks. "They" act as supervisors, ostensibly skilled in the art of direction. The folk, on the other hand, act as little more than serfs who must "[d]rive so much before sundown."

Nonetheless, they maintain their dignity by taking pride in the work that they do:

You sang:
Ain't no hammah
In dis' lan',
Strikes lak mine, bebby,
Strikes lak mine. (56-57)

The speaker returns to the past in the next stanza in order to cite still more atrocities suffered by the people. But there is a subtle, yet telling, variation here:

They tried to guarantee happiness to themselves
By shunting dirt and misery to you. (57)
Whereas the speaker has previously spoken of contemporary occurrences or historical events, here he uses the term "tried." Brown suggests that class struggle is a dynamic phenomenon. Despite the concerted efforts of the Southern oligarchy to repress the people into psychological submission and thereby maintain economic and political power by buying "off" relatively affluent blacks, the people persist, engaging in haunting guffaws that attest to their will to survive:

They heard the laugh and wondered;
Uncomfortable,
Unadmitting a deeper terror ... (57)

The "deeper terror," of course, is that the measures taken by Southern whites are not sufficient to crush the spirits of the people—a fear that such persistence will lead to equality in spite of the myriad "Reserved For Whites Only" signs.

What is particularly interesting, though, is that the poem's protest of racism notwithstanding, Brown never mentions blacks categorically. Notice, for instance, that the "Strong men" refrain avoids direct reference to African-Americans. Granted, one can argue that, given the formal strategies of the poem, such a point is moot—that the speaker is clearly referring to blacks. However, while I do not disagree with this last point, it also seems clear that Brown is concerned with describing African-American colonization within the context of internationalism.
The complexity of Brown's experiments is perhaps most
clear in "Memphis Blues" wherein Brown analyzes the black
community's response to crisis by applying a blues
aesthetic to his fusion of secular rhyme, blues lyricism
and the sermon. The result is a sort of secular sermon
rendered in a blues modality: a blues-sermon. Using the A
B A form (that is, text, elaboration of the text, and
repetition of the original text) commonly found in
sermons, Brown creates a poem whose rhythmic qualities
recall the sermon, while adhering to a blues method. The
poem opens in secular rhyme, recalling a number of cities
that no longer exist:

Nineveh, Tyre,
Babylon,
Not much left
Of either one. (60)

Commonly associated with wickedness, the once great
cities are now "ashes and rust." The obvious implication
is that contemporary Memphis, which is associated with
the luxury afforded by the Southern elite, will
eventually undergo a similar fate, since the earlier
Memphis was destroyed "[i]n many ways." Thus, the speaker
harbors no illusions concerning the indestructibility of
"[d]is here Memphis":

Floods may drown it;
Tornado blow;
Mississippi wash it
down to sea--
Like the other Memphis in
History. (60)
In the second section, Brown employs call-and-response to riff simultaneously on both the blues and the sermon. It is important to recall that despite the black church community's antipathy toward blues music (Mahalia Jackson's refusal to sing blues lyrics for instance), blues musicians themselves not only described their performances in religious terms, they also infused spirituals into their songs. Moreover, given Brown's concern for the community at large, it is appropriate that he draws from various forms, since they correspond to different segments of the community. Brown's preacher is asked:

Watcha gonna do when Memphis on fire, Memphis on fire, Mistah Preachin man?

And he responds:

Gonna pray to Jesus and nebber tire, Gonna pray to Jesus loud as I can, Gonna pray to Jesus, oh, my Lawd! (60)

The speaker's call, as Stephen Henderson has noted, is a riff on well-known blues lyrics and other forms in the oral tradition. Compare these lines from Big Bill Broonzy:

Whatcha gonna do when the pond goes dry, honey?
Whatcha gonna do when the pond goes dry, babe, babe?
Whatcha gonna do when the pond goes dry?
Sit up on the bank and watch the poor things die, Honey, O babe o'mine.

While the call in the blues song is a riff-chorus, Brown inverts the pattern by using the riff-chorus as the response in which he worries the line three times. But
Brown skillfully creates a mini riff-chorus of his own in the call. The first line is repeated, in part, in the second line, which specifically addresses the preacher. After this process is repeated in the next five stanzas of the section, the poem achieves a musicality whose rhythm is based upon the improvisation of the first and third lines of each stanza.

As is the case in "Ma Rainey," Brown suggests that in addition to rampant racism, the folk must also contend with the forces of nature that are also beyond their control. And like Ralph Ellison's Trueblood, they will accept their painful fate, face it and continue to live in the manner that they had previously. The preacher will preach; the lover will love; the musician will play music; the worker will build buildings; the drinker will drink; and the gambler will gamble.

But since the people receive few of the profits that are accumulated by the city, they are indifferent toward Memphis. They are natives to American soil, but like the blues themselves, they are scorned by the dominant society and treated as foreigners. Brown explores this dynamic further in the last section of the poem, riffing simultaneously on the secular rhyme and the standard blues song:

Memphis go
By Flood or Flame;
Nigger won't worry
All de same--
Memphis go
Memphis come back,
Ain' no skin
Off de nigger's back. (60)

Though the lines are actually rhymed couplets, Brown shortens the lines to maximize their bluesy quality.

The ambiguity of the last two lines allows for several interpretations. On one hand, one might argue that the spirituals symbolize the eventual triumph of the forces of virtue over evil, symbolized by the now destroyed cities. On the other hand, one might argue with equal force that the speaker seems to be disillusioned with a Christianity that brings no life, no greenery, but only dust. Wagner offers another possibility when he says, "No doubt at times [the people] imagine God to be an ally, but this is mere illusion." While I do not disagree with Wagner's statement, I think he fails to consider the function of the spirituals in Brown's vision. Just as the spirituals lyrics in "Strong Men" illustrated the people's indomitable will to endure, so here Brown suggests that even after the day of reckoning, the folk will continue to fashion a life out of their living hell.

The fortitude that develops from surviving such an experience sometimes leads to boasting. The badman tales and toasts are variations of this phenomenon. Among blues singers, songs that boast of sexual potency are common. Sometimes, though, singers celebrate places. In "Kentucky Blues," Brown's persona celebrates Kentucky:
Yet "Kentucky Blues" is not, strictly speaking, a blues poem. While Brown certainly captures the tone and feeling of the blues song, it is important to note that Brown riffs on black vernacular and the ballad form, using the common four-line, a b c b rhyme scheme. At the same time, there is no heroism here—only irony. The persona confronts the hard truth of his life: he lives, like the characters in "Memphis Blues," in the midst of affluence, but receives few of its benefits. Yet there is neither bitterness nor indifference here, even though the persona is estranged from his own community:

- Women as purty
  As Kingdom Come,
  Ain't got no woman
  Cause I'm black and dumb. (50)

Brown shows the effects of living in a racist society. Though victimized by a caste system based upon skin color, the folk themselves have reproduced the very forms of repression that are responsible for their marginalization. One recalls the well-know rhyme: if you're yellow, you're mellow / if you're brown, stick around / but if you're black, get back.

Brown's achievement in "Kentucky Blues" is that he does not romanticize his persona. Rather, Brown allows him to speak in his own blues language so that we can see
his contradictions. Note this parody of "The Lord's Prayer":

I cried, Lord, my father, Lord, eh, kingdom come.
I cried, Lord, my father, Lord, eh, kingdom come.
Send me back my woman, then 'thy will be done.48

Brown's persona is surrounded by blues-inducing predicaments. He lives in state where "[t]horoughbred horses" are common, but he owns "nothin / But a dam' jackass." There is corn and tobacco aplenty, but he "Can't raise nothin" on his own barren soil. He is even without a "Man O' War," i.e., a good buddy. Consequently, he, like the speakers in many blues songs, turns to alcohol:

De red licker's good,
An' it ain't too high,
Gonna brag about Kentucky
Till I die.... (50)

Blues people like the persona, Paul Garon points out, "seized upon [drugs] as weapons against the horrors of human existence, and as means for dealing with such conflicts."49 While this strategy obviously led to other problems, we must recall that one of the primary functions of blues music involves providing a means of acquiring and/or imposing emotional control in relation to one's experiences. The alcohol thus assists the persona to laugh at his own powerlessness. Embued with the sensations of his "red licker," he can find amusement in the blues line "looking up at down"50 because he identifies with the speaker in the song.

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The "Kentucky Blues" persona's use of alcohol helps him to laugh at himself and thereby create a sense of escape from his harsh living conditions. Oftentimes, though, black Southerners expressed a desire for leaving the South. In 1903, W.C. Handy heard these early blues lyrics:

Goin' where the Southern cross the Dog.
Goin' where the Southern cross the Dog.
Goin' where the Southern cross the Dog. 51

But there was also disenchantment with urban life:

Got the freight train blues. I've got these box cars on my mind.
Got the freight train blues. I've got these box cars on my mind.
I'm gonna leave this town because my man is so unkind. 52

In "Tin Roof Blues," Brown captures the tone and spirit of the blues by riffing on the standard twelve-bar blues form, simultaneously revising the lyrics of "Yellow Dog Blues" and infusing the sentiments expressed in "Freight Train Blues" into his own blues verse:

I'm goin' where de Southern crosses top de C. & O.
I'm goin' where de Southern crosses top de C. & O.
I'm goin' down de country cause I cain't stay here no mo'. (92)

Just as many runaway slaves expressed disenchantment with life in the North, so Brown's persona has discovered that the North is not the mythical Canaan. While the material conditions and wages are more favorable, the persona feels nonetheless powerless. The rampant corruption--the numbers game and other institutions of the tenderloin--is dirty and confusing. Therefore, despite the abject
poverty of living in shacks covered with tin roofs, it is
at least a style of "livin' what a man kin understand."
Contemplating his/her destination, the persona looks at
the curves of the railroad, but thinks instead of the
curves of a familiar river and the friendly people who
live nearby:

Goin' where de Norfolk Western curves jes lak de
river bends,
Goin' where de Norfolk Western curves jes lak de
river bends,
Goin' where de people stacks up mo' lak friends.(92)

Like "Tin Roof Blues," "New St. Louis Blues" is also
written in AAB stanzas. The poem consists of three
separate but related poems entitled "Market Street
Woman," "Tornado Blues" and "Low Down." But whereas "Tin
Roof Blues" reflects the personal quality of blues music,
the persona of "New St. Louis Blues" is largely a
detached observer. In fact, the persona does not refer
directly to himself until the fourth stanza of "Low
Down," the last sub-poem of "New St. Louis Blues." In
"Market Street Woman," the tone is almost clinical:

Market Street Woman is known fuh to have dark days,
Market Street Woman noted fuh to have dark days,
Life do her dirty in a hundred ornery ways. (68)

Though the persona speaks in African-American vernacular,
which of course is not associated with analysis, s/he is
nonetheless a sort of social critic whose lyrics provide
a case study of a prostitute.

Though Gabbin sees little experimentation in "New St.
Louis Blues,"53 it is important to note that the mood of
detachment, as Henderson points out, is itself an innovation. In addition, Brown riffs on two well-known blues songs: W.C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues" and Elzadie Robinson's "St. Louis Cyclone Blues." In "St. Louis Blues," the speaker laments the loss of her lover:

```
St. Louis woman wid her diamon' rings
Pulls dat man aroun' by her apron strings
'Twant for powder an' store-bought hair
De man I love would not gone nowhere
```

In "New St. Louis Blues," the seductive "St. Louis woman" who is the object of the speaker's scorn becomes the aging "Market Street Woman" who is the focus of Brown's poem:

```
Put paint on her lips, purple powder on her choklit face,
Paint on her lips, purple powder on her choklit face,
Take mo' dan paint to change de luck of dis dam place. (68)
```

Note the "powder" images and the objection to artificiality in both passages. But while the woman in "St. Louis Blues" exerts power via physical beauty, the aging "Market Street Woman" has no autonomy. As in "Tin Roof Blues," Brown suggests that urban life promotes little emphasis upon intrinsic values. The "Market Street" image, of course, suggests exploitation. Like her slave ancestors, she is a commodity whose value is based upon sexual performance.

However, despite Brown's achievement in adapting the standard blues form to a quasi sociological analysis, the mood of detachment raises questions of gender
representation. Unlike the persona of "Kentucky Blues," who expresses his own illusions which, in turn, provide readers and listeners with an index to his decision-making process, the "Market Street woman" does not speak for herself. We know nothing of her own perception of her admittedly limited options in the St. Louis marketplace. Rather, Brown traps her within a presumably male narrative. Hence, the insensitivity of the line: "Gettin' old and ugly, de sparks done lef' her eye." Though the persona sympathizes with her and objects to the social conditions caused by "Market Street," he is unable to question the very logic that is responsible for her exploitation. Like the pimps and johns who inhabit her world, he is also blind to her intrinsic beauty.

In "Tornado Blues," the second poem in the trilogy, Brown suggests that, in addition to problems caused by racism and class privilege, the folk must also struggle against nature itself:

| De Black wind evil, done done its dirty work an' gone, |
| Black wind evil, done done its dirty work an' gone, |
| Lawd help de folks what de wind ain't had no mercy on. (68) |

While the intersection of these issues is implied in "Ma Rainey," Brown resorts to personification of powerful natural forces to dramatize his idea in "Tornado Blues." In addition to the evil "Black wind," the people must grapple with "Destruction," "Fear," "Death" and "Sorrow." Also like "Ma Rainey," Brown employs the communal voice:
Newcomers dodge de mansions, and knocked on de po' folks' do',
Dodged most of the mansions, and knocked down de po' folks' do',
Never know us po' folks so popular befo'-- (68)

While it is obvious that natural catastrophes do not occur by design, Brown's point is that, since the storm most affected "de Jews an' us," it appears so to the people. Thus, Brown seems to call attention to inadequate material conditions. Because of their poverty, the folk cannot afford to build structures that can withstand the horrific weather. Even worse, their meager funds are not sufficient to pay mortgages and insurance premiums, and they lose "de homes we wukked so hard for."

Thus, it is appropriate that Brown selected the phrase "Low Down" as a title for the concluding poem of the trilogy. Low down evokes the common blues phrase: low down dirty shame. Of course, the suggestion is that shame should be heaped upon members of the ruling class who are responsible for the persona's condition. Though he cannot fathom a reason, he feels certain that "some dirty joker" has put a "jinx" on him, and suggests that the game of life in which he competes is unfair; the odds are stacked against him:

Dice are loaded, an' de deck's all marked to hell,
Dice are loaded, de deck's all marked to hell,
Whoever runs dis gamble sholy runs it well. (69)

One detects a clear undertone of protest against capitalism and its doctrine of competition within the
context of free enterprise. The gambling-house metaphor is apt. It is impossible for the persona to win, that is, make and accumulate money. Thus, Brown refutes the Horatio Alger myth. Unable to "pull himself up by his bootstraps," the persona's place at the bottom of the American socio-economic hierarchy seems more firmly entrenched everytime he casts his "Dice." Moreover, given the anonymity of the "dirty jokers," who "runs dis gamble," there are no open channels through which the persona might seek to alleviate his grievances. Hence, his bitter compliment to the "housemen" who oppress him so effectively.

The persona is the counterpart to the Market Street woman. His bones have become brittle in old age, and he is lonely. His woman has left him, and his "pa'dner," i.e. buddy, is in jail. Poverty prompts him to contemplate death:

So low down bummin' cut plugs from passers by,  
So low down bummin' cut plugs from passers by,  
When a man bum tobacco ain't much lef' to do but die... (69)

The persona's situation is exacerbated by a lack of refuge. Traditionally, the church has served this role, providing a new community for those who have lived a life of sin. Today it is still possible to hear congregation members refer to being "reborn." Even the church vernacular suggests communal values. Men are called brothers; women are called sisters. However, Brown's
position toward the black church is complex. Brown's father, Sterling Nelson Brown, was a minister. Born a slave in 1858, the elder Brown, whose autobiography is entitled *My Own Life Notes*, was a model of integrity. In addition to relating stories about his own father who refused to whipped without fighting back, Reverend Brown observed several debates in his church between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois. So the church was a strong presence in Brown's background. He does not object to Christian principles inscribed in the Ten Commandments, for instance, yet Brown viewed the church as a site where corruption is more often the norm than the exception. In "Low Down," Brown makes what is perhaps his most stinging attack upon the hypocrisy of the church:

> Church don't help me, 'cause I ain't got no Sunday clothes,
> Church don't help me, got no show Sunday clothes,
> Preachers and deacons, don't look to get no help from those. (69)

The persona rejects the church's hypocrisy. Despite its self-proclaimed mission as a saver of lost souls, the preachers and deacons are less concerned with spirituality than image. As a bluesman, the persona's antipathy toward the church community reflects the traditional schism between the black church and blues people.

At the same time, it should be noted that Brown understood that there were church members who identified
with poor sinners. In "Checkers," Brown riffs on the
ballad and African-American vernacular English to
illustrate how members of different segments of the
community sometimes compromised for the purposes of
fellowship. Mojo Pete, a prototypical badman who "Totes a
gat," i.e. a gun, and Deacon Cole meet on Saturdays at
the local barbershop to play checkers. When the game
begins, the "barbershop loungers" halt their exchanges of
"lies" to watch the "weekly war":

And although Pete
Won't cuss at all
The deacon's words
Aren't biblical.
"Pusson, what gits
In de jam youse in,
Better let somebody
Play what kin."
"Be not puffed up
With anything,
My son. Trust God,
An' watch yo' King!" (71)

Despite the truncated rhythm here, the interaction
between Pete and the Deacon suggests that ideological
differences between the church congregations and the
blues people did not prevent peaceful co-existence. More
fundamentally, the barbershop scene is a metaphor for the
cross-fertilizations between oral and aural performances
of the respective camps.

The "Lie" to which Brown refers in "Checkers"
requires conscious artistry. As with the black sermon,
many people may be attracted to the form, but relatively
few can develop the nuances and subtleties necessary to

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command the attention and respect of black audiences. In the late 1920s, Brown met a waiter in Jefferson City, Missouri who provided a basis for one of Brown's most significant achievements: the introduction of the "lie" into modern literature with his series of Slim Greer poems. Of the persona in these poems and their real-life original Brown remarks, "He says I owe him some money because I shouldn't have taken his name." In a maneuver that is typical of his creative process, Brown riffs on the "lie" and the ballad simultaneously, employing the latter as a mold to give shape to Brown's hilarious narrative.

Talkinges' guy
An' biggest liar,
With always a new lie
On the fire

Tell a tale
Of Arkansaw
That keeps the kitchen
In a roar; (77)

Thus Brown describes one of the most effective psychic weapons that African-Americans have developed in America: the ability to laugh at the absurdities of Jim Crow society. Slim is especially funny because he can "lie" with a straight face about "passing" for white in Arkansas even though he is "no lighter / Than a dark midnight."

After he meets a white woman who thinks he is "from Spain / Or else from France," Slim is discovered by a
"Hill Billy" who, upon hearing Slim playing blues on the piano, immediately suspects that Slim is an imposter:

   The cracker listened
   An' then he spat
   An' said, "No white man
   Could play like that...." (78)

The irony here is humorous yet cutting. The suggestion, of course, is that blues music is an African-American expression. However, in order to make certain that Slim is black, i.e. a "Nigger" and therefore devoid of any claim to civilization, the "Hill Billy" must cling to a sort of constructed ignorance. By suggesting that whites and blues music are mutually exclusive, the "cracker"59 traps himself into a logic in which artistic incapability constitutes a badge of racial superiority.

   The humor reaches a climax when the white woman, having been tipped off, now also suspects Slim:

   Crept into the parlor
   Soft as you please,
   Where Slim was agitatin'
   The ivories.
      Heard Slim's music--
      An' then, hot damn!
      Shouted sharp--"Nigger!"
      An' Slim said, "Ma'am?" (78)

The woman gives Slim a cultural test by calling him "Nigger" to find out whether he responds in a conditioned way. When he responds instantly, he reveals his identity, thereby failing the test. Consequently, he must now use speed, one of the traditional attributes of black tricksters, since he can no longer use wit as protection.
"Slim Lands a Job?" dramatizes the contradictions between black workers and the Southern aristocracy by mocking the outrageous expectations that were often required of the workers. After Slim has inquired about a job, a huge, six-foot tall, gun-toting employer named Big Pete asks Slim if he can wait tables. After Slim answers affirmatively, Big Pete demonstrates his expectations of his workers, expressing his intolerance for black workers whom he considers slothful:

Don't 'low no slow nigger
Stay 'round heah,
I plugs 'em wid my dungeon!
    An' Slim says, "Yeah?" (79)

But Slim changes his mind about the job after observing the ridiculous demands that Big Pete places upon his workers:

A noise rung out
    In a rush a man
Wid a tray on his head
    An' one on each han'

Wid de silver in his mouf
    An' de soup plates in his vest
Pullin' a red wagon
    Wid all de rest.... (79)

Slim's question signifies his unwillingness to submit to slave-like labor and docility. Though he cannot openly express the disdain he feels for Big Pete, his response—and his subsequent narrative—exemplifies the irrepressible spirit of the black liar. "[R]ooted in the tradition of masculine boasting[,] [t]hese wisecracks," writes Henderson, "also illustrate hyperbolic
imagery ..." 60 Observe the cockiness of the persona in this secular rhyme that Brown quotes in Negro Poetry and Drama:

I seen Solomon and Moses
Playing ring around the roses ...
I seen King Pharaoh's daughter
Seeking Moses in de water ...
Seen Ole Jonah swallowin' de whale
And I pulled de lion's tail;
I've sailed all over Canaan on a log.61

Of course, it must be emphasized that black women also have their great tradition of liars. Henderson's comments regarding masculine boasting really call attention not a gendered activity but to a particular style of lying across the African-American community.

"Slim in Atlanta" employs humor to expose the ludicrousness of the Jim Crow legal system. However, unlike "Slim Lands a Job?," "Slim in Atlanta" also pokes fun at the black masses who repress their natural emotions in order to comply with a series of laws that "keep all de niggers / From laughin' outdoors." The laws reach a pinnacle of absurdity when one discovers the stipulation the Southern aristocracy has established for blacks who wish to laugh outside their homes:

Hope to Gawd I may die
If I ain't speakin' truth
Make de niggers do deir laughin'
In a telefoam booth. (81)

The disclaimer in the first line is a formula that liars use to increase the effectiveness of their performance. The ability of the liar to provoke a response with a line
such as "I ain't lyin" increases in proportion to the outrageousness of the "lie."

Though he is no revolutionary, Slim is certainly a rebel. His very perception of the social conditions in Atlanta pose a threat to the "rebs" who warn him that the penalty for disobeying the laughter-laws is death. But when he is pointed to a booth, and sees the spectacle of "a hundred shines" "In double lines," Slim is unable to contain his laughter:

Slim thought his sides
Would bust in two,
Yelled, "Lookout everybody,
I'm comin' through!"

Pulled de other man out,
An' bust in de box,
An' laughed four hours
By de Georgia clocks. (81)

Slim is eventually escorted out of town when the state pays the railroad for the expenses: "Den things was as usural / In Atlanta Gee A."

In capturing the language and psyche of characters such as Slim Greer and Big Boy, Brown inaugurated full blown modernism in African-American poetry. Informally dubbed the Dean of African-American literature during his lifetime, Brown studied such poets as Walt Whitman, Edward Arlington Robinson, Carl Sandburg, Robert Frost, Amy Lowell and Edgar Lee Masters. But like the musicians who created the spirituals and blues, Brown transformed these poets, and shaped an art based upon the black oral tradition. Though poets like Langston Hughes (as we shall
see in chapter 5), Margaret Walker, and Brown's protege, Sherley Anne Williams would later revise Brown's version of modernism, Brown's *Southern Road* constituted a monumental achievement upon which to build.
NOTES


4 See David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, p. 192.


15 Joanne V. Gabbin, Sterling A. Brown: Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition (Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 1985), p. 159. All further references to this text will appear in the text.


17 Sterling Brown, "Negro Characters as Seen by White Authors," p. 73.


20 Paul Oliver, Blues Fell This Morning, pp. 192-96.


32 Paul Oliver, Blues Fell This Morning, p. 282.
33 Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God, p. 16.
34 Jeff Todd Titon, Early Downhome Blues, p. 21.
37 Paul Oliver, Blues Fell This Morning, p. 278.
39 Joanne V. Gabbin, Sterling A. Brown, p. 159.
40 Paul Oliver, Blues Off the Record, p. 19.
46 Jean Wagner, Black Poets of the United States, p. 490.
47 David Evans, Big Road Blues, pp. 135-36.
49 Paul Garon, Blues and the Poetic Spirit, pp. 91-92.

52See Stephen Henderson, "The Heavy Blues of Sterling Brown," p. 34.


56It is interesting that Brown, writing in the 1930s, anticipates a line from the Soul group The Temptations almost forty years later: ". . . so low you can't get under it."


59It is interesting to note that the Atlanta semi-pro baseball team adopted The Crackers as its monicker.


CHAPTER 5

EPISTROPHY: OR, THE PERFORMANCE OF CULTURAL
(RE)MEMORY IN LANGSTON HUGHES'S
MONTAGE OF A DREAM DEFERRED

Having examined Sterling Brown's riffs on vernacular forms, we can now observe the next phase in the development of blues poetics by examining Langston Hughes's Montage of a Dream Deferred. Like Brown's Southern Road, Montage of a Dream Deferred captures a fighting spirit produced, in part, by the effects of war. Just as World War I created a labor shortage, World War II caused a vacuum that was filled by black migrants who poured into America's urban centers. Like their counterparts a generation earlier, the migrants of the 1940s sought jobs and a fulfillment of their hopes and dreams. However, life in urban America was far from idyllic. Though the war brought the end of the Depression, tensions were still high. There were riots in Detroit and Harlem in 1943.

This militant spirit, as Eric Lott points out, was reflected in styles that were by-products of the larger hipster culture of the 1940s. Working-class youths donned zoot suits, and created their own jargon. Bebop musicians refused to conform to the Satchmo-like image of the grinning entertainer, and insisted that audiences treat them as artists. As drummer Kenny Clarke said, "There was a message [to black people] in our music. Whatever you go into, go into it intelligently." For bebop musicians,
musical eloquence and sophistication were most
effectively expressed in what Lott calls "an aesthetic of
speed and displacement—ostentatious virtuosity dedicated
to reorienting perception even as it rocked the house."3

The demands for social change that bebop expressed
sonically elicited hostile responses from mainstream
institutions. Eric Porter notes4 that Los Angeles radio
station KMPC referred to bebop as "hot jive" and banned
it from its airwaves. *Time* magazine misrepresented the
music by de-emphasizing its artistic qualities and
associating it with drugs, impudent jargon and suggestive
lyrics.5 That Hughes recognized the political
implications of bebop is clear from a passage from
"Simple on Bop Music":

"Everytime a cop hits a Negro with his billy, that
old stick says, 'BOP! BOP!... BE-BOP!... MOP!... BOP!' And that Negro hollers, 'Ooool-ya-koo!
Ou-o-o-o-!' "Old cop just beats on, 'MOP! MOP!... BE-BOP!
MOP!' That's where Be-Bop came from, beaten right out
of some Negro's head into them horns and saxophones
and guitars and piano keys that plays it."6

The statement by Simple suggests that there is a direct
relationship between black music and political
conditions. As Lionel Hampton has said, "Whenever I see
any injustice or or any unfair action against my own race
or any other minority groups Hey Ba Ba Rebop stimulates
the desire to destroy such prejudice and
discrimination."7
Yet when he wrote for a children's book without the mask of a fictional character, Hughes de-emphasized any political underpinnings of bebop:

Sometimes for fun, singers sing "oo-ya-koo" to boppish backgrounds today, as Cab Calloway in the 1930s sang "hi-de-hi-de-ho-de-hey," meaning nothing, or as Lionel Hampton sang "hey-baba-re-bop" in 1940, or as Louis Armstrong used to sing "scat" syllables to his music in Chicago in the 1920s, or as Jelly Roll Morton shouted meaningless words to ragtime music in the early 1900s ... for fun. Nonsense syllables are not new in poetry or music, but they are fun.8 (my italics)

Though the glaring contrast between the two statements suggests that Hughes was disingenuous, the word "fun" is an index to the very stuff of blues music. Its incantational quality and its ability to inspire humor in the face of adversity is the basis of its opposition to the status-quo. While Hughes appears to have contradicted himself, he actually described two distinct albeit related aspects of the blues idiom.

That bebop informed the fabric of Montage of a Dream Deferred is clear from Hughes's prefatory statement:

In terms of current Afro-American popular music and the sources from which it has progressed--jazz, ragtime, swing, blues, boogie-woogie, and bebop--this poem on contemporary Harlem, like be-bop, is marked by conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms, and passages sometimes in the manner of the jam session, sometimes the popular song, punctuated by the riffs, runs, breaks, and distortions of the music of a community in transition.9

But bebop presented a formidable artistic challenge for Hughes. He had already riffed on blues lyrics and the black speaking voice in Weary Blues and Fine Clothes to
the Jew, and Brown had experimented even further with riffing in *Southern Road*. But since bebop was primarily an instrumental music, Hughes could not transcribe its sound onto the page. Though Hughes believed that music was an important index to the souls of black folk, by 1948 he understood the potential of the montage form to capture the full panorama of African-American culture.

Since he was no longer bound by lyrics or voice, Hughes could visually represent the culture of Harlem. The shifting sequences of the montage allowed Hughes to resolve a presumed opposition between visually oriented modern poetics and the black oral tradition. As Craig Hansen Werner has suggested, one can argue that *Montage* actually reflects the principles of imagism in Ezra Pound's doctrinal statement:

1. Direct treatment of the "thing," whether subjective of objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.

Hansen comments that given Pound's emphasis upon musicality, "the absence of any explicit mention of the visual arts ... would seem to suggest an underlying compatibility between imagism and Afro-American aesthetics."

However, Pound's reference to the metronome suggests an antipathy toward repetition. Therefore, while I agree with the thrust of Werner's statement, it is important to understand that many blues
poets perceive repetition as a device to enhance the effectiveness of "the musical phrase."

As Pound had done in his *Cantos*, Hughes conceived *Montage* as one long poem comprised of a series of short poems. But like Theolonius Monk's blues approach to the piano, Hughes, in a brilliant performance of cultural (re)memory, created a vernacular version of modernism to capture a transitional moment in Harlem. *Montage* has been described as a linguistic jam session in which disparate points of view are juxtaposed. However, while it is important to remember the musical aspects of *Montage*, it is equally important to underscore Hughes' visual experiments. Thus, I want to suggest that *Montage* should be read as a multifaceted text in which Hughes employs film techniques as devices to simulate the role of a bebop orchestra leader like Billy Eckstine, whose bands included such musicians as Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis and Sarah Vaughan.

At times, Hughes performs cultural (re)memory by repeating terms of (re)memory or simulating blues techniques. I call this method of repetition epistrophy, which recalls Thelonius Monk's classic composition "Epistrophy" which relies heavily upon repetition. But while the term epistrophy is related to the Standard English word epistrophe which refers to the repetition of strophes, my metaphor, based upon Monk's unconventional ideas (note his spelling of the word epistrophe), refers
more generally to Afro-modernist\textsuperscript{15} poetry. Just as Monk conceptualized modernism as a revision of sanctified church music,\textsuperscript{16} so Hughes envisioned modernism as a fusion of oral forms and modernist techniques, creating what Art Lange calls "word pictures."\textsuperscript{17}

\textit{Montage} includes fragments of various discourses, including journalistic commentaries, newspaper headlines, commercial advertisements, aphoristic statements and epistolary writing. In addition, \textit{Montage} includes riffs on vernacular forms, such as African-American urban speech (including bebop jargon), ballads, blues, folk rhymes and bebop itself. At times, Hughes replicates camera shots to create the illusion of actual sites in Harlem. For instance, in "Neon Signs," Hughes repeats the names of several marquees:

\begin{verbatim}
MINTON'S
(ancient altar of Thelonius)
.
.
.

MANDALAY
Spots where the booted and unbooted play
.
.
.

SMALL'S (397)
\end{verbatim}

In "125th Street," Hughes employs imagistic techniques to revise stereotypical images and illustrate the beauty of the people:

Face like a chocolate bar
full of nuts and sweet.

Face like a jack-o'-lantern,
candle inside.

Face like a slice of melon,
grin that wide. (407)

Most often, though, Hughes interweaves these forms around the phrase "a dream deferred" that reflects Hughes's belief that African-Americans have been consistently denied opportunities in America. The phrase "a dream deferred" is repeated intermittently throughout Montage, and functions as a riff chorus for the entire poem. At the same time, Hughes replicates the shifting sequences of the montage to approximate the AB pattern in music. Hence, many poems that evince no formal relationship to the black oral tradition are informed by an internal intertextuality that simulates the call and response method of blues music.

Hughes complements his dream motif by using the American class struggle as a sub-text. In "Ballad of the Landlord," Hughes blends film techniques with a riff on the ballad form. Unlike Sterling Brown's riffs on the ballad in Southern Road, Hughes's revision is not an attempt to render a mimetic portrayal of the form. Rather Hughes attempts to convey a sense of the form to readers, so that he could use it unapologetically as a weapon of propaganda like American folk music in the 1930s. The ironic title suggests the nature of Hughes's experiment with the ballad. In referring to the landlord, Hughes calls attention to the problem of authorship in cultural politics: from what and/or whose point of view does the
public view the opposition between workers and the ruling class? The poem begins with the speaker telling his apartment owner about the rundown condition of his apartment:

Landlord, landlord,
My roof has sprung a leak
Don't you 'member I told you about it
Way last week?

Landlord, landlord,
these steps is broken down
When you come up yourself
It's a wonder you don't fall down. (402)

Like Brown in "Odyssey of Big Boy," Hughes allows his character to speak for himself to create a more realistic effect than that afforded by the traditional form wherein the hero's experiences are narrated in third person. Unlike Brown's poem and the traditional ballads, though, Hughes's ballad is not a narrative of his character's life. Rather, Hughes's ballad focuses on a pivotal moment in the life of his character who is a laboring every(wo)man of sorts.

After demonstrating the legitimacy of the worker's complaint, Hughes cleverly describes the intensity of the owner's determination to maximize his profits. Hughes mediates the owner's reactions to the worker through his responses to the owner. In the process, Hughes exposes the ruling class's strategies of containment. First, the owner uses projection, and threatens eviction:

Ten bucks you say I owe you?
Ten bucks you say is due?
Well, that's Ten Bucks more'n I'll pay you
Till you fix this house up new.

What? You gonna get eviction orders?
You gonna cut off my heat?
You gonna take my furniture and
Throw it in the street? (402)

Then, after the worker threatens to "land [his] fist on"
the owner, the process of misrepresentation begins:

Copper's whistle!
Patrol bell!
Arrest.

Precinct Station.
Iron cell.
Headlines in press:

MAN THREATENS LANDLORD
TENANT HELD ON BAIL
JUDGE GIVES NEGRO 90 DAYS IN COUNTY JAIL. (403)

Hughes's shift to visual media is an excellent
performance of epistrophy. While many black poets summon
cultural (re)memory with allusions, Hughes, like John Dos
Passos in his USA trilogy, records the black cultural
experience in "Ballad of the Landlord." In so doing, he
extends the conventions of traditional ballads. Rather
than concluding when the police apprehend the worker,
Hughes continues the narrative by replicating camera
shots, literally illustrating the sequence of events. The
last line is especially poignant because it repeats
countless headlines of similar injustices.

At the same time, "Ballad of the Landlord" also
illustrates the mythology inscribed in the notion of
individualism. That is, the poem demonstrates that the
failure of marginalized groups in America to develop
broad coalitions has led to an impotent opposition. Trapped inside a logic that confuses machismo with radicalism, the speaker resorts to spontaneous violence that is utterly insufficient because the apartment owner is part of an entire system of individuals who work in concert, if not conspiracy, to thwart not only the tenant's efforts to seek redress but also any attempt to express sympathy for the conditions that precipitated the conflict.

If "Ballad of the Landlord" describes how the dream is deferred, "Projection" reflects Hughes's vision of how to begin the process of realizing the dream:

On the day when the Savoy
leaps clean over to Seventh Avenue
and starts jitterbugging
with the Renaissance,
on that day when Abyssinia Baptist Church
throws her enormous arms around
St. James Presbyterian (403)

Note the repeated terms of black cultural (re)memory. Hughes uses personification to maximize the effect of his imagery. For instance, the "enormous arms" image suggests both the heavy-set women in the congregation, as well as the influence wielded by the church. The Savoy Ballroom was a historic site for the development of African-American performance styles. It served as a musicological laboratory for Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonius Monk and others, and was the site of Gillespie and Parker's first collaboration. The phrase "Savoy / leaps" recalls the (re)memory of "Lester Leaps In" by
saxophonist Lester Young, an innovative Kansas City stylist who was a forerunner of bebop. More specifically, "Savoy / leaps" recalls the Lindy Hop dance that was performed at the Savoy Ballroom. As trombonist Dickie Wells recalls,

I used to watch those Lindy Hoppers throw those women all the way to the roof in the Savoy.... and grab 'em when they came down. And doing all the stepping, up they go again.20

Similarly, the jitterbug image evokes both the dance itself and the percussive rhythms of the bands to which the dancers performed. Hughes uses the term "jitterbugging" here as a metaphor for discourse, just as dance commonly serves as a device that facilitates dialogue.

To maximize the effect of his imagery, Hughes employs a riff chorus to simulate a "jitterbugging" music of his own. As the phrase "On the day" is repeated with variations, the poem accumulates emotional intensity which, in turn, increases the speaker's desire for unification:

On that day--
Do, Jesus!
Manhattan Island will whirl
like a Dizzy Gillespie transcription (404)

But while "Peace!" is "truly / wonderful," Hughes's dream of a unified African-American self ignores the tremendous problems that many marginalized groups encounter in their attempts to resist ruling hegemony. As Hughes himself demonstrates in "Parade," large segments of the black
elite can only envision black identity as a coffee-colored reflection of the colonizer.

In contrast to the folk-based nationalist construct in "Projection," "Parade" proposes the prospect of unification controlled by the black elite. The conspicuous lack of references to either boogie-woogie or bebop suggests a (pre)neo-colonial vision that rejects the sonic implications of blues music as well as the radical viewpoint of the worker in "Ballad of the Landlord":

Seven ladies
and seventeen gentlemen
at the Elks Club Lounge
planning planning a parade:
Grand Marshall in his white suit
will lead it.
Cadillacs with dignitaries
will precede it. (388)

The repetition of "planning" suggests the black elite's narcissism and its habit of ignoring the problems of the downtrodden. The cadillac and Elks club images imply a refusal to question the hegemony of the dominant culture. Though the black elite embraces the notions of freedom and democracy, this class can only conceptualize liberation as a quest for material luxury. Note the title "Grand Marshall," which signifies pomp and grandeur. The mission of the black elite, we see, is not to change society but rather to become part of the ruling oligarchy.
The black elite's rejection of blues music does not constitute a rejection of music per se, but the militarism implied in the regimented steps of the marching band reflects the group's intolerance of ideological difference. Hughes relies upon rhyme and repetition to establish his rhythm, but does not attempt to recreate the sounds of the band even though marching bands produce their own distinct sounds. Instead, Hughes uses monologue:

And behind will come with band and drum on foot ... on foot ... on foot ... (389)

The band and drum images suggest the instrumental music, and the repeated "foot" image suggests the percussive sounds of the band's steps.

The complexity of the problems intersecting race and class can be observed in the crowd's reaction to the parade. Though the entire affair has been underwritten by bourgeois politics, the procession creates an opportunity for black collectivity. As a result, it stimulate...
Hughes employs a method he introduced in 1926 in "The Cat and the Saxophone (2 a.m.)" in which he juxtaposes a dialogue between two lovers against the lyrics of a blues song. Here, as is in "Dead in There," Hughes uses short lines and stanzas to create a parade image by simulating film techniques. Hughes further demonstrates his effort to affect his readers visually by juxtaposing the parade image against a monologue.

Hughes again explores the intersection of race and class in "Low to High" and "High to Low." In the former poem, Hughes riffs on the black urban voice, and creates a character who presents a call to the more affluent segment of Harlem:

How can you forget me?
But you do!
You said you was gonna take me
Up with you--
Now you've got your Cadillac,
you done forgot that you are black.
How can you forget me
When I'm you? (411)

The passage is characteristic of epistrophy. Hughes infuses just enough of the traditional blues stanza to lend credibility to the speaker's painful sense of betrayal by the black middle class. Note the repetition of the first line, as well as the rhyme that ends lines...
five and six. The cadillac image signifies the luxury attained, in part, by constructing identities based upon an attempt to mirror the dominant culture and to de-emphasize any cultural connections to an African past.

"High to Low" is a response to "Low to High." Not surprisingly, there is no mention of racism. Yet the speaker suggests that the black working class has no monopoly on experiences of victimization. But in a manner that typifies the confusion of the black elite, the speaker mistakenly blames black workers for the problems that middle-class blacks encounter in their attempts to climb the American social ladder. The luxuries and relative economic security have produced a sense of arrogance that renders the speaker myopic to the implicit wisdom inscribed within the African-American working-class sensibility:

One trouble is you:
you talk too loud,
cuss too loud,
look too black,

the way you shout out loud in church,
(not St. Philip's)
and the way you lounge on doorsteps
just as if you were down South,
(not at 409)
the way you clown--
me, trying to uphold the race (412)

The ironic point of view arouses humor and facilitates Hughes's description of the speaker's ludicrous worldview. Note the repetition of the word "loud." The speaker is referring not only to noise. He is suggesting
that the former speaker's very style of life is ugly and
worthy of censure simply because of its departure from
the American norm—even though black workers have been
thwarted in their attempts to live a "normal" lifestyle.
Though the poem is humorous, it is important to
understand the absurdity of the speaker's vision. After
the Harlem riot in 1943, many "Sugar Hill" blacks
expressed disapproval because they felt that the riot
deterred social mobility.\textsuperscript{21}

The sensibility that produced the "loud" and raucous
behavior of Southern blacks evolved in America's urban
centers. The veneer of obsequiousness that was necessary
for survival in the rural South had little utility in the
cities. Stoicism gave way to hipness. And yet the riddle
of the zoot suit\textsuperscript{22} presented quite a problem for mid-
century black writers. Ralph Ellison analyzed hipster
style and behavior in \textit{Invisible Man}, but otherwise the
hipster was largely ignored. Like Ellison, Hughes also
understood the radical politics that were implicit in the
hipster's zoot suit and language. In his famous poem
"Motto," Hughes focuses on the hip new language, and
riffs on it to illustrate its beauty and describe the
worldview associated with it:

\begin{quote}
I play it cool
And dig all jive.
That's the reason
I stay alive.

My motto,
As I live and learn,
\end{quote}
is:
*Dig And Be Dug*
*In Return.* (398)

While "Motto" is seemingly innocuous, it is as oppositional as "White Man," a 1930s poem wherein the speaker asks the "White Man," "Is your name in a book / Called the *Communist Manifesto*?" (195). The speaker in "Motto" abides by a code of morality that is diametrically opposed to the constraints that the dominant class wishes to impose upon him. Since "cool[ness]" denotes tolerance, that is, the ability to "dig all jive," the moral code that is inscribed in the word "cool" constitutes a rebellion against exclusion.

At the same time, Hughes demonstrates that there are grave consequences to rebellion. In "Dead in There," the counterpoint to "Motto," Hughes uses typography and elegaic imagery to describe a funeral:

Sometimes
A night funeral
Going by
Carries home
A cool bop daddy.

Hearse and flowers
Guarantee
He'll never hype
Another paddy.

It's hard to believe,
But dead in there,
He'll never lay a
Hype nowhere! (399)

The short lines and stanzas accentuate the illusion of a funeral by simulating a camera shot. But while the late hipster receives a burial, it is noteworthy that his
epitaphist is not a preacher but rather a fellow hipster. The term "cool" is ironic in that it refers both to his death and to the hipster's lifestyle that was based upon "hyp[ing] / padd[ies]," that is, hustling whites out of money.

In "Children's Rhymes," Hughes uses dialogue between an older adult and children to describe the rift between the two generations and thereby provide a more in-depth depiction of the social transformations in Harlem. But whereas the militancy of the hipsters is merely implied in "Motto," the speakers in "Children's Rhymes" openly express a radical politics that they perceive in the hipster's attitude toward America's herrenvolk democracy:

When I was a chile we used to play,
"One--two--buckle my shoe!"
and things like that. But now, Lord, listen at them little varmints! (390)

The passage reflects a recurrent theme related to Hughes's dream deferral motif: the black oral tradition has served as a psychological device with which to respond to marginalization. Like Brown, Hughes believed that vernacular forms reflect the true consciousness of the people. The irony here, of course, is that the older speaker, whose speech attests to his participation in oral culture, expresses frustration at the children's ability to question the hegemony of Anglo-American narratives and create their own forms to confront the realities of their own era:
By what sends
the white kids
I ain't sent:
I know I can't
be President. (390)

As the poem progresses, the rhymes become more militant:

What's written down
for white folks
ain't for us a-tall:
"Liberty And Justice--
Huh--For All."

Oop-pop-a-da!
Skee! Daddle-de-do!
Be-bop!

Salt' Peanuts
De-dop! (390)

Notwithstanding the resentment toward the hypocrisy of racial discrimination, the passage is really a testimony to the vitality of the African-American oral tradition and its capacity to adapt to successive generations, providing creative outlets for emotions and ideas that cannot be expressed in officially sanctioned institutions like school and church.

The bop passage is equally effective in sound and script, and constitutes an excellent performance of cultural (re)memory. While the passage reads as an onomatopoeic illustration of urban vernacular, it is notable that "Salt Peanuts" and "Oop-pop-a-da" were among Dizzy Gillespie's first hit recordings, the latter being the first vocal. Gillespie later recorded "Ooop-pop-a-da" with Cuban conga player Chano Pozo, and demonstrated the internationalism implicit in the blues idiom.
Yet despite Hughes's eloquent celebration of orality, it must be pointed out that the speaker's rejection of traditional narratives is based upon a presumed opposition between orality and literacy. The conspicuous absence of a counterpoint to the poem undercuts the aesthetic premise of Montage itself, and suggests that Hughes discounted the possibility of a wrested literacy\textsuperscript{23} which, in turn, allows for the reactionary idea that literacy itself is rightfully the province of the dominant society.

Hughes's celebration of the oral tradition is also reflected in poems that riff on blues stanzas. Though none of the poems in Montage strictly follow the traditional three-line AAB stanzaic pattern of the twelve-bar blues, "Blues at Dawn" is a close resemblance. However, the poem is not a riff on the country blues songs that inspired Brown. Rather, "Blues at Dawn" is an illustration of the revised blues songs of the big city. "Blues at Dawn" actually has an AABA pattern. But like Brown in "Southern Road," Hughes breaks the third line in half to lend more aural power to its rhyme in scripted form:

\begin{verbatim}
I don't dare remember in the morning.
I don't dare remember in the morning.
If I recall the day before,
I wouldn't get up no more--
So I don't dare remember in the morning. (420)
\end{verbatim}

Although Hughes is effective in evoking a blues mood, one should note the language here. There are no apostrophes
to suggest the Southern black voice. Also, the word "recall" is a term that would not be used in country blues lyrics.

In "Same in Blues," Hughes employs four-line stanzas with a b c b rhyme schemes to simulate a jazz quintet. Each stanza is an expression of a distinct voice, so that the poem approximates the personal nature of the blues idiom and the capacity of the music to accommodate individual expression in a communal context. As the title suggests, "Same in Blues" describes the psychological impact of the dream deferral upon black workers by providing fragments of dialogues that illustrate how various people have been affected. Note the italicized passages that serve as a rhetorical basis for the dialogues that are interwoven around it:

I said to my baby,
Baby, take it slow.
I can't, she said, I can't
I got to go!

There's a certain
amount of traveling
in a dream deferred.

Lulu said to Leonard,
I want a diamond ring.
Leonard said to Lulu,
You won't get a goddamn thing!

A certain
amount of nothing
in a dream deferred. (427)

Hughes's best performance of epistrophy is perhaps illustrated in his "boogie" poems, as well as the poems that serve as a call and/or response to them. As Stephen
Tracy has pointed out, the term "boogie" refers to a specific dance step. However, the term can also refer not only to dancing but generally to travel as well. According to Tracy, Hughes's six "boogie" poems are composed around a boogie-woogie beat. However, I want to argue that, in the most aural "boogie" poems, Hughes incorporates the boogie-woogie beat within a larger jazz aesthetic to simulate a hybrid musical form. "Dream Boogie," the first poem in the series, provides a good example of how Hughes replicated the synthesizing formula of blues music. Hughes's simulation of hybridization in "Dream Boogie" constitutes a formal approximation of the reconstructive project that Hughes felt was necessary in real life. Boogie-woogie was primarily a music of piano and vocals. Pianists like Pete Johnson and Cow Cow Davenport and blues singers like Lonnie Johnson and Memphis Slim created an urban blues style that appealed strongly to newly arrived Southerners. In his own "boogie" performance, Hughes reconnects two divergent strands of the blues impulse by combining boogie-woogie images with bebop images, while replicating a bebop rhythm:

Good morning, daddy!
Ain't you heard
The boogie-woogie rumble
Of a dream deferred?

Listen closely:
You'll hear their feet
Beating out and beating out a-- (388)
The first stanza functions as a riff chorus that is repeated with variations throughout Montage. This is a particularly effective device because it inscribes within the very structure of the poem the repeated denials of opportunity to African-Americans. Hughes employs the riff chorus here just as jazz bands begin their tunes with a riff chorus. The dash functions like a break in jazz. The expected word, "beat," is not mentioned. Instead, another speaker interjects a question: "You think / It's a happy beat?" The suggestion is, of course, that the gaiety of black dance is a response to their harsh living conditions:

Listen to it closely:
Ain't you heard
something underneath
like a--

What did I say? (388)

Here the riff chorus, repeated with a variation, establishes a basis for another break that is signified again by the dash. This time the expected word is "rumble," which implies the brooding sentiments lurking beneath the surface.

It is also noteworthy that the dialogue between the two speakers functions like a duet. It is ironic, though, that the main speaker, who has called attention to the repressed anger, responds:

Sure,
I'm happy!
Take it away! (388)
And the second speaker complies:

Hey, pop!
Re-bop!
Mop!

Y-e-a-h! (388)

The speaker is a skillful interpreter of music; s/he grasps its subtle nuances, which allows him/her to discern the submerged anger that is suggested rhythmically. Nonetheless, sophisticated musical ideas do not necessarily lead to political consciousness.

Thus, Hughes points out the sharp distinction between the political implications of African-American vernacular culture, on one hand, and concrete political realities on the other. The speaker's refusal to answer the question directly indicates that his/hers is an emotive revolt. The music does not aim to change the political landscape. Rather, the "boogie-woogie rumble" is directed at an interior space in which an alternative sensibility can be developed.

The next "boogie" poem, "Easy Boogie," is framed by "Wonder" and "Movies." Hughes plays the images of each poem contrapuntally to simulate an antiphonal effect. First, Hughes replicates a camera shot in "Wonder" to capture the topography of nighttime Harlem:

Early blue evening.
Lights ain't come on yet.
Looky yonder!
They come on now! (394)

The combination of the "blue evening," light images and the speaker's announcement set the stage, as it were, for
"Easy Boogie." After the speaker says, "They come on now!" Hughes replicates a live performance of blues music. He does not, as in "Weary Blues," attempt to riff on the lyrics that accompanied boogie-woogie pianists. Rather, like the musicians who improvise upon the twelve-bar blues form, Hughes elaborates upon the AAB stanzaic structure. But whereas blues stanzas usually consist of three lines with four bars each, Hughes composes three four-line stanzas:

    Down in the bass
    That steady beat
    Walking walking walking
    Like marching feet.

    Down in the bass
    That easy roll,
    Rolling like I like it
    In my soul.

    Riffs, smears, breaks.

    Hey, Lawdy, Mama!
    Do you hear what I said?
    Easy like I rock it
    In my bed! (395)

All three stanzas have the same a b c b rhyme scheme. The first stanza establishes the call; the second stanza is both a variation of the first and a response to it; and the third stanza is a clear expression of the implicit statements in the first two stanzas.

In its celebration of blues instrumental music, "Easy Boogie" anticipates Jayne Cortez's "In the Morning." Also, "Easy Boogie" describes the dynamics of African-American performance within a specific historical and
artistic context. The phrase "Riffs, smears, breaks" approximates a break in jazz, and the walking bass image summons the (re)memory of the innovations in the rhythm sections of bebop bands. The repetition of the first lines in the first two stanzas is an artifice to lure readers into anticipating a repetition of the previous stanza. But as in "Dream Boogie," Hughes frustrates the reader's expectations, and shifts the focus to describe an audience member's emotional reaction to the music.

Part of the reason that blues music serves as a tonic against resignation is due to its incantational quality. In "Easy Boogie," Hughes describes blues instrumentalists' capability for conveying sonically what the following blues lyrics express in words:

> What makes my grandma love my grandpa so
> S'what makes my grandma love my grandpa so
> W' he can still hoochie coochie like he did fifty years ago!  

The word "rock" in the last stanza is a term of (re)memory. Here Hughes uses the word as a metaphor for sexual intercourse, just as blues singers begin verses with well known blues lines like, "Rock me baby, rock me all night long."

Hughes contrasts the soulful blues performance with the artificiality of Hollywood in "Movies." While the speaker in "Easy Boogie" is an informed auditor of blues performances, he and other blacks do not understand the conventions of Hollywood films:
Harlem laughing in all the wrong places
at the crocodile tears
of crocodile art
that you know
in your heart
is crocodile: (395)

The repetition of the "crocodile" cliche reinforces
Hughes's belief that Hollywood committed psychological
violence against black viewers.

"Boogie: 1 a.m." functions as a coda for "Low to
High" in that it depicts black working-class culture away
from the workplace and the auditorium. The title calls
attention to the percussive dance-beat rhythms that
boogie-woogie pianists played. As the main attractions at
blue-light, all-night pay-parties that began at one
o'clock,27 the pianists enjoyed sumptuous plates of food
at no cost. Depending upon the speciality of the host,
party-goers could enjoy, in addition to cake and/or ice
cream, a main entree of soul food, such as fried fish,
chitterlin's, hog maws, or gumbo.28

As in "Easy Boogie," Hughes revises the denotation of
"boogie" to include bebop by focusing upon a jazz rhythm
section and describing its capacity to "boogie." But
unlike the first two "boogie" poems, in "Boogie: 1 a.m."
Hughes does not present a musico-poetic replication of
blues music. Rather, he employs compressed imagery after
the riff chorus:

Good evening, daddy!
I know you've heard
The boogie-woogie rumble
of a dream deferred
Trilling the treble
And twining the bass
Into midnight ruffles
Of cat-gut lace. (411)

Having already replicated the sound of the walking bass in "Easy Boogie," here Hughes uses a "twining" image, combined with the alliteration of /t/ sounds to suggest the thumping sounds of the bass. The word "Trilling," which denotes alteration, implies antiphonal percussive sounds. Hughes contrasts the low note suggested by the "twining" bass image with the soprano sounds suggested by the "treble" to approximate an improvisation of his own blues performance within the larger blues modality of Montage itself.

As Tracy has noted, the lace and ruffle images operate on a dual level. On one hand, they suggest the trimmings of the people's Saturday-night attire. On the other hand, lace and ruffle are both verbs: lace denotes binding; ruffle denotes disturbance. As in "Dream Boogie," Hughes suggests that there is turmoil lurking beneath the surface. The fine clothes and mouth-watering food mask a "gut"-level reality that the "cat[s]," that is, the people, feel but do not understand. Their response is to dance through the wee hours of the morning to alleviate their pain.

In "Lady's Boogie," which is a counterpart to "Boogie 1 a.m.," Hughes shifts the focus to a middle-class black woman. Just as "Boogie 1 a.m." illustrates the psychology of black working-class culture, so "Lady's Boogie"
describes the false consciousness of a Sugar Hill black whose worldview complements the comments expressed in "High to Low." Unlike "High to Low," though, the speaker in "Lady's Boogie" is a member of the working class who criticizes a woman's cultural politics:

See that lady
Dressed so fine?
She ain't got boogie-woogie
On her mind--

But if she was to listen
I bet she'd hear,
Way up in the treble
The tingle of a tear.

_Be-Bach!_ (412)

The speaker's language contrasts with the woman's prim and proper image. The term "fine" and the incorrect subjunctive demonstrate his lack of formal education. But as a product of blues culture, the speaker has developed a sharp sense of wit. His ironic bebop pun constitutes a signifying riff on bebop lexicon that is directed at the "lady" and others who share her snobbish attitude.

Notwithstanding the humor, however, the poem is actually an appeal to middle-class blacks to challenge their presumptions about African-American identity. Hughes suggests that the "lady['s]" antipathy toward boogie-woogie stems from her reluctance to experience--even vicariously--the pain of black life. As a skilled listener, the speaker is aware that if well-to-do blacks really "listen[ed]" to boogie-woogie music, they would hear "The tingle of a tear." Yet they cannot because they
can only conceptualize black identity as a reflection of the dominant culture: hence, the reference to Bach.

The psychological impact of living in a society in which race is a metaphor for class oppression can be observed in "Nightmare Boogie," which is a response to "Passing." Passing is, of course, a term of black cultural (re)memory, and recalls a history of light-skinned blacks who have lied about their racial identity so that they may lead lives as whites. Here Hughes repeats the title of Nella Larsen's novel, Passing, and revises the traditional meaning to refer to elite blacks "who've crossed the line / to live downtown" (417).

After "Passing, Hughes penetrates the persona's psyche in "Nightmare Boogie":

I had a dream
and I could see
a million faces
black as me!
A nightmare dream:
Quicker than light
All them faces
turned dead white!
Boogie-woogie,
Rolling bass,
Whirling treble
of cat-gut lace. (418)

Though less fortunate blacks are trapped in a living-nightmare, the persona fears that all of his efforts to escape other blacks will be in vain if social barriers were to be removed. Though his language reflects his origins in African-American culture, he has become proficient in masking other signs of his cultural
identity. Thus, it is not surprising that the persona experiences his worst nightmare when poor, unlettered blacks turn "dead white." The death image is ironic. Though it is ostensibly a reference to skin color, the image really describes the persona's dejection. The boogie-woogie images suggest the difficulty that the persona has had in abandoning his cultural background. At the same time, though, the boogie-woogie images suggest the unfathomable prospect that the newly turned whites will continue to embrace African-American cultural forms, and thereby redefine the very notion of white America to which the persona has strived to belong.

"Dream Boogie: Variation" and "Hope" comprise the final pieces of the call-and-response pattern in the "boogie" series. In "Hope," Hughes directs the focus on an elderly couple. The ironic title calls attention to the couple's utter despair. Their poverty has compelled them to grapple with the contradictions between their hopes, on one hand, and the stark reality of their lives on the other:

He rose up on his dying bed
and asked for fish.
His wife looked it up in her dream book
and played it. (425)

Note the lack of grief. Rather than preparing plans for a funeral, the woman views her husband's death as a good omen, and attempts to get rich by gambling.
Like his artistic models who improvise upon a given musical theme, Hughes elaborates upon the graphic scene in "Hope." As the title suggests (note the similarity between "[h]ope" and "[d]ream"), Hughes shifts the focus to a boogie-woogie pianist who performs a musical interpretation of the image in "Hope." There is no hint of bebop here. The boogie-woogie pianist performs solo, and his music suggests neither dance nor sexuality—only pain from the dream deferred:

Tinkling treble  
Rolling bass,  
High noon teeth  
In a midnight face,  
Great long fingers  
On great big hands  
Screaming pedals  
Where his twelve-shoe lands,  
Looks like his eyes  
Are teasing pain  
A few minutes late  
For the Freedom Train. (425-26)

The pianist's physical features recall a long history of misrepresentation. But as in "125th Street," Hughes revises the Sambo stereotype. Whereas mythology de-historicizes the colonized people, Hughes's conclusion calls attention to America's history of slavery and segregation. The train metaphor is particularly effective. It invokes blues musicians' fascination with trains, replicating their sounds in their instruments. Hughes points up the tension of the situation in the contrast between the movement suggested by the train image and African-Americans' lack of social mobility.
Given the painful depictions of the dream deferral in "Hope" and "Dream Boogie: A Variation," one might expect Hughes to lighten the tone of Montage. However, in the next poem "Harlem," Hughes presents an imagistic illustration that complements the previous two poems:

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore--
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat? (426)

Note the precision of the imagery. The raisin metaphor is apt because it suggests both African-Americans' skin color and their history of toiling long hours under "ol hannah." Also, the raisin image recalls the whipped-scarred backs of the slaves who dared to resist the codes of slavery. The sore image calls attention to the indifference to the pain that blacks have endured. And the rotten meat metaphor reminds readers of the squalid conditions in which blacks have been forced to live.

In his conclusion, Hughes responds to the question that opens the poem.

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode? (426)

The explosion reflects Hughes's belief that America would continue to be plagued by riots until blacks receive justice. Unlike Haki Madhubuti's "But He Was Cool," however, Hughes does not define African-American identity in relation to an ability to commit violence. Rather,
Hughes asserts the right of the colonized to resist violently.

Hughes reinforces the effectiveness of his imagery with typographical experiments. By shaping the poem like an inverted missile, Hughes suggests that racial discrimination is comparable to a ticking time-bomb. Note the length of the first line, which suggests a base. The separation of the second stanza and third stanza creates the illusion of a tip, and Hughes's italics suggest an explosion.

But while Hughes presaged the violence of the 1960s, he understood that such mass resistance was not imminent in the late 1940s. Though some of the Harlemites understood that "the trains are late" (427) and that "there're bars at each gate," (427) many of the migrants were concerned primarily with economic survival. In "Letter," Hughes riffs on African-American epistolary writing to illustrate the naivete of many new migrants:

Dear Mama,

    Time I pay rent and get my food
    and laundry I don't have much left
    but here is five dollars for you
    to show you I still appreciates you.
    My girl-friend send her love and say
    she hopes to lay eyes on you sometime in life.
    Mama, it has been raining cats and dogs up here. Well, that is all so I will close.
    Your son baby
        Respectably as ever,
        Joe (429)

"Letter" can be read as an African-American counterpart to W.H. Auden's "Unknown Citizen." Joe understands that
he has not attained the dream, yet unlike the worker in "Ballad of the Landlord," he continues to believe in it. The irony of the poem lies in the contrast between Joe's patience and the reader's awareness of the futility of Joe's efforts to escape poverty.

The critical neglect of Montage by such noted critics as Larry Neal, Stephen Henderson and Henry Louis Gates constitutes an error of singular magnitude. Like Margaret Walker and Robert Hayden, Hughes addressed the conflict between the black oral tradition and modern literary conventions. However, the publication of Montage prefigured Sherley Anne Williams's Some One Sweet Angel Chile, and foreshadowed the beginning of a pre-future form in African-American poetry because it allowed Hughes to explore the possibilities of revising the notion of the poetic artifact.

It is not extraordinary that Hughes recorded much of Montage on an album entitled Weary Blues. Beat poets such as Kenneth Rexroth, Laurence Ferlinghetti and Bob Kaufman gained popularity from poetry readings with jazz in the 1950s. But when Hughes collaborated with bassist Charles Mingus, a major innovator of bebop music who composed and shaped material for the album, the two artists fused black oral and aural traditions, and anticipated the albums of Kalamu ya Salaam's album My Story, My Song and Jayne Cortez's performances with her own band. In fact, in an unwitting testimony to Hughes's achievement, Cortez
herself, without knowledge of Hughes's album, once selected poems from *Weary Blues* in a presentation of jazz and poetry in Los Angeles.\textsuperscript{32}
NOTES


2Kenny Clarke, quoted in Dizzy Gillespie with Al Fraser, To BE or not ... to BOP (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), p. 142.


8Langston Hughes, quoted in Sascha Feinstein, Jazz Poetry, p. 108.

9Langston Hughes, The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes, eds. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), p. 387. All further references to this work will be included in the text.


13Craig Hansen Werner, Playing the Changes, p. 163.


15I am borrowing Craig Werner's term here.


18See Dizzy Gillespie with Al Fraser, *To BE, or not ... to BOP* (Garden, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1979), pp. 118-35.


20Dickie Wells, quoted in Dizzy Gillespie with Al Fraser, *To BE, or not ... to BOP*, p. 67.


22I am borrowing Ralph Ellison's phrase here.


26Traditional blues verse, quoted in Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, p. 62.


30I am borrowing Jerry Ward, Jr.'s term here. Ward used the term at a presentation at the National Black Arts Festival in Atlanta in 1994.

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CHAPTER 6

BLUE NILE: OR, TAKING THE BLUES BACK HOME: 
THE INCARNATION OF SECULAR PRIESTHOOD 
IN THE POETRY OF JAYNE CORTEZ

When harpist Alice Coltrane joined John Coltrane's band, it was an important historical moment for black women musicians. Like Mary Lou Williams a generation earlier, Coltrane's achievements helped pave the way for contemporary women musicians like pianist Gerri Allen. While women had always been in the forefront of blues music as vocalists, few had opportunities to excel as instrumentalists. Yet Coltrane was unique in two major respects: first, she was married to the legendary saxophonist; secondly, she played an instrument that is still rarely featured in jazz bands. Similarly, Jayne Cortez listened to avant-garde black music while married to saxophonist Ornette Coleman. And like Coltrane, she, too, achieved success in a male-dominated art form. Of course, even during the Black Arts Movement women like Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez gained popularity as performers. But the tendency to define resistance in terms of violence privileged male poets who often implied that revolution was as imminent as the next thunderstorm.

Cortez was undaunted. Like Civil Rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer and Black Panther leader Elaine Brown, Cortez was determined to disrupt traditional assumptions about gender in political movements, and she forged her
poetry in the flames of struggle. Her first book, *Pissstained Stairs and the Monkey Man's Wares*, was published during the height of the Black Power movement in 1969. A year earlier, Martin Luther King was assassinated, and seventeen-year-old Black Panther member Bobby Hutton was killed in a shoot-out with Oakland police. Cortez's poetry reflects the revolutionary spirit of this period, and demonstrates her political commitment to resist colonization on an international scale.

Cortez's poetry demonstrates the full potentiality of blues poetics. Having examined riffing and the performance of cultural (re)memory, we are now prepared to observe how both methods can be utilized when a poet incarnates the blues musician. Cortez's development as a poet seems to coincide with a development of an internationalist worldview and an interest in Surrealism whose radical politics are quite compatible with the ideas of Black Arts theorists. Surrealists emphasize a correlation between consciousness and social action. Breton's idea of recovering one's psychic force by plunging into the depths of one's interior sounds similar to Haki Madhubuti's idea that liberation can only be achieved if black people "change [their] mind[s]." As Aldon Lynn Nielsen has pointed out, even though some surrealists were themselves racists, their 1933 statement in Nancy Cunard's *Negro* that "With [the white man's]
psalms, his speeches, his guarantees of liberty, equality, and fraternity, he seeks to drown the noise of his machine guns" prefigures much of Black Arts poetry. Though Andre Breton mistakenly assumed that all artists are products of the bourgeoisie, surrealists were committed to a "tenet of revolt, complete insubordination [and] sabotage according to rule." In addition, surrealists displayed an awareness of class oppression. Breton states: "It is up to us ... the poetry specialists, the art critics ... to move, as slowly as necessary ... toward the worker's way of thinking ..."^2

In its rejection of simplistic either/or oppositions, surrealism has allowed Cortez to fully realize Larry Neal's dream of a people's poetry. That Cortez has been neglected by Black Arts critics calls attention to the irony of Cortez's artistic achievement. While the nationalist vision of many Black Arts poets restricted their attention to African-American cultural forms, Cortez's interest in Surrealism is analogous to blues musicians' fascination with Western instruments. Just as black musicians discovered that they could create the effects they desired in music by applying oral techniques to Western instruments, so Cortez has employed Surrealism to enhance her blues aesthetic: hence, her fourth book is entitled *Mouth on Paper*.^5

More specifically, Cortez's poetic style exemplifies blues music's propensity for creolization in that it
blends surrealistic imagery with rhythms that usually riff on the black sermon form. Moreover, in establishing her own band with which she performs regularly, Cortez extends the musico-poetry tradition initiated by Langston Hughes. That is, Cortez blurs the distinctions between poetry and song by quite literally using her voice as an instrument, often employing vocal techniques that replicate those of blues singers and/or instrumentalists.

Thus, Cortez's experiments with blues music, the black sermon and surrealism have created a unique version of an incarnation of secular priesthood. The fusion of the sermon form with blues music is especially important, and deserves brief commentary here. Though the black church community has traditionally frowned upon blues music, it has not been uncommon for blues musicians to use church music as a basis for improvisation. Robert Johnson, for instance, wrote and sang a song entitled "Preachin' the Blues," and pianist Bobby Timmons's "Moanin'," which elaborates upon gospel music, is now considered a jazz classic. Similarly, the riff chorus that is employed in the call and response by black preachers and their congregations is a prominent feature in Cortez's poetry, and is usually employed as a variation of what Gerald Davis has called a formula set that "develop[s] from a key word, idea, or phrase in the lines immediately preceding the set." For set read riff chorus. Observe the following lines that Davis cites:
Churches everywhere
Churches in the basements
Churches on the street corner
Churches in the storefronts and in the garages
Churches in the dwelling house and
Churches in the synagogues
Churches everywhere
Churches on the air twenty-four hours a day
Turn on the air and you'll hear somebody preaching
    church

The key word here is, of course, "Churches," and the line "Churches everywhere" concurrently establishes rhythmic and rhetorical bases for subsequent lines.

At times, though, Cortez's key word or phrase is less obvious to readers. Nor does she always convert her key word or phrase into a riff chorus. In "For the Brave Young Students of Soweto," for instance, the riff chorus contributes more to the rhetorical import of the poem than its rhythm. Cortez celebrates the 1976 uprising by South African students by cataloging a series of images that function like a collage to describe the degradation of South African colonization. The issue of concern was the politics of language. Students marched in protest as a response to the government's order that Afrikaans be used as the language of instruction in the schools. After the police killed 13-year-old Hector Petersen by shooting him from behind, students rioted, boycotted and burned schools, and attacked police stations and the homes of black policemen.8

In the recorded version, the poem is introduced by a duet between muzette player Bill Cole and drummer Denardo
Coleman, Cortez's son. As the tempo of the drumming increases, the muzette fades, allowing for a brief drum solo before Cortez interjects with her own voice, using the line "when i hear your name" or a variation of it as her key phrase to draw parallels between various colonized groups. First, she implies a political interconnection between South Africans and African-Americans:

\[ Soweto \\
\quad \text{when i hear your name} \\
\quad \text{I think about you} \\
\quad \text{like the fifth ward in Houston Texas (44)} \]

Then she focuses on non-black colonized peoples to emphasize the global nature of colonization:

\[ \text{When i look at this ugliness} \\
\quad \text{and think about the Native Americans pushed} \\
\quad \text{into the famine of tribal reserves} \\
\quad \text{think about the concentration camps full of sad} \\
\quad \text{Palestinians (44)} \]

Unlike most Black Arts poets, Cortez does not describe racial hatred as the fundamental problem that colonized people face. Rather, she presents racism as a by-product of capitalism. And she points out that workers, as in all capitalist societies, are forced to perform the most difficult labor but are nonetheless deprived of the wealth thus produced. She envisions

\[ \text{two black hunters walking into the fire of} \\
\quad \text{Sharpeville} \\
\quad \text{into the sweat and stink of gold mines} \\
\quad \text{into your children's eyes suffering from malnutrition} \\
\quad \text{while pellets of uranium are loaded onto boats} \\
\quad \text{headed for France for Israel for Japan (44)} \]
The first line functions as a basis for rhetorical and rhythmic elaboration. In the succeeding lines, Cortez omits the phrase "two black hunters walking," and maintains the image by repeating the word "into" at the beginning of the lines. The reference to Sharpeville, where South African casualties numbered approximately two hundred fifty, including seventy killed, introduces the theme of violence that is developed later in the poem. Cortez's reference to Japan demonstrates the complexity of her vision. Although the Japanese have suffered from the devastation of the atom bomb, Cortez understands their role as economic imperialists.

The profits accumulated by the labor of the workers are used to develop and maintain policies and strategies that reify ruling class privilege. At the same time, however, Cortez illustrates a major distinction between class oppression and the conditions of darker-skinned workers in colonized situations. Whereas white workers suffer from problems created by economics and ideology, colonized workers must also deal with the horror of violence and the construction of mythologies that project savagery onto the colonized. It is apt, then, that Cortez employs the cataloging technique used in black slave seculars to describe the violence that undergirds the marginalization of colonized peoples. Note Cortez's use of the word "and" to link her lines together:
away from the river so full of skulls
and Robben Island so swollen with warriors
and I think about the assembly line of dead "Hottentots"
and the jugular veins of Allende
and once again how the coffin is divided into dry ink
how the factory moves like a white cane
like a volley of bullets in the head of Lummumba
and death is a death-life held together by shacks
by widows who cry with their nipples pulled out
by men who shake with electrodes on the tongue (44)

Although Africans have been stereotyped as blood-thirsty savages, Cortez uses the skull image and the references to the murders of Salvadore Allende and Patrice Lumumba to reverse the imposed image by suggesting the ruthlessness of colonizing regimes. The torture images in the last two lines also reflect the effects of white supremacist mythology, and recall the battle royale scene in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in which the nameless narrator and other black youths who are commanded to lunge for counterfeit money shake "like wet rats" because "[t]he rug was electrified."¹⁰ The hottentot image is particularly evocative in that the steatopygia, as Sherley Anne Williams suggests in "The Finding of a Nest the Coming of a Roost,"¹¹ has been traditionally a symbol of sexual potency for black men. Specifically, the term refers to a statuette of a pregnant black woman whose buttocks is disproportionately large. However, in America this image has been distorted into a symbol of ugliness for black women. Cortez's quotation marks call attention to the misrepresentation of the statuette as well as the diversity of body-types among black women.
The fragmentation of the colonized is another aspect of the colonial experience. While there are, of course, always differences between distinct elements of a given group, privileged groups in colonial situations are able to exploit the tensions that exist between elements of the colonized, while they simultaneously form coalitions among themselves vis-a-vis the colonized. Given the apparent futility of open resistance for fear of violence, the people are

forced into fighting each other
over a funky job in the sewers of Johannesburg
divided into labor camps
fighting over damaged meat and stale bread in
Harlem divided into factions fighting to keep from fighting
the ferocious men who are shooting
into the heads of our small children (45)

Cortez's repetition of the words "divided" and "fighting" reflect her belief that marginalized groups can achieve liberation only through reconstructive efforts that ultimately lead to organized armed resistance. The sewer and decayed food images in Johannesburg and Harlem respectively imply not only similar mistreatment but also a common enemy.

Thus, Cortez suggests that while the students were specifically opposing the South African government, they were also attacking worldwide oppression. Note the key phrases "to see you" and "when i see you":

 to see you stand on the national bank of america
 like monumental sculpture made of stained bullets
 to see you stand empty handed
 your shoulders open to the world
each day young blood falling on the earth
to see you stand in the armed struggle
next to Mozambique, Angola, Namibia, Zimbabwe
Soweto i tell you Soweto
when i see you standing up like this
i think about all the forces in the world
confronted by the terrifying rhythms of young students
by their sacrifices
and the revelation that it won't be long now
before everything
in this world changes (46-47)

Cortez does not engage in tonal semantics in "For the Brave Young Students in Soweto." Instead, she relies upon the rhythmic structure of the poem and the blending of her own voice with the members of her band to compel the listener's attention. However, in "U.S./Nigerian Relations," a revised title from the printed version in *Firespitter* entitled "Nigerian / American Relations," Cortez demonstrates the complexity of sound-based poetics. Although the printed version reads as a simplistic example of prose that is nothing more than a compound sentence, Cortez's performance is a classic example of the incarnation of secular priesthood.

As is suggested by its title, "U.S./Nigerian Relations" addresses the contradictions of neo-colonialism. Whereas Africans have been the primary resources for exportation in the past, Cortez suggests that the development of capitalism has caused a reversal. Now the preferred raw materials are minerals that can be refined or converted into products that, in turn, are to sustain a lifestyle of relative ease. This phenomenon has deprived many Third World peoples of opportunities to
acquire meaningful labor in their own countries. Consequently, they feel compelled to migrate to more affluent geographical locations where they are often treated with scorn. Hence, Cortez says,

They want the oil
But they don't want the people
They want the oil
But they don't want the people
They want the oil
But they don't want the people
They want the oil
But they don't want the people
They want the oil
But they don't want the people
They want the oil
But they don't want the people
They want the oil
But they don't want the people

The poem is clearly an extended riff chorus. At the outset of the poem, Cortez's lines, which are barely audible at this point, are accented by single drum beats. As she increases the volume of her voice, the other band members begin to play. When Cortez speeds up the tempo, the band responds, and they all proceed at feverish pace before a brief interlude when the band plays ensemble without Cortez.

When Cortez returns, she uses an antiphonal approach, alternating the pitch of her voice by enunciating the line "They want the oil" in her speaking voice and enunciating the word "people" in a high-pitched voice that intermittently intones an interrogative. Then Cortez returns briefly to the fast tempo before concluding the poem by slowly repeating the phrase "they don't want the people."
In contrast to "U.S./Nigerian Relations" and "For the Brave Young Students of Soweto," in "I Am New York City" Cortez emphasizes the surrealistic method that characterizes much of Cortez's poetry:

```
i am new york city
here is my brain of hot sauce
my tobacco teeth my
mattress of bedbug tongue
legs apart hand on chin
war on the roof insults
pointed fingers pushcarts
my contraceptives all (9)
```

The first line serves as a riff chorus for the entire poem, which should be read as a praise poem for New York. That is, Cortez's poem, like Brown's "Kentucky Blues," is an approximation of the blues singer's celebration of a certain place. But in her celebration, Cortez, as is typical of her style, personifies the city. At the same time, Cortez revises traditional male definitions of toughness and rambunctiousness in the big city by describing the urban experience in rebellious feminine terms. While male performers like H. Rap Brown gained respect and admiration from members of their communities by asserting their masculinity with lines like these,

```
Man, you must don't know who I am.
I'm sweet peeter jeeter the womb beater
The baby maker the cradle shaker
The deerslayer the buckbinder the women finder
Known from the Gold Coast to the rocky shores of Maine
Rap is my name and love is my game.
I'm the bed tucker the cock plucker the motherfucker
The milkshaker the record breaker the population maker
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Cortez's persona reflects the bravery and courage of Bessie Smith (recall the legend of her chasing the Klan away from her tent) and women like Big Shug who fascinated Zora Neale Hurston. Like the female personas in blues lyrics, Cortez's persona defies the constrictions of both bourgeois morality and male dominance. Such is her bodaciousness that she takes "hot sauce" and "tobacco teeth" as contraceptives. The persona's unmitigated gall recalls Cortez's "Carolina Kingston" who is an "imbangala woman" who has "plenty macking motherhood / packed in [her] grief house yea."\textsuperscript{15}

In addition to describing blues-oriented women's refusal to abide by the restrictions of either black men or white America, Cortez achieves a pyrotechnic breakthrough in "I Am New York City." For instance, the third stanza of the poem appears in print:

\begin{quote}
I am new york city of blood
police and fried pies
i rub my docks red with grendaline
and jelly madness in a flow of tokay
my huge skull of pigeons
my seance of peeping toms
my plaited ovaries excuse me
this is my grime my thigh of steelspoons and toothpicks
i imitate no one (9)
\end{quote}

The first line of the printed version does not suggest a pause. But in the recorded version, performing with bassist Richard Davis, Cortez pauses before enunciating the word "blood" by elongating the /e/ sound in "city." In so doing, she maximizes the power of the "blood" image
by simulating an unexpected gunshot. Cortez's vocal experiments here call attention to her use of tonal semantics. Nielsen has pointed out that the pitch of Cortez's tone descends progressively in her performances. However, Cortez also incarnates blues singers by alternating the pitch of her voice to replicate the antiphony of blues music. After delivering the first two lines in an even-toned pitch, Cortez begins to simulate the call and response. She raises the pitch in the third line of the stanza, and lowers it in the next line until the final word "tokay," which is chanted with a raised pitch. The call and response pattern is repeated until lines seven through nine wherein Cortez maintains a raised pitch level. In the concluding line "i imitate no one," Cortez places a slight emphasis on the word "no." This line is not chanted but spoken in a tone of feminine audaciousness that anticipates such women hip hop artists as MC Lyte and Left Eye.

But while Cortez has successfully developed vocal techniques to enhance the power of her affective poetics, her version of blues poetry often incorporates the compressed imagery associated with more conventional modern poetry, which distinguishes her work from many poets in the Black Arts Movement. For instance, in the passage above, Cortez combines her personification of New York with a menstrual metaphor. Note the "ovaries" image and the repeated blood images. Beginning with the word
"blood" in the first line, the words "grenadine" and "tokay" that end the third and fourth lines, respectively, also suggest bleeding.

At the same time, however, Cortez's blues/surreal method allows her to fuse contradictory imagery. Note that the word "police" comes immediately after "blood." Yet the police image is also linked to the "fried pies" image, which suggests not only soul food cuisine but also a style of life in which the pursuit of pleasure ignores considerations of jurisprudence. Cortez's menstrual image points to both the excruciating pain of urban life and the people's determination to persevere. The "grenadine" image evokes the unwritten history of colonization of migrants from the Grenadines, and suggests simultaneously the physical labor of New York city dock workers and the sweet taste of pomegranate juice. Finally, in the fourth line, the phrase "madness in a flow of" suggests violence, and anticipates the word blood. But like Hughes in "Dream Boogie," Cortez frustrates the reader's expectation with the word "tokay." The term "jelly" is, of course, a well known term of (re)memory that suggests sexual activity. In sandwiching the phrase "madness in a flow" between "jelly" and "tokay," Cortez again describes both the physical dangers of living in New York and its capacity to foster uninhibited fun.

"Lynch Fragment 2," is Cortez's contemporary version of the African-American lynch poem. The accompanying
music on the recorded version of the poem is not a sorrowful dirge as one might expect. Instead, Davis introduces the poem with a version of reveille which is "a bugle call in the morning to awaken military personnel and alert them for assembly." The irony, of course, is that Davis's performance is itself a wake-up call and summons for action against police brutality. As such, his repetition and inversion constitutes a signifying riff. Similarly, Cortez employs an ironic point of view in her revision of the African-American lynch poem made famous by Jean Toomer and Richard Wright. However, unlike previous poems that focused on how white citizens terrorized blacks in the rural south, Cortez turns her attention to the horrors committed by urban policemen. As in "I Am New York City," Cortez employs a blood image to suggest the violence of the city: "I am bleed mouth nod / from an oath in sorrow" (16). Though nodding usually suggests agreement, Cortez uses "nod" ironically to suggest both the physical movement of the victim's head and the policemen's zeal to ostensibly obey their sworn "oath[s]" to uphold the law, which many misinterpret as a license to inflict violence.

Unlike "Give Me the Red off the Black of the Bullet," which also addresses police brutality, "Lynch Fragment 2" does not contain a riff chorus, nor are there any explicit references to blackness. Observe these lines from the former poem:
Give me the black on the red of the bullet
i want to make a tornado
to make an earthquake
to make a fleet of stilts
for the blackness of Claude Reece Jr.
the blackness called dangerous weapon
called resisting an arrest
called nigger threat18

Conversely, in "Lynch Fragment 2" Cortez uses imagery to describe both her persona's physical features and ethnic background before allowing him to give his account of his experience with police:

i succulent republic of swamp lips
push forward my head through
windshields of violence
to baptise in a typhoon of night sticks

Scream on me (16)

The first line refers to the relatively large size of black people's lips. Yet it also suggests the violence suffered by such victims as Rodney King. Cortez cleverly reverses the stereotype by celebrating a physical trait associated with ugliness while simultaneously describing the policemen's distorted worldview that is (mis)informed by the myth of white superiority which, in turn, impels them to view such features as attractive targets for violence. The word "succulent" suggests both the size of the persona's lips and his awareness of the policeman's reading of the symbolism of such features.

Lines two through four, like the subsequent one-line stanza, describe the actual beating. Note the "night sticks" image. Such is the intensity of the violence that Cortez aptly employs a "typhoon" metaphor to describe the
rapidity and force of the licks. Yet again, Cortez creates the illusion that the persona is in control of the action by using the verb "push." Indeed, the imagery actually suggests suicide: "i ... push forward my head through / windshields ..." However, Cortez is illustrating the absurdity of police brutality by describing the ludicrousness of the official accounts that policemen often use to absolve themselves from guilt.

The line "Scream on me" also suggests violence. The word "Scream" is a term of (re)memory that recalls a history of pain (and pleasure) in African-American cultural history. Hence, the simulation of its sound among blues musicians and Haki Madhubuti's call for mobilization in his poem "Don't Cry, Scream." During the early 1970s when "Lynch Fragment 2" was published, to scream on someone referred to the act of capping, that is, to violate someone through language.20

At the same time, Cortez's bluesurreal method allows her to testify to the irrepressible nature of her persona's spirit. On Cortez's recording, she enunciates each word in the phrase "Scream on me" with emphasis, and uses an impertinent tone that is suggestive of the voices of black inner city youth.

Having suffered a "typhoon" of terror, the persona performs a ritual:

i've gasolined my belly against suspects (16)
Then he undergoes a metamorphosis and calls out:

Attention all units

i call to the fumes
drawn back against steel
against invisible fuck of a cry
to remove its road block flesh of a flunky
and let that rotting become feast
on sapphire of my adobe fangs. (16)

The first line is both a mockery of the police summons and a call for resistance against injustice. In the recorded version of the poem, Cortez replicates the tone of a policewoman. The "road block flesh" image not only suggests the practice of repressive measures like setting road blocks in predominantly black neighborhoods. The image also suggests an inability to think. The term "flunky," which was commonly used in black communities in the 1970s, accentuates the idea by suggesting that the policeman's ethics are based upon his ability to serve as a henchman for the ruling class. But since the persona has metamorphosed into a sort of war-like deity, he is able to use the policeman's weapon against himself. Not only is the "flunky"-policeman "removed" from the streets; he becomes a "feast." The persona uses "adobe fangs" to tear his "flesh."

The use of profanity, which has been controversial in African-American poetry, deserves special commentary here. An early example of profanity used as a poetic device can be found in Sterling Brown's "Slim Greer" in which his persona says, "hot damn." During the Black Arts
Movement, poets used profanity in an attempt to reflect the language of the street experience and to signify to black audiences a sense of rebellion—a disregard for the moral and ethical codes that many blacks perceived to be repressive. In this way, poets attempted to convey a feeling of freedom that they hoped the audience would attempt to seek in real life.\textsuperscript{21} In "Lynch Fragment 2," the phrase "invisible fuck of a cry" implies the violation of the victim, his pain and the public's tendency to ignore such violations.

In the concluding lines of "Lynch Fragment 2," Cortez returns to a riff-like restatement of her persona's identity. Whereas he has introduced himself as "bleed mouth nod," he concludes by saying,

\begin{quote}
  i am zest from bad jaw quiver \\
of aftermath
\end{quote}

\textbf{Come Celebrate Me (16)}

Notable here is the repetition of the mouth image. The term "quiver" evokes the toast "Dolomite" in which the main character, Dolomite, tells his uncle, "I see your lips quiverin', but I don't hear a cocksuckin' word you sayin'." When the uncle responds to the insult by "letting out with a left, as quick as a flash," Dolomite tears his head off because "he was just that damn fast."\textsuperscript{22} In her revision, Cortez transforms the victimized uncle into a bodacious rebel who continues to "talk trash" during and after suffering a beating. In the
concluding line, Cortez emphasizes the word "me" to reinforce the idea of the persona's irrepresibility.

In "Brooding," Cortez describes the effects of right-wing ideology. On her album Unsubmissive Blues, Cortez comments that "Brooding" addresses

[t]he development of racism in the United States. (A device used to divide and exploit human beings.) Some people in this society feel threatened by the struggle for change and advancement. They become depressed, obsessed brooders.23

It is ironic, however, that such "brooders," who are often oppressed members of the American working-class, act against their own best self-interests when they oppose social change that benefits other marginalized people.

Rather than employing a tone of anger to protest against these attitudes, Cortez speaks in an ironic tone, and employs surrealistic imagery to describe a distorted worldview. The band introduces "Brooding" by playing an ensemble passage that implies the confusion of Cortez's referent. When Cortez joins in the performance, she uses the word brooding as a riff chorus:

They're brooding in Rosedale with pipe-bombs in their mouths

Brooding in Boston with darts between their teeth

Brooding in Connecticut with curses on their tongues

Brooding with the smell of rat's piss in their hearts brooding with the breath of red whiskey in their spit brooding into madness into death into sheets

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drying up
while brooding brooding brooding brooding
brooding (26)

On the recorded version of "Brooding," Cortez replicates the extra spaces on the page by pausing distinctly between each stanza. Cortez also pauses on the recording when she repeats "brooding" in the last line. The hyperbole in the first three stanzas is a device that mythologizes racist mythology. In depicting bigots with imagery that blurs the lines between the physical self and violent weaponry, Cortez describes both the emotional intensity and the ludicrousness of counter-revolutionaries. That is, Cortez suggests that when whites construct a notion of a collective self that depends upon the capacity to exterminate its racial other, they reify violence by confusing it with cultural expression.

Yet it is notable that while Cortez believes that such individuals are "blood thirsty people," (26) she does not refer explicitly to racial identity. Instead Cortez avoids the chauvinism of the Black Arts Movement (recall Nikki Giovanni's use of the term "honkey" in "The True Import of Present Dialogue, Black vs. Negro") by referring to geographical locations where conservative politics and blatantly racist policies are disguised as conceptual bases of genuine democracy so that they can function, in reality, as licenses for the free execution of white supremacist policies:
They're brooding with purple veins of the bible
    shooting from their noses
brooding with brass knuckles on their toes
brooding with badges under their chins
brooding with bricks in their baby carriages
brooding with prayers in their belts
    just brooding brooding brooding brooding brooding brooding

(27)

Here again, the key word is "brooding," but Cortez adds
the word "with" to create the formulaic phrase "brooding
with."

The alliteration of plosives in words like "brass,"
"bricks" and "belts" has an onomatopoeic effect in that
they suggest explosion. Also, Cortez varies her
repetition of the last line of the stanza by alternating
her pitch. Cortez's pyrotechnics are apt in that they
complement the radical politics that the poem expresses.
In describing the wrongheadedness of many Anglo-
Americans' obsession with violence, Cortez's tonal
semantics arouses humor that fosters a sensual
apprehension of the hypocrisy that she attacks. For
instance, loving one's neighbor is an important tenet of
Christianity, but Cortez points out that many white
Christians use Biblical references as ideological
weapons. At issue here is a self-righteous, mythical
innocence that undergirds a Nazi-like worldview that
celebrates "burning books" and "burning buses" (27) as
part of an overall strategy of a pseudo-revolutionary
struggle for the American people.

Davis's elegaic bass playing introduces "Rose
Solitude." Cortez's persona is a personification of the
Duke Ellington muse. Though here, too, there is the braggadocio of the blues persona, Cortez employs less antiphony in her own voice, using instead a softer, sensual tone to simulate a jazz ballad. Cortez begins the poem by capturing the ambience of the jazz musician's life offstage:

I am essence of Rose Solitude
my cheeks are laced with cognac
my hips sealed with five satin nails
i carry dreams of romance of new fools and old flames
between the musk of fat
and the side pocket of my mink tongue

Listen to champagne bubble from this solo (36)

As a preeminent blues musician, Ellington was relatively well paid. He was revered by musicians and audiences alike for his inimitable dress style. Hence, the name Duke because he wore "turtle skinned shoes" and walked with "canes / made from dead gazelles." Though Cortez herself is a modest dresser in her own performances, she recognizes Ellington's dress style as a vital aspect of his performance. An emphasis on attire is also important in the black church tradition. As ethnomusicologist Joyce Jackson pointed out in her study of gospel quartets, dress is part of the criteria for a successful performance.\(^2\) Black audiences adulation for a performer's immaculate dress seems to reflect a worldview that privileges pageantry and beauty. Though the logical extreme of such reverence in a capitalist society can imply a reification of consumerism, one can also argue...
that black audiences' requirement that their performers be stylishly dressed calls into question the myth of the starving artist.

Cortez uses her surrealist method to create a poetic collage filled with seemingly incongruous word pictures that she, in turn, near-sings in collaboration with Davis. In addition, Cortez employs a variation of the riff chorus, though readers/listeners may not detect it immediately because Cortez shifts her key words after the first line:

I tell you from stair steps of these navy blue nights these metallic snakes these flashing fish skins and the melodious cry of Shango surrounded by sorrow by purple velvet tears by cockhounds limping from crosses (36)

After the first line establishes the rhythm, Cortez begins the next three lines with the word "these," and omits the phrase "I tell you from," opting instead to simulate jazz musicians' method of frustrating their listener's expectations by implying the phrase. Similarly, Cortez begins the conclusion of the passage with the phrase "surrounded by sorrow," and omits the word "surrounded" in the next two lines.

The collage-effect also simulates blues music. The blend of brilliant colors with Cortez's silky voice produces an exhilarating effect that is comparable to the soothing feelings that compel foot-tapping motions from audience members at jazz concerts. Moreover, Cortez's use
of color invokes the presence of blues music. The "navy blue nights" image, like the "purple velvet tears," suggest not only the nighttime settings of the performances but also the super blues basis of Ellington's music. The snake and Shango (Nigerian god of thunder) images suggest the saxophones and drums, respectively, while "fish skins" imply the sequined dresses the women patrons wore.

But in describing Ellington's music and history, the persona reveals him/herself as a priestess who, by virtue of her capability to permeate both corporeal and incorporeal substances, engages in a performance of her own that constitutes, in turn, a form of resistance to traditional definitions of womanhood. Though she is susceptible to stage fright, the persona's bravery is such that she can "walk through the eyes of staring lizards" (37). Cortez's persona delivers her narrative chant in great proximity to the audience "from [the] stair steps," and is yet able to announce:

I tell you from suspenders from two-timing dog odors from inca frosted lips nonchalant legs
i tell you from the howling chant of sister Erzulie and the exaggerated hearts of a hundred pretty women they loved him (37)

Note the reference to infidelity. The persona acknowledges the hypocrisy. She has smelled the stench that has seeped, as it were, into Ellington's "suspenders." Yet she accepts his contradictory behavior as an admittedly
foul element of the Ellingtonian constitution. At the same time, she is at once inside the very breath of Haitian sea goddess Erzulie's chant and the "hearts of a hundred pretty / women." Equipped with such powers, she is, for all appearances, omnipotent, and can conceive of the unimaginable, such as "a caravan of heads made into ten thousand / flowers." The caravan image is an act of epistrophy in that it alludes to "Caravan," a tune that many people associate with Ellington's music even though he did not compose it, just as jazz afficionados associate "My Favorite Things" with John Coltrane.

In "If the Drum Is a Woman," Cortez engages in an intertextual dialogue with Ellington. Although the poem is epistrophic in its repetition of Ellington's suite entitled A Drum Is a Woman, "If the Drum Is a Woman" is actually a revision of Ellington's "What Else Can You Do With a Drum," which appears on the album. The first part of the song is a narrative performed by Ellington himself who focuses on Carribee Joe, a lover of nature and animals, who finds an elaborate drum in the jungle. When Joe touches the drum, it speaks to him and says, "I am not a drum, I am a woman. Know me as Madam Zajj, African chantress."25 After Joe rejects Madam Zajj's appeal to "make beautiful rhythms together," she angrily flies away to Barbados to find another Joe. Then the trumpet section initiates the calypso rhythms in which Trinidadian singer Ozzie Bailey sings,
There was a man who lived in Barbados,
he saw pretty woman one day,
he took her home and when she got there she turned
into a drum.
It isn't civilized to beat women
no matter what they do or they say,
but will somebody tell me what else can you do with a
drum?26

Cortez displaces Bailey's male voice, and revises
Ellington's representation of the black woman as sex
object. While Ellington envisioned Madam Zajj as
representation of the subsumptive qualities of blues
music,27 her capability as an enchantress is based
largely on her physical beauty. In contrast, Cortez
enchants (male) listeners to question their
conceptualizations of gender roles by assuming the role
of secular priestess:

If the drum is a woman
why are you pounding your drum into an insane
babble
why are you pistol whipping your drum at dawn
why are you shooting through the head of your drum
and making a drum tragedy of drums
if the drum is a woman
don't abuse your drum don't abuse your don't abuse
your drum (57)

While many of Cortez's recorded poems are introduced by
her band, Cortez opens the poem, and the drummer, who is
the only band member present, begins to play in the
second line, and increases his volume until he reaches a
zenith with the word "babble," thus accentuating Cortez's
riff chorus with the word "drum." Conversely, Cortez
simulates the drum beat by repeating the phrase "don't
abuse your drum."

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While "If the Drum Is a Woman" is obviously an indictment of violence against women, the poem is not an idealization of women but rather an appeal to male self-control:

I know the night is full of displaced persons
I see skins striped with flames
I know the ugly disposition of underpaid clerks
they constantly menstruate through the eyes
I know the bitterness embedded in flesh
the itching alone can drive you crazy
I know that this is America
and chickens are coming home to roost
on the MX missile
But if the drum is a woman
why are you choking your drum
why are you raping your drum
why are you saying disrespectful things
to your mother drum your sister drum
your wife drum and your infant daughter drum
if the drum is a woman
then understand your drum (57)

In the first five lines, Cortez combines interpolation with a nurturing, sympathetic tone to express her understanding of the oppressive conditions that haunt working-class men. At the end of lines one through three, and again in line five, Cortez repeats the word "yes." At the beginning of line seven, Cortez interpolates the word "hey." Note also the epistrophic line "and chickens are coming home to roost" that summons the (re)memory of Malcolm X's banishment from the Black Muslims and his subsequent assassination.

But the historical victimization of black men notwithstanding, the passage is actually a study of the process whereby colonized individuals are often reflections of the colonizer. The implication here is
that men must confront their illusions about male superiority as part of the ideological apparatus that undergirds their own class and/or racial marginalization. For Cortez, the most effective means of stimulating such an alteration of consciousness involves developing cooperative strategies of resistance. Thereby men might achieve true liberation and witness firsthand the benefits of gender equality.

In "In the Morning," Cortez engages in a revision of a different sort. She calls the poem a shout, but it is not a shout in the literal sense of the term. Rather, "In the Morning" is a jazzed-up reconceptualization of the shout, and can be read as a counterpoint to "U.S./Nigerian Relations." Unlike the latter poem, however, "In the Morning" is not polemical. Instead, the sound of the song/poem informs both form and content. Just as bebop musicians employed terms like ool-ya-koo to express the pleasure and social ramifications inscribed in the blues impulse, so "In the Morning" describes and conveys the sensations of African-American self-discovery through the medium of sound.

"In the Morning," then, should be read as a celebration of the blues tradition. The title itself is an act of epistrophy. Black preachers use the phrase in their sermons to refer to the hereafter. The title also summons the (re)memory of the spiritual "In That Great Getting Up Morning" and such blues classics as
Billie Holiday's "Good Morning Heartache" or "Depot Blues," wherein Charley Lincoln sings,

I woke up this morning with the blues three different ways
I woke up this morning with the blues three different ways
Had two minds to leave you, only one to stay.\(^{30}\)

At the same time, "In the Morning" revises Sterling Brown's "Memphis Blues." Like Brown's poem, "In the Morning" riffs on the ABA form that preachers and jazz musicians often use: text, development, restatement. In the recorded version of "In the Morning," the band introduces the poem with a slow tune that blends a downhome blues beat with a jazzy, urban sound. Although none of the musicians has a solo, the sound of the guitar is particularly prominent. The foregrounding of the guitar is apt because guitarists were the preferred instrumentalists among blues vocalists. The blues sound contributes to the poem's appeal by producing the actual sounds that Cortez celebrates via simulation and replication. Thus, in their collaboration, Cortez and her band create a musico-poetic form that extends both the Western tradition of literature and the black oral tradition. The performers fuse different strands of blues music together with a poetic form that is not only a simulation of blues music in terms of its stanzaic structure but also in its subsumption and reconceptualization of another distinct form—surrealism.
Like the persona of "Rose Solitude," the persona in "In the Morning," is also a performer. The blues, she says, "[m]asquerad[es] in [her] horn like a river / eclipsed to these infantries of dentures of diving / spears" (29). Note the weapon imagery and the conflation of voice and instrument weapon. Though "In the Morning" is an homage to the blues tradition, Cortez reminds readers that blues music is a form of resistance that expresses an African-derived sensibility:

Disguised in my mouth as a swampland
nailed to my teeth like a rising sun
you come out in the middle of fish-scales
you bleed into gourds wrapped with red ants
you syncopate the air with lungs like screams from yazoo
like X rated tongues
and nickel plated fingers of a raw ghost man
you touch brown nipples into knives
and somewhere stripped like a whirlwind
stripped for the shrine room
you sing to me through the side face of a black rooster (28)

Cortez does not refer specifically to blues music here. Instead she uses imagery that suggests blues culture. In the first four lines of the stanza, Cortez employs images that suggest the topography of the American South. However, the gourd, swamp, sun and ant images are equally suggestive of Africa. Similarly, the fish image suggests both the fish-fries in the South and the diet of Africans who lived in close proximity to large bodies of water. My point here is that Cortez is celebrating the creolized slave culture in which the survival of Africanisms assisted in the development of a uniquely
African-American sensibility that, in turn, helped to foster a milieu wherein blues music could be created.

Cortez begins to narrow the focus in the fifth line of the stanza so that she, like a jazz vocalist, can make her statement on blues culture specifically. Note the scream image followed by the allusion to Yazoo, Mississippi which evokes the (re)memory of the Mississippi Delta blues tradition. Notable also are the images that imply the sexuality and violence of blues culture. Note the pistol, knife and ghost images, as well as the "X rated tongues" and "black / rooster" images. Nielsen has pointed out that the rooster evokes the (re)memory of "Howling Wolf's little red rooster that was 'too lazy to crow for day.'"31 But Cortez's rooster image and the medicinal sexual pleasure that it implies can also be read as a revisionary response to Holiday's "Good Morning Heartache" and other blues songs in which singers invoke the blues muse to salve the emotional wounds that their personas have been sustained from failed relationships.

After the first stanza, Cortez simulates jazz improvisation in the structure of her poem. First, she uses her title phrase as a riff chorus that frames an allusion to blues lyrics. Observe these lines from "In the Morning":

In the morning in the morning in the morning all over my door like a rooster in the morning in the morning in the morning (28)
And compare the similarity of the second line to this blues passage:

When I woke up this morning,
Blues all around my bed.\(^{32}\)

Cortez's riff chorus functions like a break in jazz, which is a short solo that usually departs from the preceding musical pattern. Here the riff chorus marks a rhythmic departure from the previous pattern of the poem, and Cortez maximizes the effect by varying the tone of the repeated line. Guitarist Bern Nix complements Cortez's break by soloing afterwards, and thereby accentuates the simulation of the jazz break. In the process of blurring the distinctions between poetry and music, Cortez also revises Hughes's "Dream Boogie" in which Hughes employs dashes and dialogue to simulate jazz breaks.

Later in the poem, Cortez changes the rhythm again. She shifts to a staccato-like beat, repeating the word "shine":

and when i kick through walls
to shine like silver
when i shine like brass though crust in a compound
when i shine shine shine
you wail to me in the drum call of a black rooster\(^{29}\)

An intertext for Cortez's use of "shine" can be found in Sterling Brown's incorporation of a blues lyric in "Strong Men": "Me an' muh baby gonna shine, shine / Me an' muh baby gonna shine."\(^{33}\)
When Cortez returns to her title phrase for the riff chorus, she establishes a rhythm that continues to build until the poem reaches a crescendo:

In the morning when peroxide falls on a bed of broken glass and the sun rises like a polyester ball of menses in the morning gonna firedance in the petro in the morning turn loose the blues in the funky jungle in the morning I said when you see the morning coming like a two-headed twister let it blow let it blow in the morning all swollen up like an ocean in the morning early in the morning before the cream dries in the bushes in the morning when you hear the rooster cry cry rooster cry in the morning in the morning in the morning (30)

Here is an incarnation of secular priesthood par excellence. Recall Gerald Davis's observation that "the spiritual essence ... of the performance may well be carried into the days and weeks following the actual performance as those who experienced [it], or those who have reports of [it], discuss it, evaluate it, and relive it." In her performance of "In the Morning" at the National Black Arts Festival in Atlanta in 1994, the audience demonstrated its excitement with loud shouts, screams and claps.

In addition to the poem's structural rhythm, Cortez replicates the sound of blues music by varying her voice antiphonally. In the first line, Cortez's pitch rises when she enunciates the word "morning." But in the two
subsequent repetitions of the line, Cortez enunciates the line in a lower pitch that contrasts with the higher pitch in preceding and succeeding lines. Moreover, in her enunciation of the repeated phrase "let it blow," Cortez elongates the /o/ sound to simulate the sounds produced by horn players, and she raises her pitch and elongates the long /i/ sound in the word "cry."

To conclude the poem, Cortez uses a slight variation of the first stanza after a brief pause during which Nix solos:

I said
disguised in my mouth as a swampland
nailed to my teeth like a rising sun
you come out in the middle of fish-scales
you bleed into gourds wrapped with red ants
you syncopate the air with lungs like screams from yazoo
like X rated tongues
and nickel plated fingers of a raw ghost man
you touch brown nipples into knives
and somewhere stripped like a whirlwind
stripped for the shrine room
you sing to me through the side face of a black rooster

In the morning in the morning in the morning (30)
The "I said" phrase in the first line is a riff on the worried line in blues lyrics. The repetition of her own riff chorus in the last line, which Cortez enunciates in a descending volume, replicates the closure of a jazz performance. For instance, Coltrane's "Acknowledgement" is an extended riff chorus that is played in variations throughout the composition. But near the conclusion of the tune, Coltrane displaces his saxophone with the
voices of his band members who repeatedly sing the title phrase "A Love Supreme" in a descending volume.

Like "In the Morning," "You Know" is self-reflexive, and is a celebration of the blues idiom. However, "You Know" contrasts with "In the Morning" in several respects. Cortez uses the riff chorus intermittently in "In the Morning" to simulate improvisation. However, in "You Know" the riff chorus, "you know," functions like a walking bass: the steady beat allows for the superimposition of antiphonal lines that simulate a solo. Also, while Cortez creates improvisational effects in "You Know," the poem does not concern music so much as it does blues poetics. That is, "You Know" both describes and exemplifies Cortez's ability to merge script and sound and thereby incarnate secular priesthood. Just as Bessie Smith and other women blues singers demonstrated their commitment to their audiences, so Cortez's dedication "(For the people who speak the you know language)" (41) illustrates her political identification with working class African-Americans who often repeat the phrase "you know" in conversations.

Cortez's dedication also constitutes an act of signifying (in the traditional sense of that word) on many African-Americans whose false consciousness is manifested in their vehement disapproval of any linguistic habits that deviate from the dominant culture. In using the phrase "you know" as the rhythmic basis of
her poem, Cortez demonstrates the poetic potentiality of African-American vernacular English. Thus, "You Know" is a response to Hughes's "Low to High" and "High to Low."

After the band breaks into a bluesy, medium tempo tune, Cortez opens with,

You know
I sure would like to write a blues
you know
a nice long blues
you know
a good feeling to my writing hand you know
my hand that can bring two pieces of life together in your ear
you know
one drop of blues turning a paper clip into three wings and a bone into a revolt
you know
a blues passing up the stereotype symbols
you know
go into the dark meat of a crocodile and pinpoint the process
you know
into a solo a hundred times
like the first line of Aretha Franklin (41)

The solo image calls attention to the emphasis upon repetition in African-American performance. Hip hop artists today continue the tradition by repeating sequences of rhymes. The allusion to singer Aretha Franklin indicates that she is an important artistic model for Cortez. The phrase "the first line of Aretha" suggests Franklin's inimitable style that is recognized immediately by informed listeners. In addition, Cortez's homage to Franklin recalls the privileged position of the black musician in African-American communities, that is, the priestess-like role that Franklin served for black women during her popularity in the 1960s and 1970s.

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Like Cortez herself, Franklin was not, in the strict sense, a blues singer. However, the sound of Franklin's voice, her lyrics and the style in which she rendered them—all produced an effect upon audiences comparable to that of blues musicians. Franklin's performance of "Respect" is a case in point. Though Otis Redding had recorded the song earlier, Sherley Anne Williams points out:

Redding's version of "Respect" was never made into the metaphor. Black man/Black Woman or, just as importantly, Black/White relationships that Aretha Franklin's version became.... Aretha characterized respect as something given with force and great effort and cost. And when she even went so far as to spell the word "respect," we knew that this sister wasn't playing around about getting Respect and keeping it. (italics mine)

Notable here is the word "we" that signifies a community of listeners for whom Franklin articulated a set of values that reinforced her listeners' sense of self.

For Cortez, part of the process of creating a blues poetics involves demythologizing blues music. She cautions against stereotyping blues music as a compilation of lyrics that run "love love love in the ground" (42), and describes the potentiality that blues music holds for an effective resistance poetry, that is, a hard-hitting poetry "that you could all feel at the same time / on the same level like a Joe Louis punch" (41). Note, for instance, the paper clip image that, when infused with "one drop of blues," metamorphoses into
"three wings" which, of course, suggest flight and, hence, liberation. Cortez calls for

a serious blues
you know
a significant blues
you know
an unsubmissive blues
you know
a just because we exist blues
you know (42)

Cortez's decision to omit the words song or poem in lines like "an unsubmissive blues" (which is a repetition of her own album title) not only attests to her advocacy of a blues poetics but also suggests a double-edged revision of Black Arts poetry. For instance, "You Know" displays all ten of the qualities that Carolyn Rodgers lists in her taxonomy of Black Arts poetry. "You Know" "signifies"; it "teach[es]/rap[s]; it "run[s]down" and "coatpull[s]"; it engages in "mindblow[ing] (fantasy); it is "dealin/swingin"; it expresses "love"; it is "two faced (irony); it "riff[s]; it is "du-wah"; and it concerns "getting us together." Yet the poem is also an implicit critique of the cultural nationalism that impeded the full development of a blues poetics. While "You Know" should be read as a response to Baraka's request in "Black Art": "We want a Black poem," her foregrounding of the blues tradition in the line "i sure would like to write a blues" is a revision of the manicheism in "Black Art." Similarly, "You Know" retorts to Sonia Sanchez's "liberation / poem" wherein she
says, "blues ain't culture / they sounds of / oppression." Despite Sanchez's disclaimer, her very language, that is, her use of the zero copula, as well as her omission of the /r/ sound in the lines "no mo / blue / trains running on this track," (an epistrophic device to recall Coltrane's *Blue Trane*) testify to her own attempt to create a blues poetics.

Cortez's version of blues poetry constitutes a profound challenge to literary conventions, and demonstrates the eloquence of pre-future blues poetics. While recent performances of other African-American poets, such as Sonia Sanchez, Kalamu ya Salaam, Askia Toure and Amiri Baraka demonstrate the popularity of blues poetry among audiences, Cortez's development of vocal techniques and her ability to work regularly with her own band have allowed her to realize the full potentiality of the incarnation of secular priesthood.
NOTES


7Gerald Davis, I got the Word in me, and I can sing it, you know, p. 52.


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16 Aldon Lynn Nielsen, *Black Chant*, p. 221.


19 One of my own most painful memories about growing up was being lampooned about the size of my lips. In a fit of anger, the self-hatred would spew out, "You liver-lipped bastard."

20 One of the problems presented by cultural texts that revise oral forms is that much of vernacular culture is never recorded. In this case, I must again rely upon my own experiences, having matriculated through high school between 1971 and 1974. My friends and I used this phrase quite often to describe an event that had already taken place.

21 For an interesting discussion of Black Arts poetry from a participant's point of view, see Kalamu ya Salaam's "Art for Life: My Story, My Song" in *Contemporary Authors Series*, Volume 21.

22 This toast was quite popular in black neighborhoods of the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1970s. My love for toasts like "Dolemite" and "The Signifying Monkey" and my ability to perform them helped me to establish a clearly defined role in my community, and marked the beginning of my passion for poetry, although it would take years for me to admit it.


26 Duke Ellington, *A Drum Is a Woman*. 

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27 See Liner Notes, *A Drum Is a Woman*.


29 On October 25, 1997, I attended a funeral for my aunt, Mary Brown, and heard the preacher use this phrase in his sermon.


CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION: IT ALL COMES BACK TO YOU

As we look toward the dawn of the 21st century, we can survey the entire progression of blues poetics in the 20th century. Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown established the grounds for future experiments. But it is also important to remember lesser known early Afro-modernists who did yeoman work—poets like Helene Johnson and Waring Cuney in the 1920s. Following Johnson and Cuney, Frank Marshall Davis published *Black Man's Verse* (1935) and *I Am the American Negro* (1937) during the depression years. An outspoken critic of racism and American class relations, Marshall anticipated the concerns of many contemporary African-American poets. In "Jazz Band," for instance, Davis writes,

Play that thing, you jazz mad fools!  
Boil a skyscraper with a jungle  
Dish it to 'em sweet and hot—  
Ahhhhhhhh!

Like Hughes and Brown, Davis anticipated Black Arts poetry, and his cuisine metaphor anticipates today's hip hop lexicon.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Margaret Walker and Bob Kaufman continued the progression of blues poetics. Walker published *For My People* in 1942, and Kaufman, performing his jazz-inspired poetry before beat audiences in the 1950s, anticipated Larry Neal's call for the destruction of the text. A few years later, in the early
1960s, the Umbra writers workshop produced a number of poets, including Tom Dent, Calvin Hernton, Ishmael Reed, Askia Toure, and David Henderson. Though most of these poets did not emphasize oral forms in their poetry, they nonetheless envisioned poetry as a vocal expression, performing in bars, homes, and other non-traditional settings.

In the Black Arts Movement, Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Larry Neal, Nikki Giovanni, Haki Madhubuti, Carolyn Rodgers, Michael Harper, Marvin X, Jayne Cortez, and Kalamu ya Salaam became popular among black audiences. But one poet who deserves more attention than she has received is Sarah Webster Fabio. In her poem "Tribute to Duke," Fabio writes,

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When things got down
and funky
you bit into the blues
and blew into the air,
"I Got It Bad and
That Ain't Good,"
And from deep
down into your
"Solitude," you
touched both
"Satin Doll" and
"Sophisticated Lady"
wrapped them in
"Mood Indigo" and made
each moment
"A Prelude
to a kiss."
```

Like many poets who write epistrophies, Fabio uses classic titles by Ellington to establish rhythm and to summon cultural (re)memory. But Fabio adds another layer
of complexity with the accompanying italicized segment. The juxtaposition of the two columns, which simulates call and response, revises Hughes's "The Cat and the Saxophone: (2 a.m.)." Yet one can only imagine how Fabio might have performed the poem. As Stephen Henderson points out, the poem could be performed by two readers. "There are places," he writes, "where medleys or individual songs are either to be played in the background[,] imagined[,] or recalled ... by the audience/reader... At times, the second voice becomes a set of directions, or a score." Like Sterling Brown in "Ma Rainey," she attempts to describe the impact of Ellington's music upon listeners by summoning the reader's (re)memory of Ellington's music and depicting a nameless character's response to it. Various techniques suggest that s/he is creating a sort of private performance in response to the recording. Note the elongated spelling of the word never, which implies singing, and the interpolations of the word "BLOW" which indicate the character's emotional response to the horns. There is also a subtle change that implies that s/he has revised Ellington's song to accommodate his/her psychic needs. For instance, the song reads "sweet and gentle," but the character says, "kind / and gentle."

After the Black Arts Movement, many blues poets came to feel the difficulty if not impossibility of creating good art out of rhetoric and found the didacticism of
Black Arts poetics constricting. In their search for alternatives, some, like Mari Evans, turned to riffing:

baby baby tell me  
whut did I do wrong?  
baby baby tell me  
whut did I do wrong?  
ain seen yo face since Thursday  
How come you stay away so long?  

Many others, however, found that the performance of cultural (re)memory was a more suitable form. Some poets, like Ntozake Shange, wrote autobiographical poetry. In "Nappy Edges," for example, Shange recalls the process of colonization:

sumner high school/ squat & pale on the corner/ like our vision/ waz to be vague/ our memory of the war/ that made us free to be forgotten becomin paler/ a linear movement from south carolina to missouri/ freedmen/ landin in jackie wilson's yelp/ daughters of the manumitted swimminin in tina turner's grinds...  

Shange describes the effects of Anglo-American ethnocentrism by repeating the word "pale" which has the ironic effect of describing her struggle to claim her African-American heritage in spite of "sumner['s]" effort to (mis)educate her. The poet's use of "freedmen" and "manumitted" force readers to confront the history of slavery. Yet what is most striking about "Nappy Edges" is its visual appearance. The poet attempts to create a style that is ideally suited to her particular voice by using slashes to fragment her long, Whitmanesque lines. This method of isolating her images creates illusions of
the poet's breath-rhythms, and it allows her to reconcile a concern for vernacular sounds with literary discourse.

Other poets employed epistrophy to saturate their poems with the imagery and tonality of black cultural forms. In "Blues for Leon Forrest," Sterling Plumpp captures the spirit of blues music:


The first line repeats the opening of countless blues songs, and the line "a long / ways from home" repeats the blues line "Po' boy long ways from home." More importantly, though, Plumpp extends his focus beyond blues lyrics to the broader canvas of African-American language and culture. In the end, the poem is not so much an homage to blues music as it is a celebration of the vitality of the psyche that produces it.

Humor is an important element of "Blues for Leon Forrest." Plumpp employs hyperbole, which is common in many forms of black expression. After the speaker has announced his exile, affliction of the blues, and "Bucket
of Blood / of despair," he resorts to a riff-chorus to maximize the effectiveness of his hyperbole. Beginning with the line, "I got the real/unbaptized / blues," each riff-chorus intensifies in surreality, and culminates with his boasting of hiring a "metaphysical wheelbarrow to haul / [his] scrambled soul around."

In the 1990s, a new generation of blues poets appeared, and many of them have been influenced by hip hop music. Poets such as Jessica Care Moore, Tony Medina, Ruth Foreman, Kevin Powell, Pamela Plummer, Ras Baraka, Charlie Braxton, and Saadi Khali are all powerful poets who perform in poetry slams across the country. But insofar as their revisions of hip hop constitute a new phase of blues poetics, many younger black poets present new challenges for critics because their poetry demands that an understanding of rap lexicon be incorporated into critical analyses.

Like their predecessors, today's young poets are most concerned with the problem of the double-consciousness, and they understand the role of art in radical cultural politics. In this dissertation, I have examined the rather long-standing opposition between blues poets and critics, which often turns on the revision of vernacular forms practiced by African-American poets. Yet it is important to understand that my blues trope does not accommodate all black poetry. Such a claim would merely return us to a manichean vision that replicates the
colonizer in black face. Many African-American poets display little interest in black cultural forms. For instance, Gwendolyn Brooks--while she protests against racial discrimination--established her literary reputation in 1949 with the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Annie Allen* where she employs traditional poetic forms. Rather, I have focused upon a marginalized segment of African-American literature, and I have attempted to initiate a dialogue engaging poets, audiences, and critics alike. Future critics of blues poetry will benefit from interdisciplinary training that emphasizes critical theory, post-colonial theory, modern poetics, linguistics, anthropology, and musicology. "All Blues" is only a beginning, but it is my hope that future analyses will consider the importance of style and resistance in African-American poetry. Since black audiences treat poets as secular priests who address the unique concerns of their community, critics should approach style as a method of waging resistance through art. As Amiri Baraka says, "Form is an aspect of content[.] It is an ideological choice."
NOTES


2Tom Dent discussed the history of Umbra at The National Black Arts Festival in Atlanta in 1994. He also related his Umbra experiences to those of us who were members of Congo Square Writers Union in New Orleans in the early 1980s. For an interesting account of Umbra's history, see Tom Dent, "Umbra Days," Black American Literature Forum 14 (Fall 1980): 105-08.


4Fabio died in 1979.


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VITA

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