MATIAS CORBETT GARCEZ

GIL SCOTT-HERON: A BLACK BULLET THROUGH THE HEART OF WHITE AMERICA

Florianópolis, 2015

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Tese de doutorado apresentada à Banca Examinadora do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Inglês do Centro de Comunicação e Expressão da Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, como requisito parcial para a obtenção do título de Doutor em Estudos Culturais, linha de pesquisa Poéticas de Resistência, sob a orientação da Professora Doutora Maria Lúcia Milléo Martins.

Florianópolis, 2015

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Dedicated to my wife and love, Cristiane, and my son, Ravi.

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My contention is that your blessings derive from your positive contributions. But they must come from the heart. Not because of what you expect in return. Otherwise what you contributed was a loan, not a gift.
(Gil Scott-Heron, 2012)

ABSTRACT

This research discusses the poetry and music of Gil Scott-Heron as tools of resistance. In the process of analyzing his work as historical counter-narratives, a dialogue was established with some considerations from Amiri Baraka and Kodwo Eshun. To discuss the ways in which his music and poetry fused into a black vernacular technique-technology, and how such fusion was extremely important in the writing of many chapters of the history of African-Americans, some ideas from Rayvon Fouché, Larry Neal, and Baraka were used. The music of Scott-Heron is interpreted as PhonoFiction by adapting certain thoughts from Eshun. The correspondences between black speech and black music in the work of Scott-Heron were also analyzed using concepts created by Stephen Henderson. Lastly, through an analysis of his work it was concluded that he developed a poetics of the immediate, in that, his work instigates immediate action from African-Americans in their collective struggle for equality and freedom.

Keywords: Gil Scott-Heron; Poetics of Resistance; Counter-narratives; PhonoFiction; Black Vernacular Technique-Technology.

RESUMO

Esta pesquisa analisa a música e poesia de Gil Scott-Heron como ferramentas de resistência. Para discutir sua obra enquanto uma contra-narrativa histórica estabeleceu-se um diálogo com Amiri Baraka e Kodwo Eshun. Para analisar as maneiras que a música e poesia de Scott-Heron se fundiram em uma técnica-tecnologia vernácula negra, e como tal fundição foi extremamente importante na escrita de diversos capítulos da história Afro-Americana, seguiram-se ideias de Rayvon Fouché, Larry Neal e Amiri Baraka. A música de Scott-Heron também é analisada enquanto FonoFicção, adaptando-se pensamentos de Eshun. Também se discutiu as correspondências entre a fala negra e a música negra, na obra de Scott-Heron, seguindo ideias de Stephen Henderson. Por fim, através da análise da obra de Scott-Heron concluiu-se que ele desenvolveu uma poética do imediato, no sentido de que sua obra instiga uma ação imediata de afro-americanos para uma luta coletiva por igualdade e liberdade.

Palavras-chave: Gil Scott-Heron; Poéticas de Resistência; Contra-narrativas; FonoFicção; Técnica-Tecnologia Vernácula Negra.

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1 Introduction

> I break it down with a rhyme: From now to the beginning, let it be like a record spinning / a poetics of presence / contents under pressure. (Miller 32)

Concerning African-American History, what would the 20th Century sound like? True, there is no single answer to this question, but I am certain that a lot of those sounds would come from the vinyl, the LP record. Think about a record like John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme" (1965): There is a surplus of knowledge, wisdoms, histories, and discoveries, and a crisscross of potentialities, cultural patterns, and techniques in the air around you when you pick-up that polyvinyl saucer. It is a multi-medium artifact which contains sound codes, visual stimuli, tactual textures, a most peculiar smell of enveloped remembrance, as well as manifold layers of narratives: personal, communal, imaginative, and soulful. Hold that black disk in front of you – those tiny lines that perfectly crease its rubbery surface are the horizon which separates you from all that was going on during that recording; decipher the story behind these rings, and you will communicate through this phonograph record with those musicians. You place it, gently, over this teleporting device, known as a phonograph. You take the phonograph's prosthetic arm and place it over the disk. A needle touches the disk softly, slightly sensuously, and all these sonorous patterns come out of the amplifiers: the sound of memories. There is an instant before you hear music, in which there is a most distant hiss, and a throb, the heartbeat of the disk. All your senses are ready – you plunge into this receptacle of sound and signs, and each new understanding enables countless more. Hearing a record such as "A Love Supreme" is like being cladded in a stream of stories. I understand it to be as

fundamental for a historical contextualization of what the 60s were all about for African-Americans as Dr. King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" or Malcolm X's "Message to the Grassroots."

As I will discuss further on, Coltrane's album is but one example of a torrent of narratives which emerged throughout the 20th Century, as more and more African-Americans began experimenting with the LP record. Especially after the 50s, as the technologies became each time more accessible, the record became a powerful means of resistance, as well as a way of spreading a whole culture and lifestyle for many African-Americans. I will argue here that African-Americans transformed the LP record and the song into a fundamental chapter of the History of African-Americans. Following this premise, I shall initially discuss specific African-American movements, concepts, and ideas of the 20th Century, such as New Negro, Civil Rights, and Black Power, amongst others, by tracing parallels between these moments and happenings, and certain African-American songs and albums of the time. In other words, I will reach back into these moments in history by analyzing the music. In this phono-journey, I discuss the languages, histories, memories, and technologies found in these audio-narratives. My overall objective is to provide new perspectives and frameworks for future analysis concerning the relevance of music and poetry in the Black Experience. I intend to discuss how both arts fused into a black vernacular technique-technology throughout the 20th Century, and how such fusion was extremely important in the writing of many chapters of the History of African-Americans. This research aims to shed some light on certain fundamental musical experiences of the 20th century, vivisect

them, in an attempt to resignify, relive, and recuperate some long-forgotten narratives.

I discuss the ways Gil Scott-Heron managed to contribute with this vast database of knowledge and information. I interpret his poetry and music as counter-narratives. Counter in the sense of being completely different from official narratives. Counter because he openly supports certain people, ideas, and organizations, which are understood to be dangerous elements within American society, according to the establishment. Counter because he recollects the past in a different manner than from official historical chronicles. Counter because he uncovers certain day-to-day stories and tragedies, which the State tries to keep veiled. Counter because he develops narratives that talk about possibilities for the future of African-Americans which certainly scared many power structures and institutions; as the possibility of African-Americans being able to self-define themselves as "I," and to refuse being defined as "Other." Counter because he demanded his civil rights and full citizenship.

This research also discusses Scott-Heron's work in terms of a poetics of the immediate. I argue that his work calls for the immediate action of African-Americans in their collective struggle for equality and liberation; as did Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, Charles Mingus, Amiri Baraka, and Nina Simone, among others. Immediate because the living conditions of African-Americans were deteriorating faster and faster, and all the government had to say about it seemed to be, "we are working on it." Immediate because police brutality was increasing, but the State seemed each time more silent about it. Immediate because he wanted to provoke revolutions in people's minds, where the first

revolutions happen, as he said many times throughout his career. Immediate because he sang like many revolutionary political activists of his time. Scott-Heron's poetry and music helped to shape the unofficial 'image' of the country, its history and culture, as well as the identity and ethos of a people.

In the first chapter I discuss the theoretical parameters of my methodological analysis of poetry and music. I analyze how Amiri Baraka understands African-American music as a valid chronicle not only of African-American history, but also of the history of the United States, and I use some of his ideas in my critical discussion of Scott-Heron's work. I investigate the correspondences between African-American music and poetry articulated within a black vernacular technology. Following some ideas established by Kodwo Eshun, I study African-American music as counter-narratives which generate PhonoFiction; and also as cosmic music, or the music of life, and also of individual and collective movement, following ideas by Alice and John Coltrane, as well as Amiri Baraka. I interpret African-American music as a transnational connection between peoples and cultures by adapting ideas from Anna Everett and Amiri Baraka. I also argue that African-American music and poetry are devices which can be used in the struggle for liberation of Black people. I examine certain changes which African-American poetry and music went through during the course of the 20th Century, especially during the 60s and 70s. In the second chapter, I give a historical background for the kind of music and poetry I analyze, and discuss how African-American music and poetry functioned as a tool of resistance for African-Americans during the 20th Century. In the third chapter, I interpret Scott-Heron's music and poetry

in terms of a black bullet through the heart of white America. I investigate many of his lyrics, album covers, and liner-notes in order to get a better picture the kind of reality he talks about, the kind of personal politics he talks about, and the kind of revolutionary action he calls for. In the fourth chapter, I analyze four songs, which cover different historical moments and sociocultural environments. I discuss how these songs managed to interweave black speech, or the way the common black man and woman talked, to black music, and in so doing they helped to develop a black vernacular technology, or a kind of technique developed by blacks, and which was mass oriented; and also how his work managed to create counter-narratives which gave voice to many marginalized people, especially African-Americans. In the conclusion, I explain why this research is significant, and I also try to leave open paths for future researches. Let us embark on a musical and poetical journey across time and space, let us reach back into the intelligences and warnings left behind by these artists: read, listen, experience.

2. Theoretical horizons: A blue-print for thought engineering

> Poems are bullshit unless they are
> teeth or trees or lemons piled
> on a step. Or black ladies dying
> of men leaving nickel hearts
> beating them down. Fuck poems
> and they are useful, wd [sic] they shoot
> come at you, love what you are,
> breathe like wrestlers, or shudder
> strangely after pissing. We want live
> words of the hip world live flesh &
> coursing blood. Hearts Brains
> Souls splintering fire. We want poems
> like fists beating niggers out of Jocks
> or dagger poems in the slimy bellies
> of the owner-jews. . . . (Baraka 3895)

This research is about African-American poetry and music. The overall goal of this research is to discuss music albums and songs as historical narratives; and to try to understand how these narratives are still changing and affecting us today, how and why they are still present in our day-to-day lives. This study understands that there are stories and ideas to be found within these albums and songs which can illuminate diverse paths and knowledges for our todays and tomorrows; it bridges the past to the present in an attempt to stimulate new ideas. Baraka has already made such statement, that albums and songs are historical narratives, in his book “Blues People” (1963). In it, Baraka argues that the study of the different stages and styles of ‘negro music,’ its development, presented excellent data, or primary sources, for a better understanding not only of African-American history, but also of the history of the United States. He saw music as one of the ethos of Black culture, and argued that by analyzing in-depth a music style linked almost exclusively to African-Americans, such as the blues in the early 20th Century, one can have a clear picture of their living conditions at the time. Music is a valid chronicle of African-American history. He writes:

> It seems possible to me that some kind of graph could be set up using samplings of Negro music proper to whatever moment of Negro’s social history was selected, and that in each group of songs a certain frequency of reference could pretty well determine his social, economic, and psychological states at that particular period (Jones, 65).

He rummages through albums, songs, and lyrics as a historian examining artifacts and ruins of another time. For Baraka, musicians like Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, or Blind Lemon Jefferson are as important for the study of the history of the United States, as Herodotus

for the study of Ancient Greece. He argues that these musicians and their songs formed the parts and pieces of a larger cultural expression, ‘negro music,’ and that ‘negro music’ has left an indelible mark in ‘new’ America (post-19th Century), politically, psychologically, culturally, and economically. According to him, ‘negro music’ displayed sophisticated communicative systems, or languages, as slave work songs, the blues, and jazz, each with specific techniques, vocabulary, and poetics. This research makes use of his ideas in order to analyze albums and songs as historical narratives. Following his argument, this research understands that a music album such as Gil Scott-Heron’s “Small Talk at 125th and Lenox” (1970) is as important for a critical discussion of what it meant to be black in the United States during the 60s and 70s, as Dr. King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1963).

This study discusses the correspondences between African-American music and poetry, articulated within a black vernacular technology. Vernacular in that many of the different genres, styles, and cultural movements associated with both arts, as jazz, Black Arts Movement, or hip hop, have their beginnings within popular culture, they are overtly mass oriented. The Oxford Online Dictionary defines ‘technology’ as: “The application of scientific knowledge for practical purposes; from Greek *tekhnologia* ‘systematic treatment,’ which was derived from *tekhnē* ‘art, craft’ + *-logia.*”[1] Therefore, if technology has to do with ‘systematic treatment’ (*tekhnologia*) of an ‘art or craft’ (*tekhnē*), then African-American music and poetry is a sort of technology. After all, the slide guitar, boasting, sampling, rapping, scat

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[1] *Oxford Online Dictionary.* Available at: < http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/technology> Accessed in July 23, 2014

singing, and signifying, terms frequently seen in the critical and academic discussion of African-American music and poetry, are certainly technologies; vernacular technologies.

This research uses different theoretical sources for a critical reading of Scott-Heron's work. It aims to contextualize his work with the work of thinkers, poets, musicians, performers, and writers, in an attempt to discuss its relevance. I understand that there are still many untold stories to be found within his music and poetry; stories and narratives which remember history in a different manner than that of 'official' narratives. In that sense, Scott-Heron's work is interpreted as historical chronicles, and also as a black vernacular technology. Furthermore, it also understood as a device of resistance which can transform our social, political, and cultural environments.

This study does not understand African-American music or poetry as a fixed set of patterns which follow linear and rational structures. This is not an attempt to discuss these sounds and verses as solely compositions, lines in a book, or completed works of art which can be classified, or divided into hierarchies, categories, and styles. Instead, this dissertation chooses to discuss African-American music and poetry as limitless planes of connections to, and possibilities for the right now, the becoming, the near and far future, and also the past and all its memories, histories, and mysteries. I am interested in poems and songs which seem to expect something from us, poems and songs which seem to leave clues and coordinates for us to piece together in order to obtain some new knowledge. In other words, it is not just about reading or listening, it is about experiencing it, feeling it, and living it. This research wants to know what the poetry and rhythms of yesterday and

today, or "yesternow," as Miles Davies (1971) once said, can tell us about our cultures, histories, and societies; it observes the holistic relation of African-American music and poetry with historical and present-day events, ideas, movements, and communities.

I argue that in the course of the 20th Century this black vernacular technology invented new languages, each one with rich and diverse systems of signification, codes and concepts, as well as specific vocabulary, grammar, syntax, symbols, signs, and even mythology. This black vernacular technology was composed of (1) techniques, skills, and practices which presented a unique relationship with the available resources (technology) of the time, as sampling, jazz poetry, scat singing, or boogie-woogie, and (2) a vast array of actions, attitudes and feelings, as groove, jive, blues, or mojo, which together created and shaped new cultures, world views, and aural spaces. Some examples of this black vernacular technology are: Amiri Baraka's "Why is we Americans" (2002), or Charles Mingus's *Mingus Ah Um* (1959). "Why is we Americans" covers and remembers a history of exploitation, racism, and psychosocial mutilation which many 'official' narratives choose to ignore. Moreover, it demands reparations, justice, and everything which was promised to black people:

> [B]ut I ain't come from a foolish tribe, we wants [sic] the mule the land, you can make it three hundred years of blue chip stock in the entire operation. […] Plus, we want damages, for all the killings and the fraud, the lynchings, the missing justice, the lies and frame-ups, the unwarranted jailings, the tar and featherings, the character and race assassination. […] For all the music and dances you stole. The styles. The language. [..] All these are suits, specific litigation, as represent we be like we, for reparations for damages paid to the Afro-American nation (Baraka "Why is we Americans").

There are many videos of him performing-reading this poem on the internet, and the more I see them, the more I appreciate his vocal techniques, which make him sound like an instrument, and his style of writing things in a manner which suit his voice and breath pauses perfectly; Baraka is certainly a technologist of African-American music and poetry. As for "Mingus Ah Um," it managed not only to review and reread the past, with songs like "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat," an eulogy to saxophonist Lester Young, and "Open Letter to Duke," a tribute to, yet also re-reading of Duke Elligton, but it also gave different directions and horizons to music, with its polyrhythmic explosives phrases, and wild and synchopated beats. "Fables of Faubus," is a very important and emblematic song of the album, as it was one of the most political songs of the time. In it, Mingus does a sort of call-and-response with his drummer Dannie Richmond, and they make explicit reference to the governor of Arkansas, Orval E. Faubus, pro-segregation, among other political figures of the time. It goes like this:

> [Mingus] Name me someone ridiculous, Dannie.
> [Dannie] Governor Faubus!
> [Mingus] Why is he sick and ridiculous?
> [Dannie] He won't permit integrated schools.
> [The whole band] Then he's a fool. Boo Nazi fascist supremacists. Boo Ku Klux Klan.
> [Mingus] Name me a handful that's ridiculous, Dannie Richmond.
> [Dannie] Bilbo [in reference to white supremacist governor of Mississippi, Theodore Gilmore Bilbo], Faubus, Rockefeller, Eisenhower.
> [Mingus] Why are they so sick and ridiculous? [Dannie]Two, four, six, eight! [All] They brainwash and teach you hate!" (6-13) (Mingus)

Mingus was reinterpreting the function and role of the album, in that it was not just a sort of catalogue of songs designed to 'sell' an artist, or a

set of 'singles;' Mingus was saying that the album was also a tool African-Americans could use to give voice to their struggles, like an 'open letter' to people, or a condensed form of protest. In other words, he was transforming the album and song into a different technology. It represents a fundamental step in the direction of music becoming each time more politicized and committed to the black cause. Both the poem and the album function like history lessons which teach us about the reactions and demands of a people who were tired of been disenfranchised and treated as property or second-class citizens; tired of being depicted and portrayed as submissive and weak. Each one of these narratives talk about very specific things and moments, with their very own idioms and expressions, but together they are a body of knowledge, a new language, and they shape another history – the Black American History.

Therefore, this study is about reclaiming the past, but also about reimagining the present and future. I am interested in discussing the ways and manners in which, together, African-American music and poetry give voice to marginalized yearnings and callings; how they give common people different forms of agency. Overall, this dissertation proposes to discuss African-American music and poetry as historical narratives. It aims to discuss the correspondences between African-American music and poetry, and how both arts generated a black vernacular technology during the course of the 20th Century. This study discusses certain transformations the music album underwent in the 20th Century, as a result of the creativity and ingeniosity of gifted artists, as Scott-Heron, who helped to turn it into an entirely different material artifact.

2.1 Don't analyze the groove: Music must explain itself

> Far from needing theory's help, music today is already more conceptual than at any point this century, pregnant with thoughtprobes waiting to be activated, switched on, misused. (Eshun 1999, 3)

Theorist and filmmaker, Kodwo Eshun, in his book "*More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*," writes that music must be experienced before it is analyzed. He argues that instead of resorting to different theories to discuss and explain music, we should choose instead try to make sense of it by understanding which ways it affects, changes, and transforms us and our environments; after all: "You can theorize words and styles, but analyzing the groove is believed to kill its bodily pleasure, to drain its essence." (7) According to him:

> In CultStud, TechnoTheory and CyberCulture, those painfully archaic regimes, theory always comes to Music's rescue. The organization of sound is interpreted historically, politically, socially. Like a headmaster, theory teaches today's music a thing or 2 about life. It subdues music's ambition, reigns it in, restores it to its proper place, reconciles it to its naturally belated fate (3).

However, he argues that this is a mistake. He thinks that the opposite should happen, and that music should be "encouraged in its despotic drive to crumple chronology like an empty bag of crisps, to eclipse reality in its wilful exorbitance, to put out the sun." (3) The way he sees it, music is already a theory, a political act, a world view: Music in and by itself already offers more than enough data for a critical and theoretical discussion of our social, cultural, political, and economic surroundings. He writes a lot about black music creating discontinuums and counter-memories, terms which I shall discuss further on, which function like alternative histories, or new beginnings, in that they

operate from within the fissures and gaps of ‘official’ narratives and history. Black music, therefore, can create cracks in certain systems of power and control. In the realm of music, for instance, black people had way fewer impediments and restrictions when compared to their history of social, political, and economic limitations created by a racist and difuse power structure.

One of Eshun’s main arguments is that the counter-memories, or “unofficial histories,” found in music have created conceptual frameworks for a “chronopolitical” moment in history; such memories have provided us with sufficient information for an age of “Total Recall,” where the only thing we will forget is the art of forgetting (Eshun 2003, 287). He understands music as a communicational tool, and suggests that blacks have managed to reinterpret the album, as well as the song, in such a manner, that they have been inventing all sorts of new technologies with these reinterpretations, as sampling and scratching. Eshun’s study focuses on enhancing the possibilities and pluralities found in music. It is dedicated to the ‘newest mutants,’ musicians who have used technology/electronics to ‘prosthetically’ enhance and extend their art. For instance, he argues that some of these ‘mutants/musicians’ have learned to intensify their music’s sensatory traits, a form of enhancement, by electronically engineering its content and form, in search of fluidity, spontaneity, and trance-inducing mind states. These mutants come from the “Outer Side” (Eshun 1999, 4), their music “alienates itself from the human; it arrives from the future.” (4) Mutant music is alien music, “a synthetic recombinator, an applied art technology for amplifying the rates of becoming alien.” (4). This alien music boomed out counter-memories, which swayed back and forth

across time and space, perhaps through sampling or remixing, perhaps through studio effects as reverb or phase. Throughout the book, Eshun chisels out these counter-memories contained in the massive database of black/alien music; sounds which he interprets not only as valid and insightful narratives of our times, but also as a necessary means for dealing with the pains and effects of living in alienation in an alien nation. He writes that these counter-memories of black/alien music are PhonoFiction (PF): a crossbred combination of sleeve-notes from albums, photographs and drawings seen in albums, lyrics from songs, sound patterns and instrumentations in songs with no lyrics, samples/samplings which crisscross time and space, and much more. PF is the sum of all parts of a record or song, the stories and possibilities such totality pours out.

2.2 Kinetic music: Journeys into cosmic music, or the music of life

> Black music, especially black song, spoke to needs, desires, and duties both sacred and secular. The imperatives of freedom struggle brought the sacred and the secular together, dynamically building off of each other, solidifying commitment, bracing and signifying resistance. […] The historical centrality of black music to the black cultural matrix—to black cultural politics in particular—must be underscored. In other words, black music is an axiomatic element of black history and culture. (Martin Jr. 49)

Many years ago I came across the following African dictum: “If you can walk, you can dance, if you can talk, you can sing.” It is from a time and place where drums, singing, chanting, and dance transmitted knowledge, information, histories, myths, and legends, where “recitations and songs cover[ed] the totality of vital experience,

including cosmology and theology" (Goody 48). Most importantly, the dictum binds music to movement, as well as music to language; in other words, music to life and people. It understands music has a social function, like walking and talking; music, much like language, is a fundamental resource in the maintenance and recreation of history and traditions, as well as social practices and groups.

I start this discussion by quoting the dictum because of its broad understanding of music, and because it assumes music is extremely important in our day-to-day lives. This dissertation discusses music in much the same manner. My argument is that, during the 20th Century, in the context of the day-to-day life of African-Americans, singing and dancing (music) was perhaps as important and vital as talking and walking. African-American music of the 20th Century, therefore, is completely interweaved with the experience and condition of being black in the United States, or Black culture as a whole within the country. Anna Everett, in the introduction of her essay "The Revolution will be Digitized: Afrocentricity and the Digital Public Sphere," wrote about these manifold and deep connections between music, and what she defines as the "African-Diasporic Consciousness." She wrote:

> Despite the well-documented dehumanizing imperatives of the colonial encounter, the ethnically and nationally diverse Africans in the New World developed self-sustaining virtual communities through paralinguistic and transnational communicative systems and networks of song, dance, talking drums, and other musical instrumentations. The formation of these new African-inflected communications strategies enabled this heterogeneous mass of people somehow to overcome their profound dislocation, fragmentation, alienation, relocation, and ultimate commodification in the Western slavocracies of the modern world. (126)

She believes that music played a fundamental role in the lives of many

African-Americans because it not only preserved their ancestry, which had been usurped during the Middle Passage[2], but also functioned as a common ground for the establishment of new interpersonal relationships, new collectivities. This research adapts her idea, and discusses African-American music as a transnational connection between people and cultures, a means of maintaining and reaffirming cultures, and also a tool African-Americans have used to survive in the New World.

Another important theoretical reference for this research is Amiri Baraka's idea of African-American music having a kinetic orientation. In his book "*Blues People*," he wrote a lot about the correspondences between music and movement, or the "kinetic philosophy that has informed Negro music since its inception in America" (235). Not only that, he argues that African-American culture as a whole was also intimately connected to movement: Blacks were brought over from Africa, and upon arrival were immediately sent to the cotton fields and forced to work, afterwards they were sent to the battle fields, then some migrated, while others fled, later they were sent to the factory lines, then all they way over to Europe to fight in both world wars. There is a moment in the beginning of the book, where he talks about 'the negro as non-American,' as African, in which he discusses the importance which dancing, singing, chanting, and drums, had in certain ceremonies, rituals, and celebrations, and how these forms interacted with each other in different contexts and situations; he even tells us of an African dictum which goes like this: "The spirit will not descend without song" (41). Drums and music, therefore, were also

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[2] The transport of slaves from Africa to the New World.

resources for intertribal communication in that they were a language; they functioned like charges, conductors, capacitors, intensifiers, and accelerators. More importantly, it was through these forms that Africans managed to bring their cultural memories to America. Baraka understood movement to be a trope of African-American music and the Black experience.

Following these threads, I argue that one of the results of this intimate connection between African-American music and individual and mass movement, as well as music and life, was that there were many moments throughout the 20th Century where the instrument became an extension of the body and voice of the musician. In other words, these musicians were no longer just playing an instrument, they incorporated the instrument; they transformed the instrument into an extension of themselves. In this sense, the moves and grooves of a musician, or his or her dances and bodily expressions, are directly related to his or her style of singing or playing; Jimi Hendrix, James Brown, Big Mama Thornton, and Chuck Berry come to mind. The parallels and intertextualities between music and movement, as well as music and life are recurrent throughout history, just think about slave work songs, gospel, soul, funk, rap, or even techno and drum'n'bass; all of which were created by African-Americans. Can we discuss the funk 'scene' of James Brown without mentioning his dance moves? Can we discuss the work songs without talking about the actual labor of slaves, and how the pounding of the ground with tools also served as the percussive beat for their singing? Can we analyze the Detroit techno 'scene' without discussing all the wild and liberating dancing which happened in these parties?

Still another important theoretical reference for this experiment is the idea of cosmic music, as understood by John Coltrane and his wife, Alice Coltrane. Mr. and Mrs. Coltrane talked a lot about how cosmic music not only bonded us together, but also connected us to our environments. According to Mrs. Coltrane, one of the many lessons she learned with her husband was that music creates in us a new landscape, which is overflowing with possibilities and energies; music enables us to communicate with each other across vast distances and through time. For Mrs. Coltrane, music was a tool which we could use to reach other people, as well as other spaces. She was quite enthusiastic about artists wanting to do versions of other people's songs and music because she believed that by doing that they were actually re-creating "someone else's music to be invited into their own feelings, thoughts and design" (Coltrane 2004); her husband's version of "My Favorite Things" is an excellent example of this. For Mr. and Mrs. Coltrane, music had nothing to do with entertainment, as it was much more than a cultural product, it was a life-style, a guiding force, a kind of cultural catalyst. This is what Mr. Coltrane wrote on the liner notes of his much acclaimed "*A Love Supreme*" (1965) album:

> DEAR LISTENER: ALL PRAISE BE TO GOD TO WHOM ALL PRAISE IS DUE. [...] This album is a humble offering to Him. An attempt to say "THANK YOU GOD" through our work, even as we do in our hearts and with our tongues (Coltrane 1965);

Mr. and Mrs. Coltrane envisioned something much greater than just the orchestration of different sound waves, or mechanical waves, for them music was energy; it was information, a language. In the liner notes of her album, "*A Monastic Trio*" (1968), Mrs. Coltrane writes that once she asked her husband how he would classify his music, to which he replied,

"I am looking for a universal sound." After some time she came to understand that "what he was trying to do in music was the same thing he was trying to do in his life." In other words, this pursuit of a universal sound was not only related to Mr. Coltrane trying to make his music reach all kinds of people, it was also his pursuit of freedom, his attempt to uncategorize his music, to liberate it from labels and names so that he himself could also be free from man-made hierarchies, divisions, and limits. In his latter years, Mr. Coltrane avoided labeling his music as jazz, or bebop, or free-jazz, and seemed each time more focused on making it sound like an extension of his life; just listen to "*Om*" (1968), more than a music album, it sounds like a man telling us about the many things he has heard and learned throughout his life. I adapt their ideas concerning music in order to discuss African-American music as the fiber and fabric of social relations. This research discusses African-American music as an important cohesive element of Black culture.

2.3 Poems are weapons, poetry is involvement

> The distinction between song and poem, never that precise in oral tradition, is in the context of the New Black Poetry, and some of the old which builds upon the same sources and styles, not at all very useful (Henderson, 61).

Some of the worst urban riots of the United States happened during the 60s, many were race-related. These radical forces which were rapidly changing the geopolitics of neighborhoods, cities, and states, were but the outermost layering of a much bigger problem the nation faced: Racism and all its mechanisms of control and manipulation. A lot of this rage and explosiveness was manifest in poetry of the 60s, as well as much of the poetry of the 70s. Many artists and theoreticians began to

reject the idea of poetry being merely words on a sheet of paper, or a cultural artifact. Instead, they believed that art as a whole, and poetry specifically, should be a catalyst of change and transformations. They were thinking about poetry in terms of a tool or resource which African-Americans could use in their individual and collective struggles and demands; poetry had a social and political function, it was about participatory action. Poetry should be about commitment, about giving voice to the manifold and marginalized individual and collective aspirations of African-Americans; poetry was all about getting involved with causes, with groups, with the community; poetry had the power to connect the individual to people and the environment.

Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal co-edited an important study, called: "Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing" (1968), which discusses these parallels, similarities, and correspondences between African-American poetry of the 60s and the Black Experience in the United States. Many essays of this anthology, including Baraka's and Neal's, discuss the fundamental role which art, in a general sense, and poetry specifically, had in the maintenance and spreading of African-American culture and traditions during the 60s. The book is a collection of essays, poems, theories of aesthetics, and political lambastes which together helped to mold and shape the Black Arts Movement (BAM), the "aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept" (Neal 1968). In many ways BAM was a prolongation of sorts of the Blacks Arts Repertory Theatre and School, an avant-garde cultural movement of the mid-60s which happened predominantly in Harlem, and was also idealized by Baraka. Both movements were intent on bringing art to the communities, using art as a communicational

device capable of joining all kinds of people, even rival gang members.

In one of the essays from "*Black Fire*" entitled, "The Development of The Black Revolutionary Artist," the author, James T. Stewart, writes about the necessity of being committed to causes, of making an art which is participatory, and deals with real life problems, experiences, and situations. He sees many possible connections between the movements and changes intrinsic to black music, poetry, and art, and argues that these interrelated elements, in the end, affected lives and cultures in a much wider context. For example:

> The operation of art is dialectical. Art goes. Art is not fixed. Art can not be fixed. Art is change, like music, poetry, and writing are, when conceived. They must move (swing). Not necessarily as physical properties, as music and poetry do; but intrinsically, by their very nature. But they must go spiritually, noumenally. This is what makes those mud temples in Nigeria go. […] This is what makes black culture go (331).

There is also a very curious text called "The New Breed," written by Peter Labrie, which begins like this:

> TODAY, within the black ghettoes of America, a new generation is making its presence felt. […] [P]erhaps the best way to understand it is not through the works of writers and scholars, but through certain changes occurring within the fertile music of the black communities (1130).

As Amiri Baraka sought parallels and similarities between 'negro music' and the 'new American culture' in "*Blues People*," Labrie also goes after the new sounds of the ghettoes and streets in an attempt to better understand a much broader field, in his case the youth of the country. In other words, Labrie also argues that music is a fundamental element of black culture, and that to fully understand that culture it is necessary to investigate the music. The Afterword of the anthology is an

essay written by Larry Neal entitled, "And Shine Swam on." In it, he argues that the black artist of his time, late 60s, had to be self-conscious, but also collectively conscious. Black artists should value their African ancestry, as the exuberance of their oral cultures, but also be socially and politically conscious, in that they should be true and honest to the black cause, to their collective and individual struggle for freedom, justice, and equality. He writes: "Our literature, our art and our music are moving closer to the forces motivating Black America. You can hear it everywhere, especially in the music." (8476) Neal believes that art should be meaningful, liberating, and it should envision change, movement, and transformation. New paradigms were to be created, and older forms and expressions which had been passed down as models for what art should be were to be eliminated.

> New constructs will have to be developed. We will have to alter our concepts of what art is, of what it is supposed to 'do.' The dead forms taught by most writers in the white man's schools will have to be destroyed, or at best, radically altered. We can learn more about what poetry is by listening to the cadences in Malcolm's speeches, than from most 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 the texts, like most white poets. The text could be destroyed and no one would be hurt in the least by it. The key is in music (8480-8481).

To the end of his essay he talks about a transformation which the black poet of his time was being forced to undergo in his or her daily and constant struggles. He writes:

> What this has all been leading us to say is that the poet must become a performer, the way James Brown is a performer – loud, gaudy, and racy. He must take his work where his people are: Harlem, Watts, Philadelphia, Chicago, and the rural South. He must learn to embellish the context in which the work is executed; and, where

> possible, link the work to all usable aspects of the music. For the context of the work is as important as the work itself. Poets must learn to sing, dance and chant their works, tearing into the substance of their individual and collective experiences (8510).

I suppose that the sexist bit about the poet being a 'he' was part of the rhetoric of the time, and not so much Neal's opinions on gender issues. A little bit after that comes one of the most quoted lines of this essay where Neal writes: "The artist and the political activist are one. They are both shapers of the future reality." (8515)

"Black Fire" was like the dawning, or a manifesto, of one of the most revolutionary movements of the 20th Century. BAM was a cultural movement, but also a political movement. It had its own psychology, as well as theories, philosophies, political orientations, life styles, and political aesthetics. All in all, the people commonly associated with BAM, to some extent even the authors who contributed to the anthology, had in common some basic precepts, or tenements, as many used to call them: they would not back down, cop out, or stop fighting in any way before they had their full citizenship once and for all, or before they could define the world in their own terms; as the 'political brother' of BAM, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, put it in the first demand of their Ten Point Plan:

> We believe that Black and oppressed people will not be free until we are able to determine our destinies in our communities ourselves, by fully controlling all the institutions which exist in our communities (Newton and Seale 1966).

The people involved with BAM thought that art was a means to get what they wanted, and also a way of inspiring revolutionary action to such means. One of Neal's main arguments in his essay, which I adapt to this research, is that art is no longer just something located indoors, or in

books, or in museums, such conception, he argues, is already dead; he believes that art is all around, expanding to all directions. Above all, Neal is adamant about the whys behind art. For him, art must be liberating, it must provoke, it must be engaged, hands-on, it must, always, be true to the urges and demands of all 'brothers' and 'sisters' of the nation, in other words, be true to the black cause. The kind of art which most contributors of "*Black Fire*" write about, especially Neal, is the kind of art this research is intent in discussing. Their ideas concerning the role, importance, and function of art is one of the guiding principles of this experiment.

2.4 New black poetry: A poetics of the people, the sounds and rhythms of Black America

> Poetry is a concrete function, an action. No more abstractions. Poems are physical entities: fists, daggers, airplane poems, and poems that shoot guns. Poems are transformed from physical objects into personal forces (Neal 1968).

Another seminal study which critically orients this research is Stephen Henderson's book called, *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic Reference* (1973). As the title suggests, the book discusses many correspondences between black music and poetry, as well as black poetry and vernacular speech. Henderson noticed some flows and directions permeating most of the poetry being done at the time (post WWII until early 70s). It seemed that more and more poets were treating their poems as songs, exploring the limits of prosody and musicality, as Baraka's "Dope" (1979), which starts with grunts and moans of what sounds like a junky on some mad binge; or the many poetic improvisations with jazz bands in the mid and

late 50s, as Langston Hughes' "The Weary Blues." While at the same time, it seemed that vernacular speech, the demotic and colloquial language, or what some critics termed as rapping, the dozens, signifying, and so forth, was each time more apparent in poetry. In other words, black poetry was each time more related to the reality of Black America; crafted, it seemed, in the likings and similitudes of everyday life on the streets. The fact that Henderson's insights and ideas are perhaps as valid and important today as they were back then is what is so astonishing about the study: it already imagined more than enough possibility spaces for a poetics of the new millennium back in the 70s. According to him, for example, this new poetry which was emerging in the United States had far-reaching ties to black speech and music, or verbal and musical modes of expression. These verbal modes were: "(1) virtuoso naming and enumerating; (2) jazzy rhythmic effects; (3) virtuoso free-rhyming; (4) hyperbolic imagery; (5) metaphysical imagery; (6) understatement; (7) compressed and cryptic imagery; and (8) worrying the line" (Henderson 61). The parallels with the hip hop scene which would emerge much later are striking, as Tony Bolden reminds us in his essay "Cultural Resistance and avant-garde aesthetics: African American poetry from 1970 to the present." Bolden writes: "Although he [Henderson] was writing in the 1970s, the features that he identifies, with the exception of 'understatement', might just as easily describe a poetics of flow in hip hop" (533). Henderson has a whole section entitled "Black Music as Poetic Reference" where he discusses many musical references which can be seen in poetry, such as:

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 (46)

Throughout the book he talks a lot about jazz poetry, about the many correspondences between this new poetry and the creative freedom espoused by many jazz musicians; hence why he argues that the poem should be understood as a 'musical score' (61). He even states that: "A poem may differ from performance to performance, […]" ideally it should always be like that, "just as a jazz performance of 'My Favorite Things' would." (61) He believes the jazz poem was a model for this new poetry which could be seen and heard all over the United States in the early 70s. For the purpose of this research, Henderson's work is extremely relevant because he: (1) Discusses the multiple correspondences between black poetry and music. If in "Black Fire" many authors, like Larry Neal, argued for a collective expression, and for less boundaries between art forms, and between art and life, in *Understanding the New Black Poetry* Henderson argues that there is no distinction to be made between black music and black poetry. And (2) Henderson is also very perspicacious in his assertions about the parallels between this new black poetry and the street talk of the time, the vernacular speech. Again, it is mind-boggling that even though the book was written in the early 70s, Henderson was already envisioning poetry much in the same way as artists like J Dilla, Mos Def or Ras Kass see it today: an extension of the rhythms and sounds of life, people, and the streets. Henderson discusses poetry and music as catalysts of change,

movement, and transformation. In that sense, good and serious poetry would necessarily have to be true to the Greek origin of the word, *poiein*, which is translated into ‘to make, create, or compose’: Poems must do things, they must (re)create or (re)imagine the world, ideas, relations, and environments.

2.5 The creation of a new communicative system

> The black man improvises, he creates, it comes from within. It is his soul, it is that soul music. It is the only area in the American scene where the black man has been free to create. And he has mastered it (Breitman 1970, 63-64).

African-American music and poetry are one element in techno, house, rap, funk, disco, soul, rock and roll, doo-wop, ragtime, jazz, gospel, blues, spirituals, field hollers, slave work songs, and in all the subgenres which occasionally sprout from these styles. They were one element as well in all the singing, dancing, and chanting which were forbidden by slave masters, and which we know so little of. Music and poetry were not only catalysts of change and transformation, but also 'thermometers' of what was happening at the time. As Howard Zinn writes: “It was all there in the poetry, the prose, the music, sometimes masked, sometimes unmistakably clear – the signs of a people unbeaten, waiting, hot, coiled” (446). Through music and poetry, as in the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement, or hip hop culture, African Americans wrote significant chapters of their collective history by establishing important struggles of resistance against a racist and colonial system of government. My argument is, nonetheless, that in the

course of the 20th Century African-American music and poetry blended into a new communicative system, which developed new expressions, words, concepts, codes, and signs, as well as attitudes, sounds, techniques, and aesthetics. My understanding of this new art is not in any way dissimilar to what Wynton Marsalis called 'existence music,' or the kind of music which:

> Does not take you out of the world, it puts you in the world. It makes you deal with it. It's not religiosity like 'thou must,' it says 'this is.' It deals with the present. It is the range of humanity that is in this music.[3]

Neither is it dissimiliar to what composer and theorist George E. Lewis termed 'improvised music,' or:

> [A] social location inhabited by a considerable number of present-day musicians, coming from diverse cultural backgrounds and musical practices, who have chosen to make improvisation a central part of their musical discourse. […] [An] intercultural establishment of techniques, styles, aesthetic attitudes, antecedents, and networks of cultural and social practice (Lewis 280).

It is also very similar to what Stephen Henderson defines as 'jazz poetry,' or what Amiri Baraka might suggest was nothing but the blues. To paraphrase what Lewis says about 'improvised music,' that its composition is more 'perfomer-supplied rather than composer-specific,' and also that it is a 'transnational, transcultural improvisative musical activity,' I argue that this new art has become a transnational and transcultural improvisative communicative system focused on domain-specific contexts/performances; where intersubjective exchanges of knowledge and information happen. Therefore, in a sense, more than something racial, it is a set of attitudes, feelings, rhythms, verses, and sounds which seems to always affirm the necessity of having self-

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[3] *Jazz*. Dir. Ken Burns. PBS, 2000. Documentary.

determination of one's own life, as well as self-agency of situations and things in life. Concerning the specific context of this research, I argue that the more African-Americans experimented with record making, the more it became an art form, a new communicative system, a black vernacular technology. It is as if they had been prohibited to go to places and do things for so long, basically to move about, with all those 'colored' signs, and Jim Crow laws, and structural segregation, that they managed to create their own 'living space' within the record album.

There are many important factors which helped shape this phenomenal transformation which African-American music and poetry underwent during the 20th Century, especially after WWII. (1) With the Second Great Migration of African-Americans[4] many cities almost tripled the number of inhabitants, such as Detroit and Chicago. This led to a severe urban crisis, as government investment in these urban sprawls (ghettos) disappeared, and they quickly became a 'no man's land;' dead-zones or crime-zones. There were no steady or technical jobs available, only informal and temporary ones. Black people did not own their houses and establishments, they were but tenants. (2) This forlorn situation made more and more African-Americans develop a 'Nat Turner' kind of politics. There is a significant increase in the amount of people that began to develop radical opinions and commitments. Intellectuals, theorists, critics, and artists were becoming

[4] The First Great Migration started in the dawn of the 20th century, and lasted until roughly the beginning of World War II (1939-1945). In it, about one and a half million African Americans migrated from southern cities to northern cities in search of better living conditions. The Second Great Migration happened during the first stages of World War II, and ended in the late sixties. In it, approximately five million African Americans migrated from southern cities to urban ghettos in the north, east, and west.

each time more engaged with the black cause and struggle, as well as insurgent and vociferous; as Frantz Fanon writes: "I put the white man back into his place; growing bolder, I jostled him and told him point-blank, "Get used to me, I am not getting used to anyone"" (Fanon, 100). (3) As social relations changed, and as new cultures and cultural expressions emerged, language, and its mediation of the world, also changed.

A whole new communicative system emerged from within many ghettos, a new way of talking, with new syntax, words, and expressions: American Black English. In many ways this new vernacular language was very similar to what Eric Hobsbawn defined as 'jive talk.' If in Walt Whitman's time the pavement blabbed, during the early jazz era, according to Hobsbawn, the streets jive talked. He argues that jive talk is connected to many things, for example:

> [T]o the effort of seeing and hearing everything all at once, for that is how the oppressed must be, unless they want to remain lost within the multitude.[…] Jive talk is a collective and virtuous improvisation, continuous, and always renewing itself, it depends on talent, quickness, imagination, and a kind of primitive verbal bravery. (279)

In this sense, Black English was more than a language; it was also a new life-style, an ethos of a people. It was a new communicative system, but also a means of survival, a means of resistance, of subverting the 'official' language, or, as Deleuze and Guatarri put it, of deterritorializing it. Because, as they write:

> The question is not that of reterritorializing in a dialect or patua, but of deterritorializing the bigger language. Black Americans do not oppose black to English, but to American, which is their own language, a black-English. [sic]" (Deleuze and Guattari, 54)

Therefore, Black English had less to do with a struggle for the recognition of a 'new language,' than with the struggle to destabilize an 'official' language. Black English was much more related to the trickster figure, or to signifying, than it was to power and domination, that is why it is never the 'official' language, but rather a parody of the 'official' language; a recoding of it in order to confuse and bewilder. In this sense, although Black English and English shared a common base, they were utterly different in practical terms. As James Baldwin writes in his *New York Times* article entitled, "If Black English isn't a language, then tell me, what is?," (Baldwin) Black English is completely different from English, just like the Senegalese French is different from the Marseilles French. This is so, among other reasons, because "they each have very different realities to articulate, or control." (Idem) This new communicative system has given different forms of agency and articulation to black people. New expressions could be heard in the streets, as "honkey," "funky," or "chill," as well as new sounds could be heard in albums, as Archie Shepp's "*Kwanza*" (1974), or George Russell's "*Electronic sonata for souls loved by nature*," (1969). Mysterious dialects emerged, new body languages were created, and graffiti converted subway wagons into mobile-museums, and walls into historical portraits. Good examples of this new radical and explosive 'corpora' could be seen in the speeches of notorious individuals as Malcolm X, Angela Davis, and Muhammad Ali, or in texts of acclaimed poets and writers like Etheridge Knight, Margaret Walker and Marvin X,[5] as well as in interviews of quick tempered activists as Eldridge Cleaver, and Stokely Carmichael. Malcolm X's famous speech called

[5] Who also goes by the name of El Muhajir

"Message to the grassroots," is a good example. One of the first things Malcolm says in this speech is:

> Not only does America have a very serious problem, but our people have a very serious problem. America's problem is us. We're her problem. The only reason she has a problem is she doesn't want us here. (Malcolm X 1963)

He goes on to say that he cannot understand how people like Martin Luther King Jr. promote a 'revolution' which loves people – whites – who have proven time and again their true feelings regarding African-Americans. He says:

> Revolution is based on land. Land is the basis of all independence. Land is the basis of freedom, justice, and equality […] A revolution is bloody. Revolution is hostile. Revolution knows no compromise. Revolution overturns and destroys everything that gets in its way. And you, sitting around here like a knot on the wall, saying, "I'm going to love these folks no matter how much they hate me" (Idem).

Another example is Huey P. Newton's "Essays from the Minister of Defense," where he writes:

> The racist dog oppressor fears armed people […] An unarmed people are slaves or are subject to slavery at any moment […] There is a world of difference between thirty million unarmed, submissive Black people, and thirty million Black people armed with freedom and defense guns and the strategic methods of liberation (Newton).

The Civil Rights Act (1964), and the Voting Rights Act (1965) were certainly major political accomplishments of the sixties, but the actual day-to-day life of most African-Americans was still unbearable. The peaceful revolution, advocated by people like Martin Luther King Jr., gradually lost its momentum during the sixties; especially after King was shot in 1968. Above all, when Richard Nixon finally made it to the

White House (1969), the possibility of any solid federal compromise with the black cause immediately vanished, as he had made it perfectly clear that he did not need the support of African-Americans, and that, if elected, Southern states would be able to deal with their black citizens as they pleased. Not surprisingly, urban riots became each time more recurrent, as in Watts, and Newark, amongst other areas, indicating that things were as tense as it could get. As British historian Jeremy Black writes:

> These riots indicated that a sense of lack of opportunity, and indeed an alienation that could, at times, be pointlessly destructive, were not only an issue in the South, but also affected black neighborhoods more generally. Many of the riots reflected a particular sense of police oppression of blacks. […] The riots of 1965–8 produced potent images of the underside of the American Dream. (165)

Poets and musicians of the first half of the 20th Century, as Margaret Walker, Claude McKay, and Gwendolyn Brooks, or Duke Ellington, Count Basie, or Lester Young, were much more than inspirations for poets and musicians of the 60s and 70s, their art served as a kind blueprint not only for music and poetry, but also for the culture and politics of the 60s and 70s. Nonetheless, at the same time more and more African-American artists, theorists, and critics of the 60s and 70s were referring back to certain writers, concepts, and 'traditions,' it was certainly a reinterpretation of them.

(4) New light was shed upon these former concepts and writers, so that new forms of resistance could emerge; or as Stuart Hall writes: "it is not a question of what our traditions make of us, but what we make of them" (Hall 44). From these reinterpretations new forms of music and poetry emerged during the sixties and seventies. As Gil Scott-Heron

says, artists "wanted to use words people could understand, as well as ideas people could understand."[6] Through music and poetry African-Americans managed to express themselves in their own words and terms by creating their own communicative system, and, in so doing, they resignified and recreated themselves, their collective and individual history, and their environments.

2.6 Afrofuturism: science fiction, the recovery of the past, the preprogramming of the present, and the invention of alternative futures

> Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture – and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future – might, for lack of a better term, be called: "Afrofuturism." The notion of Afrofuturism gives rise to a troubling antinomy: Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have been subsequently consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures? (Dery, 180)

This is an excerpt from an introductory text to a set of three interviews conducted by the critic Mark Dery, in 1991. The first one with Samuel Delany, the science fiction writer, the second with cultural critic Greg Tate, and the last one with Tricia Rose, a NYU professor. Dery coined the term *Afrofuturism* in this introductory text to discuss narratives from diverse genres and forms of art, created by African-Americans, which referred to their collective past and present, and made speculations about the future, by means of adapting science fiction concepts and tropes to their realities; in other words, *Afrofuturist*

[6] *Black Wax*. Dir. Robert Mugge. Gil Scott-Heron and band. Channel Four Films. 1983. Documentary..

narratives were reinterpreting certain science-fiction themes, as being alien in an alien nation, in the light of the Black experience. Dery argued that by doing this reinterpretation, these artists were recovering their collective histories, resituating themselves in the present, and coming up with alternative futures. He was particularly interested in the ways certain technologies have been appropriated and transformed, thus (re)signified by African-Americans, and how such appropriations and transformations have created new possibilities for art as a means of provoking changes. For instance, he argued that Jimi Hendrix, George Clinton, and Lee 'Scratch' Perry, (re)signified the recording studio into a new technology, and in so doing invented new languages within rock, funk, and dub/reggae. In their hands, the recording studio became another instrument; it signified much more than a place to record and edit sounds, it was a place for sound alchemy. Through the aid of the recording studio their music became a 'prosthetic' extension of their bodies – a sonorous presence.

To answer his troubling antinomy in a positive manner, Dery goes through different genres and forms of art, but always with an eye open for artists who reworked science fiction concepts through a (re)signification of technology in the light of African-American concerns. He claims that these *Afrofuturist* narratives were to be found in 'unlikely places,' as Sun Ra's cosmic music or Basquiat's futuristic graffiti. For Dery, these multiple forms of art, connected through their adaptation of certain elements of science fiction, created matrices for alternative black diasporic histories, memories, and narratives, as well as a new set of projections, imaginings, and predictions for what was still to come, and long overdue: Liberation. In that sense, science fiction

could function as a tool for recovering and reinterpreting histories/memories, or a device which better prepares the present for the future. An example of the former can be seen in Sun Ra's movie "Space is the place," (1974) in which he affirms that music is an ancient "mythic technology" capable of sending blacks to outer dimensions, to beautiful places where they were truly free; in it he also defines himself as a "presence sent to us by our ancestors." An example of the latter can be seen in Rammellzee's gothic futuristic graffiti, which reinterpreted the very shapes and forms of the letter, the basilar codes for our languages, and, thus, also helped to pave the way for what would become the language/culture of graffiti. Dery argued that these processes of recovery and preparation, which science fiction stimulates, could be a means for African-Americans to (re)situate themselves in the present, so that they are in a better position to create a space for new ideas and possibilities. Rose follows this lead by reminding us, in her interview with Dery, that concerning African-American science fiction all these imaginings into the future, and reinterpretations of the past and present, were analogous, for: "If you are going to imagine yourself in the future, you have to imagine where you have come from" (215).

Dery and the interviewees use certain science fiction tropes as metaphors for many of the experiences African-Americans have been forced to withstand, as displacement, or alienation. Dery, for instance, argues that there are many similarities between the overall present-day condition of African-Americans, and the characteristics usually associated with living in an alien world in science fiction art. He writes:

> African-Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassible force

> field of intolerance frustrates their very movements; official histories undo what has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on black bodies (branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, and tasers come readily to mind) (181).

Tate follows this thread, and suggests that the actual day-to-day life of African-Americans offers sufficient inspirational material for science fiction writers. This is what he says to Dery in the interview:

> The condition of alienation that comes from being a black subject in American society parallels the kind of alienation that science fiction writers try to explore through various genres devices – transporting someone from the past into the future, thrusting someone into an alien culture, on another planet, where he has to confront alien ways of being. All these devices reiterate the condition of being black in American culture. Black people live the estrangement that science fiction writers imagine (212).

Delany also provokes us in that direction when he says that African-Americans have an "impoverished history" of images of the future because of what they have been through in the past; for instance, he claims that:

> I have no idea where, in Africa, my black ancestors came from because, when they reached the slave markets in New Orleans, records of such things were systematically destroyed. If they spoke their own languages, they were beaten or killed. The slave pens in which they were stored by lots were set up so that no two slaves from the same area we allowed to be together. Children were regularly sold away from their parents (191).

Professor Rose makes an additional science fiction parallel when she talks about the correspondences between robots and certain African-American artists, like Afrika Bambaataa. Artists like Bambaataa incorporate different technologies, or 'robotic' elements, as samplers or drum machines, into their music as a means of reinterpreting or

(re)signifying older rhythms, as soul and funk, in the light of a new context. Such incorporations could also be interpreted in political terms, as Rose points out: “Adopting the robot reflected the response to an existing condition: namely, that they were labor for capitalism, that they had very little value as people in this society” (214). Dery and the interviewees understand science fiction not as an escapist art, but as a means of reclaiming the past, redefining the present, and also of positioning oneself in the future. Science fiction, they argue, was a technology capable of bringing the past into the present, but also warping the past and present into the future.

Dery argues that science fiction can function as a means to cope with the harshness and brutality of living in hostile and unwelcoming environment, something which many African-Americans can identify with, because through it people can imagine, project, and exchange different lifestyles and intelligences. This line of thought is very similar to what the famous cyberpunk author, William Gibson, once pointed out, that science fiction did so much speculation, and predicted and foretold so many things, that many times it ended up “preprograming the present” (Eshun 1999 108); as though science fiction adjusted and prepared the present for these possible scenarios. After reading the interviews conducted by Dery we get the idea that in the context of the Black diaspora science fiction allows for a kind of ‘active’ recovery of ideas and experiences because it recuperates the past not as something ‘done,’ useless, and finished, but as something which is happening now, and will still be happening tomorrow, and, above all, something which needs our active participation in its perpetuation. Science fiction narratives created by African-Americans artists more often than not

echo back to the mass transplant of peoples from the Mother continent, and generate a feedback which resonates somewhere in-between a counter-history, a disquieting present, and an alternative future; as Eshun writes: “Science fiction was never concerned with the future, but rather with engineering feedback between its preferred future and its becoming present” (Eshun 2003 291).

Less than a year after Dery’s interviews, the writer Mark Sinker released an article for *The Wire* magazine concerning science fiction literature created by black authors, called “Loving the alien – Black science fiction.” In it, Sinker placed heavily charged question marks over some of our conceptions of ‘what it means to be human.’ (Sinker) The way he saw it, to answer a question like ‘what does it mean to be human?’ you would forcibly have to, at some point, address the brutish history which began with the Middle Passage, as well as its monstrous effects over peoples of African descent. He argued that such question persistently poked at the inconvenient fact that blacks were not ‘part’ of the category ‘human’ until, in many circumstances, the latter part of the 20th Century; but why and how come? He traces parallels between Western ideals of ‘humanity’ and ‘mankind,’ since the beginning of modernity, which interpreted blacks as property, and the ways in which blacks have been forced to adapt to this sub-human condition; what kind of art have they produced as a result of this alien-like status within Western/white societies. He argues that blacks have developed peculiar and characteristic science fiction narratives because modern Western civilization, and its governing mentality, capitalism, have deliberately excluded blacks from social life. He interprets the marginalized social status of blacks as though it meant that they were aliens in the context of

modern Western civilization; thrust into this hostile and overwhelming environment.

Dery's interviews and Sinker's article marked the beginnings of what became a field of study called *Afrofuturism*. The idea sprawled during the 90s as more and more artists, performers, scholars, critics, and writers, with shared interests in science fiction, music, technology, cyberculture, myths, Black history and culture, and pop culture, among other areas, began testing and playing with these new possibilities, and stretching the limits of the mind, the body and its extensions. Some years later, it was Kodwo Eshun who began to pose further sets of questions. His reasoning was: Once you see a particular race/ethnicity as property/things, what sort of standards do you use to define humanity? As he writes, for blacks "the human is a pointless and treacherous category" (Eshun 1999 5). Pointless and treacherous because, at its core, Western conceptions of humans/humanity, since the dawning of modernity, have been extremely racist, as they were created and developed by racist thinkers/philosophers; "from Kant to Hegel *et al.* Africa and its subjects have been denied a history and subjectivity" (Eshun 2003 288). Eshun did not accept this modernist racist/rational/historical interpretation of humans/humanity, which likened a linear, progressive, hierarchical, and uniform continuum of history, (one which could be 'verified' through written accounts, as must be pointed out), to humanity; or language to history, and history to humanity.

If history defines a lot of whom we are and what we do as humans, our rationality and individuality, and if it is intrinsic to language, what does all that say about a group of people who have been

left out of history and prohibited to learn the language for so long? That is why the human is a pointless and treacherous category for blacks. In such context, Marshall McLuhan's remark concerning what Western thought understands as 'rational' is as illuminating as it is disheartening. According to him: "Rational […] has for the West long meant uniform and continuous and sequential. In other words, we have confused reason with literacy." (24) Therefore, as blacks had no written accounts of their history, neither were they allowed to learn the languages of their former masters, at least until mid-19th century in most cases, – which would have represented the first step to citizenship, writing themselves into history and society – it is no wonder then that, according to most thinkers/philosophers of modernity, blacks were not considered to be humans, they were not part of the historical progress of humanity, and neither were they capable of reasoning more than beasts of burden. In that sense, Eshun seems to take Dery's and Sinker's arguments to the next level by developing even more the idea that blacks are aliens within Western civilization, and also that they have created new technologies, as when he talks about PhonoFiction, which I will be discussing further on. He also drills deeper into the kind of perturbing atmosphere of Sinker's question, if blacks had always been humans, by assuming that blacks have existed as aliens ever since they were kidnapped from the Mother continent. He questions modernity by equating its beginnings with the beginnings of slavery and capitalism; in other words, he interprets race as a profit generating technology invented by diverse systems of power, at a time when capitalism was beginning to pave the way for the Industrial Revolution – the slave is the first labor unit of capitalism.

Therefore, the beginnings of *Afrofuturism* were marked by a series of questionings and discussions, which implied, among other things, that modernity was inseparable from slavery, slavery meant capital, and all three, modernity, slavery, and capitalism, transformed the African into an alien. In that sense, all these feelings associated with alienation and otherness, as displacement, dissolution, and madness, concepts so present in the modernist lexicon, were already part of the lives of countless black subjects centuries before modernist philosophers began talking about them. As Eshun writes:

> The slaves underwent real conditions of existential homelessness, alienation, dislocation, and dehumanization that philosophers like Nietzsche would later define as quintessentially modern. Instead of civilizing African subjects, the forced dislocation and commodification that constituted the Middle Passage meant that modernity was rendered forever suspect (Eshun 2003 288).

In their intriguingly unique manner, many theorists of *Afrofuturism* decided it was time to 'turn this mother around,' so to speak, and started coming up with alternative realities, by developing narratives which operated in a kind of counter force, in relation to official narratives. Narratives permeated by 'discontinuums,' as Eshun writes, because they "operate not through continuities, retentions, genealogies or inheritances, but rather through intervals, gaps, breaks" (Eshun 2003 3). If their collective images, narratives, and histories, of the past and present, but also their future perspectives, were not exactly what blacks had in mind, then the first thing they had to do was come up with better ones; because, as Alexander Weheliye puts it, "there have always been alternatives in what has been given in the present" ("A Human Fairy Tale Named Black" 466).

However saturated with overwhelming and stifling settings these *Afrofuturist* narratives could be, they were still opening up areas in people's minds, whereupon most day-to-day constrictions and mental and spiritual prejudices did not seem to have their ordinary significance. Not that they were denying or neglecting issues like racism or race relations, or class relations, quite the opposite, they were assuming these issues as given or implicit. Therefore, instead of trying to explain such issues, these artists and thinkers were assuming these 'man-made divisions,' but, simultaneously, affirming that, as any other human creation, something like 'racism' or 'classicism' or 'sexism,' or even 'imperialism,' could cease to exist, or be part of the past; in other words, those ideas and ideologies were constricted to a specific moment in space and time, rather than something perennial, natural, or universal. These narratives were describing places and things which sometimes seemed even more problematic than reality, yet, in different manners, through these narratives these artists were also self-determining and self-defining roles and function within these environments they created. This ability, this power of placing oneself, or a character, within an environment, and establishing the terms in which you will deal with your surroundings, was extremely significant in the context of the Black experience. The uncanny similarities between real life and these science fiction scenarios these artists were imagining only made such narratives more powerful and significant. In terms of PF, or *Afrofuturist* narratives created through music, there are many parallels to be made between the kind of sound as well as the lyrics Scott-Heron created from the latter part of the 70s onwards, and certain elements and tropes of science-fiction. The more distant and surreal his songs became, in that they

sounded each time more like a science-fiction narrative, the more they pointed towards a horizon where people were utterly awakened.

2.7 PhonoFiction (PF): a black vernacular technology for the manufacturing of counter-memories

> A typewriter?–why shd [sic] it only make use of the tips of the fingers as contact points of flowing multi directional creativity. If I invented a word placing machine, an "expression-scriber," *if you will*, then I would have a kind of instrument into which I could step & sit or sprawl or hang & use not only my fingers to make words express feelings but elbows, feet, head, behind, and all the sounds I wanted, screams, grunts, taps, itches, I'd have magnetically recorded, at the same time, & translated into word–or perhaps even the final xpressed thought/feeling wd not be merely word or sheet, but *itself*, the xpression, three dimensional–able to be touched, or tasted or felt, or entered, or heard or carried like a speaking singing constantly communicating charm. *A typewriter is corny!!* (Baraka 1965)

This excerpt comes from a 1970 text, yet would anyone deny it is as contemporary as 3D glasses, hyperreality, or touchscreen cellphones? It comes from a very small text Baraka wrote, called "Technology & Ethos," in which he imagines what new shapes and forms technology could have developed if 'Black Creators' had been allowed more space in the field, and in what ways such alterations might have benefitted certain black communities. Above all, the text is concerned with the political, social, and economic implications of technology, speculating how technology directly and indirectly affects and changes the lives of 'black' people. To the end Baraka writes:

> The new technology must be spiritually oriented because it must aspire to raise man's spirituality and expand man's consciousness. […] The technology itself must represent human strivings. It must represent at each point the temporary perfection of the evolutional man. And be obsolete because nothing is *ever perfect*, the only

> constant is change (Baraka 1965).

He certainly did not have a romantic or simplistic opinion about technology. For instance, there is no dualist, pessimist, or fatalist understanding of the underlying contradictions and problematics behind the developments of technologies in the text, or a kind of human vs. machine conflict. Rather, Baraka seems more interested in the 'political orientations' which seem to direct the advance of technologies. As he writes in the very first line:

> Machines (as Norbert Weiner said) are an extension of their inventors-creators. That is not simple once you think. Machines, the entire technology of the West, is just that, the technology of the West. Nothing has to look or function the way it does (Idem).

He thinks that if more and more black people become involved with the production and consumption of technology, as well as aware of the political, social, cultural, and economic connotations embedded within technology, who knows what incredible and magnificent things might happen. Following these threads, this thesis also proposes different connections and networks between African-Americans and technology. I argue that in the course of the 20th Century African-Americans developed a new communicative system, a polysemic language. African-Americans transformed record making into a 'black vernacular technology.' Through this black vernacular technique the albums became historical narratives, counter-memories, deterritorializing sonic weapons, as well as portraits of musicians – a mosaic which depicted the musician, but also a sketch done by that musician. I argue that certain artists like Archie Shepp, Pharoah Sanders, or Sun Ra had a truly exquisite way of approaching music and making records. These black 'scientists' of sound gradually began reinventing the art of record

making, and the result of such amusing changes was a kind of music which still today escapes terminologies, a kind of music which deals with what John Coltrane has defined as the:

> [T]he first vibration – that sound, that spirit which set everything else into being. It is The Word from which all men and everything else comes, including all possible sounds that man can make vocally. It is the first syllable, the primal word, the word Power (Coltrane 1967).

In such cases, music was a means to an end, a form of action, a tool against oppression and racism. There are many albums and songs which are extremely important and relevant for any study of African-American history, like "We shall overcome," or "Strange Fruit" (1937), or even James Brown's "Say it loud I'm black and I'm proud!" (1968), or Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On* (1971). These albums and songs are also chapters of the history of African-Americans and the United States. They are the product of a black vernacular technology; a domain-specific, performer-supplied technique/technology which transformed record making not only into an artform, but also a platform for multiple and variegated networks of improvisative communicative systems.

I have developed this argument by adapting and extending an idea posited by the critic Rayvon Fouché in his article for the *American Quarterly* called, "Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud: African Americans, American Artifactual culture, and black vernacular creativity." As Baraka, Fouché also wanted to know if technology could "be more responsive to the realities of black life in the United States." (640) As Baraka, he also wanted to know if technology drove as much social changes for African-Americans as it does for white Americans. In the beginning of the article he writes that:

> One cannot expect African Americans, who have been

> relegated to peripheral sites within American society and culture, to interact with technological products analogously to the members of the dominant American culture. It is the misconception of fair and equal Americaness – reeking of the value-neutrality of technology – that is highly responsible for the systematic disregard for technological activities that are peripheral to the dominant society's. […] Questions contemplating how technology has been 'raced' throughout American history, as well as how to understand and see African American technological agency, are essential for a broader conception of the complex nature of race in the creation, production, and use of technology. New questions will produce a more textured understanding of the roles that black people have played as producers, shapers, users, and consumers of technology within American society and culture (642-643).

He asserts that exactly because technology has been 'raced' throughout history, or, in other words, inaccessible to African-Americans, they have had to engage with it "based upon black aesthetics" (641), or in their own ways and manners, rather than based on the dominant use within society. According to him, because of this technological segregation African-Americans underwent they were forced to develop innovative and creative acts to deal with technology which can be seen in three ways: '[R]edeployment, reconception, and re-creation' (642). He affirms that the act of redeploying, reconceiving, and re-creating technologies was a necessary first step for African-Americans to "reclaim certain levels of technological agency." (641) In other words, because African-Americans had been excluded from the social and economic benifits of certain technologies, they came up with new artifacts which were suited for their own purposes and life, and adapted to their own ways and manners. Fouché argues that not only have African-Americans been victims of the use of technology, as with tasers, branding, the whip, and the slave ship, to mention but a few, they have

also been deprived and barred from the actual creation of technology. He gives examples of slaves and people of African heritage trying, in vain, to patent objects and tools they created, and even mentions a white attorney who said the following remark in a patent rights battle involving a black inventor: “It is a well-known fact that the horse hay rake was first invented by a lazy negro who had a big hay field to rake and didn’t want to do it by hand” (641). As Baraka, Fouché was curious about the possibilities technology could bring and brought to humans, especially black people. Fouché argues that the ‘common’ belief that African-Americans have had little influence over the development of diverse technologies which still today change our lives, or that African-Americans are adverse to technology is yet another dangerously misguided and racist perception of things. He argues that the results of this three way process of redeployment, reconception, and re-creation led not only to the development of new artifacts, but also new cultures. This is his overview of redeployment, reconception, and re-creation:

> Redeployment is the process by which the material and symbolic power of technology is reinterpreted but maintains its traditional use and physical form, as with blues musicians extending the perceived capability of a guitar without altering it. Reconception is the active redefinition of a technology that transgresses that technology’s designed function and dominant meaning, as in using a police scanner to observe police activities. Re-creation is the redesign and production of a new material artifact after an existing form or function has been rejected, as in the case of DJs and turntabists developing new equipment (642).

I have adapted his argument for this research to interpret black music and poetry as a set of interrelated styles, attitudes, feelings, and techniques which allowed for black artists to redeploy, reconceive, and re-create the technologies of making albums (records), as well as the

phonograph. In so doing, they managed to reclaim certain levels of agency, to define things in their own terms, and to position themselves in society. During the 20th Century, more and more African-Americans began redeploying, reconceptualizing, and recreating the technologies and techniques behind making a record album by ‘extending its perceived capability’ into different realms. The limits of recording sound, as well as what is an album, or what is it for, were completely ‘transgressed’ and transvalued into a new communicative system. In other words, African-Americans turned an artistic expression into a political aesthetics. The end result of this process was that more and more songs and albums have become means and modes of resistance, a tool to fight against oppression, difuse power structures, and systems of control. By doing this, African-Americans re-created the album, they turned it into a chapter of the Afro-Diasporic history. In this sense, the needle of a record player has the same function as the sowing needle: *decuttextualize* and *recuttextualize* these different texts and textures of the vast Black Atlantic database.

This new language developed through record making enabled African-Americans to reinvent their past, recreate their present, and imagine better futures. As more and more African-Americans expanded the possibilities of record making, gradually what began to emerge was a new kind of narrative or fiction: PhonoFiction (PF). The idea of PF was created by Eshun. He wanted to analyze certain albums and songs not only by looking at their different melodies, lyrics, or compositions, but also by discussing the front and back pictures of albums, their liner notes, and all that was condensed and diluted into the song and the album. He writes:

> Rejecting today's ubiquitous emphasis on black sound's necessary ethical allegiance to the street, this project opens up the new plane of Sonic Fiction, the secret life of forms, the discontinuum of AfroDiasporic Futurism, the chain reaction of PhonoFiction. It moves through the explosive forces which technology ignites in us, the temporal architecture of inner space, audiosocial space, living space (Eshun 1999, 3).

Basically, PF is a crossbred combination of sleeve-notes from albums, photographs and drawings seen in them, lyrics from songs, sound patterns and instrumentations in songs with no lyrics, samples which crisscross time and space, and much more. PF interprets music as “an intertext of recurring literary quotations that may be cited and used as statements capable of imaginatively reordering chronology and fantasizing history” (Eshun 2003, 299). It is the sum of all parts of a record or song, the stories and possibilities such totality pours out. It interprets music as a ‘chronopolitical’ event, as something reverberating within the ‘audiosocial space,’ our ‘living spaces,’ where intersubjective instances of change and exchange are constantly taking us to unexplored and multi-mediated experiences. By talking about the production and consumption of music in terms of diverse audiosocial spaces, Eshun thinks beyond any and all barriers between music/sound and life. Through PF sound and life are intertwined, in that they are constantly transforming one another into something else; music becomes a sociopolitical catalyst, “the science of playing human nervous systems, orchestrating sensory mixes of electric emotions: the music of yourself in dissonance” (Eshun 1999 160). PF flirts with reimagining myths and mythologies in music, as Sun Ra did, through a transvaluing of their classical and historical underpinnings; by replacing “lyrics with possibility spaces,” and conceptualizing music’s fiction as a

"*MythSystems*" (Eshun 1999 160). PF assembles "science from myth and vice versa" (Eshun 1999 158), by disassembling the myth's complex symbology into the diluted totality of a record/song/sound. PF is a science which creates new myths through music. It transforms different kinds of music, as jazz, hip hop, or techno, into technologies/techniques, or distinct knowledge and communicative systems. Through PF rhythm becomes a 'biotechnology' (Eshun 1999, 7), and sound a "sensory technology" (Eshun 1999, 193), the former discusses the correlations between the body of a musician and how that body creates new rhythms, the latter discusses the synaesthetic processes which occur in us when we hear certain sounds.

Eshun assumed that for some black artists making a record was a science, and that this science was capable of producing narratives so embedded with meaning and symbols that it burst out mythologies. I adapt PF to this research in an attempt to better understand the albums and songs I analyze, not only by discussing the historical contexts in which they were created, but also by discussing the correspondences between some of the subject-matters of these albums and songs and some problems and challenges we face today, as the historical disenfranchisement of African-Americans, the different kinds of structural segregation African-Americans have been dealing with, and the transformations which racism has been through, the many disguises it has assumed. As Eshun, I also believe that there are certain records out there, specific songs, which contain so much information, there are so many things encrypted in those verses, sounds, and covers that if we were to thoroughly discuss them we could eventually discover narratives as important and significant as any historical document; as he alerts us:

“Here music's mystifying illogicality is not chastised but systematized and intensified into MythSciences” (Eshun 1999, 7).

I began by arguing that African-American music and poetry are completely interwoven with movement, not only verbal-vocal-sonic movement, but also physical movement; the former related to the ‘polyrhythms and jazzy rhythmic effects’ of this new language, and the latter related to the importance of performance, and body language for such sounds and verses. I have discussed African-American music as a kinetic art, or a kind of art which establishes different types of relations and communication between people, all of which are tightly linked through collective movements. I interpreted it as a new language which connects people and cultures by creating living spaces, or audiosocial spaces. I also gave examples of musicians who transformed the album (phonograph) into a new improvisative communicative system. I shall discuss these albums not only as historical narratives, but also as a black vernacular technique/technology capable of creating PhonoFiction. I intend to discuss certain albums as PF because I believe that there are many more histories within these sonic narratives than most people give them credit for. I aim to study the pictures, the fonts and colors used, the songs and sounds that can be heard, as well as (and especially) everything which goes by unheard, all those things which we have to search for, to decode and decipher, in order to better understand them, as well as their significance and resonance in our lives.

3 Historical Contextualization

3.1 Listening to history: What are the sounds of the past?

> My country, ‘tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing; land where my fathers died (Marian Anderson “My Country ‘Tis of Thee”).

Our first stop reaches back to Easter Sunday, April 9, 1939: the historical Lincoln Memorial concert of Marian Anderson. This concert in many ways is a milestone not only for African-Americans, but also in the history of the United States. It represents the culmination of many hopes and yearnings of a people, just as Anderson embodied much of the sophistication and rectitude which African-Americans had been creating during the first three decades of the 20th Century. However, sadly the organization of the concert, everything that happened before it, also somewhat exemplified much of what African-Americans had had to endure and survive ever since they were first brought from Africa to the United States. Anderson, a worldly renowned opera singer, who had already sung in the best opera houses of the world, went through hell before having her concert scheduled for the Memorial.

Initially, she had been invited by Howard University to perform at their auditorium, but the organizers soon figured out that they would need a much bigger place to accommodate the large number of people expected to attend the concert. Anderson and the organizers first tried to schedule a concert at the Constitution Hall, of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), but they barred her because she was black. It should be mentioned that, ironically, the DAR is a lineage-based organization of women who are direct descendants of people involved in the independence of the United States, and whose motto is ‘God, Home, and Country.’ Anderson’s staff then tried a white high

school auditorium, where she was also barred. Much like the movies of the time, it seemed that the capital was also black-and-white. However, because Anderson was a world famous singer the worrying levels of outrage and indignation these racist acts were causing among more and more African-Americans soon reached the White House. The first lady of the Nation, Eleanor Roosevelt, upon hearing about all this, offered to help Anderson out, something which had never been done by her predecessors, and even resigned her membership from the DAR. With the aid of Anderson's manager, Sol Hurok, and the then-executive secretary of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), Walter White, the first lady convinced the Secretary of Interior, Harold L. Ickes, to have the concert on Federal grounds; it was a historical landmark. The federal government had never intervened on behalf of a black artist, much less in this manner, scheduling a concert in front of a National monument. No other black artist had ever been benefitted in such a way, and probably none will, given the significance and magnitude of this concert for the time.

When Anderson walked out in front of those 75,000 attendants, a mass of people stretching from the Lincoln Memorial to the Washington Monument, she was the first lady of Black America. Secretary Ickes walked beside her to the center of the stage. They stopped in front of the microphone, and Ickes voice resonated over the multitude: "In this great auditorium under the sky, all of us are free" (Keiller 212-213). Many people from the integrated audience must have wept. He continued: "Genius, like justice, is blind. Genius draws no color-line" (213). These remarks were already quite powerful and meaningful, but coming from someone from the federal government,

someone close to the White House, it meant better possibilities, it sounded like change. The visual effect of the stage was also extremely significant. Lincoln's statue rised imposingly behind Anderson, but she still looked strong and firm. As the concert was about to begin, as Anderson walked to the microphone, for a split second before she started to sing, her eyes popped-out, as if she had become suddenly terrified. Maybe she just remembered everything which had happened before the concert was finally scheduled for the Memorial; or perhaps the whole experience of being black in a country which, time and again, demonstrated, beyond reasonable doubt, that it did not like or want blacks in it, flashed before her eyes. The symbolic charge of the very first song, "My country, 'tis of thee," also known as "America," its significance and connotations, the title is already self-evident, all that must have also made her uneasy, to say the least. We must keep in mind that it is an extremely patriotic song, it is part of the national character and ethos, it was sung in official government ceremonies, (still is), and, especially, that it praises a country, it talks about it in terms of 'my country,' which means this person is a fellow citizen, an American. Imagine, then, what must have rushed through Anderson's mind seconds before she began to sing this song, after all she had been barred twice in the nation's capital. Could she also say 'my country'? Was she also an American? Whatever made Anderson's eyes pop-out, it really gives us the impression that she is deeply scared, almost paralyzed, lasted only for a brief moment, and as quickly as her eyes opened widely, they also closed. Almost immediately after closing her eyes she started to sing, and her voice was as magnificent as empowering.

Anderson is black, and a woman. At the time, culturally, politically, socially, and economically speaking, that meant almost a 'double-negative,' in terms of being a minority within a minority. If it was bad enough being black back then, as being a second-class citizen, being disenfranchised, or being called 'boy,' or 'nigger,' as if those were your names, (as Martin Luther King Jr. said in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"), being a black women must have been even harder; the double oppression. Anderson is in front of the Lincoln Memorial, which in and by itself is already an extremely charged monument, it has a tremendous historical significance, and she is there to perform, to sing. This was at a time where Jim Crow segregation was ongoing in the South. There were signs over many public and private facilities, stores, and establishments which read: Colored. 'Separate, but equal' mentality and culture was still the norm, in fact, it was the law. Lynch mobs were all around, the Klan, and other illegal white supremacist fraternities might be lurking just around the corner, and government officials are known for saying things like: "I want to see those dogs work, and the niggers run" (T. E. 'Bull' Connor, Commissioner of Public Safety for Birmingham, Alabama, also known as 'Bombingham'), or: "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever," (George Wallace's Inaugural Address as Governor of Alabama). Therefore, 1) a black woman, 2) performing in front of the Lincoln Memorial, 3) about to sing perhaps the second most patriotic song of the country, right after "*Star spangled banner*," was as important as any major historic event of the country.

There are videos of her performance on the internet. Every time I see them, her voice gives me the shivers; it is sweet and angelical, yet

it also contains all the hurt, pain, and anger of what it meant to be black in the United States. When she sang that the possessive determiner 'my,' of "My country, 'tis of thee," she sang to and for all blacks; she even changed the third line of the song from: "Of thee I sing," to: "Of thee we sing" (Keiller, 213). She sounded like some heavenly chant, like a song in a long-forgotten dream, echoing the cries and narratives of her ancestors. For the encore of the concert, almost as a haunting reminder, she sang the spiritual: "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen." Indeed, it must be hard to really know what it means to be a world famous singer, but not be allowed to sing in your own country, in its capital, because of your race, because of the color of your skin. Of course things did not change from then on. The day after the concert, D. C. was as segregated as always, but it certainly symbolized a giant step for African-Americans. After all, to have the White House intervene on the matter suggested that perhaps federal intervention over state governments would ensue; perhaps their individual liberties would finally be guaranteed, and social equality could be within reach. There was certainly a huge time-gap before something as consistent as the Civil Rights Act came from the Federal government, in terms of compromise, but, nevertheless, the concert was a remarkable feat.

The economy had been in the doldrums for some time, which meant that the national character and mood were extremely pessimistic. President Roosevelt (FDR) was trying his best to guarantee, through his New Deal, at least basic government assistance for the population, but the country was in rags, and completely torn-apart. If that was not enough, the Great Migration of African-Americans had created massive and uncontrollable urban enclaves within many cities of the Midwest,

and North, like Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Detroit. Urban sprawls which looked like war-zones were spreading all over the country. Life was tough for most people, but the depression seemed to hit blacks the hardest. When there were jobs available black workers had way less choices, they were offered fewer jobs than white workers were offered, so then with the depression, as with most any sociopolitical phenomenon, blacks felt the hardest blows. For example, in front of some factories there would be signs written: "No jobs for niggers, until every white man has a job" (Holloway). There was a feeling of anxiety looming over the nation, plus, Europe had been under considerable tension since 1938. According to one of Anderson's biographer, Allan Keiler, a music professor at Brandeis University, when the concert began the sky was grey and cloudy (212), but during the concert the sun eventually came out. I suppose that such serendipitous coincidences, the weather change, Easter Sunday, the integrated audience, in front of the Lincoln Memorial, all that together must have triggered a lot of hope and excitement among most African-Americans, as well as whites, that were there. I suppose also that many people in that audience must have thought that, just like the sky had cleared out, maybe the upcoming decade could also bring about all the long-awaited changes African-Americans wanted and needed.

Furthermore, Anderson also embodied a lot of the social, political, and cultural zeitgeist of the first three decades of the 20th Century, what became known as the New Negro movement. Her impassive and guiding presence on stage, the way she managed to transform a song into something very personal and intimate, the contours and depth she brings to songs, but also the fact that she

developed around her many spheres of influence, as being a renowned opera singer, being able to reach the White House, being a model for the Civil Rights. Here was a musician who had spent years perfecting her craft, someone who had studied with the best teachers in the business, and tirelessly sought to overcome her limitations. Anderson is a good example of the artist which really lives his or her art, who has almost an exclusive relationship with it, of complete dedication. She sang until she could reach vocal landscapes which most of us are unaware of. Her talent was the result of years and years of training, performing, improving, and pursuing more. She toured through Europe, and the United States, and was critically acclaimed on both sides of the Atlantic. Anderson was a solstice artist, those that shine the longest, but come only once in a cycle. Her vocal potency seems to reach deep into our inner-skull environments, it almost jolts our heads, but it also reveals us a woman as strong as a lighthouse, ready for the worst sea storms, and biggest waves; she will endure anything, withstand it all. Listen to her, play one of her tunes, her voice conducts you, teaches you, touches you, it reveals us a refined, conscientious, and unfaltering woman – those notes are her body across time and space. That is why she embodied the New Negro movement, because she stood for exactly what it was all about: The idea of uplifting the race, of forming new bodies, and new cultural mindsets, of being an example, a model. The New Negro was tired of being harassed, disenfranchised, disrespected, and segregated. The New Negro was no longer afraid. The New Negro was ready, and could no longer wait. Such movement was epitomized by the Harlem Renaissance, which transformed the borough into a hub of artists, intellectuals, activists, and political leaders. People from all over the

world were going to Harlem, and it gradually became an epicenter for Black culture. Anderson, much like Langston Hughes, Claude Mckay, Zora Neale Hurston, or Gwendolyn Bennett, carried the New Negro spirit and force within her.

Marian Anderson was part of the dawning of a new era; she played a considerable role in the shaping of this new ethos. Her performance at the Lincoln Memorial concert, all the different contexts and ideas behind it, represented a new personal stance for African-Americans, one of participatory action; it showed the way to a new personhood, molded out of pride and endurance; it pointed towards the impossible, but claimed it was possible, as having the first lady join her plight; and it also said it loud and clear to all African-Americans: This is our country too! The counter-memories and histories which Anderson helped to create are there for anyone to experience, see, listen to, feel, and learn from. All that she stood for, and still stands for, is extremely relevant and valid for a better analysis of what it means and meant to be Black in the United States. She condemns as much as she guides, she uplifts as much as she moves, she shows us the scars, wounds, traumas, and deformations which racism provokes, but she also tells us how to overcome all of it, how to be stronger than it.

3.2 Billie Holliday: When the crop bears a strange fruit they come by tens

> Eric Garner was no the first American to be choked by the police, and he will not be the last, thanks to legal rules that prevent victims of police violence from asking federal courts to help stop deadly practices (Rahman and Barr).

Few days after the Lincoln Memorial concert, on April 20, Billie Holliday, Lady Day, recorded “Strange fruit,” an anthem against lynching. However, before she managed to record the song, much like what Anderson had been through before having the concert scheduled for the Lincoln Memorial, Lady Day had heard ‘no’ from everyone she had tried to convince to record it. No recording company or radio station wanted to touch it because of its lyrics, but Holliday felt it needed to be done. When she was about to give up, she went to talk to her friend Milt Gabler, owner of Commodore Records, a small record store/recording company, about her frustrations over trying, in vain, to record the song. Gabler, on the other hand, was not the least bit reluctant to record it. So they got the musicians from the band of Café Society, an integrated nightclub, which Day regularly sang at: Sonny White on the piano, Tab Smith, Stan Payne, and Kenneth Hollon on tenor sax, Frankie Newton on trumpet, Jimmy McLin on guitar, and Johnny Williams on bass. What was done almost as a last resource, in a small recording studio, ended up selling a million copies, and would eventually become one of Lady Day’s best known songs. It remained in her repertoire for twenty years, and she sang it during the last performance she did for a television program, at the BBC studios, in London, for the program “Chelsea at Nine,” which was on February 23, 1959, less than six months before she passed away.

Sadly, however, the poignant shadow which “Strange fruit” casts over the history of the United States seems to reach us still today. Less than ten ago years, on June 13, 2005, the Senate apologized for never having approved a law against lynching; never (Marcoe). Perhaps such a shocking revelation might have baffled many Americans at the

time, taking them completely by surprise. Yet, African-Americans were much too familiarized with the horrors of lynching as well as the silence and connivance of the government to be shocked or surprised by it all. Ida B. Wells, in 1900, had already alerted the nation about the utter destruction of life that was happening all over the South, and in many other regions of the country, and also about the complicity of the government:

> Although lynchings have steadily increased in number and barbarity during the last twenty years, there has been no single effort put forth by the many moral and philanthropic forces of the country to put a stop at this wholesale slaughter. The silence and the seeming condonation grow more marked as the years go by (Atwater 2012, 55).

She was infuriated with the lack of action of the government over such repulsive, yet ever so present issue. Nonetheless, every time a bill against lynching went to congress, southern legislators either filibustered or threatened to filibuster. What would Wells say about the apology from the Senate? 'Too little, too late,' like always?

Though lynching in the United States has reaped the lives of people from diverse ethnic origins, the vast majority of victims of lynching have been African-Americans, and this statistical fact says a lot. The more we look into lynching, the more we examine it, the more it reveals a shadier side of the American ideology, way more ominous and realistic than one might care to admit. The pictures showing bulged eyes, deformed bodies, and all the lurid horrors of the consequences of lynching are forever imprinted and incrusted in our consciousness. To look at them is to learn about what the human being is also capable of, how low and repugnant we have sometimes been in our historical doings. Yet, instead of focusing on the atrocities of the disfigured

bodies, what about all the people that are there, witnessing all that? What does that say about those people? Some of these pictures have multitudes in them; some even have children in them. Some of these pictures were even sold as post-cards, like 'I was there,' followed by the name of a city, and a date.[7] What do all those people looking at the violated bodies almost in awe, a mix between fascination and 'justice has been done,' what does that tell us about this kind of monstrous act? What does a burnt and severed body say? What does that smell of roasted flesh tell us about all those southern gentlemen? Those screams, hollers, and desperate cries for help consumed by flames, to where do they point to? Some of these lynchings were advertised in the newspapers, with the exact time it was to begin.[8] Marian Anderson had to go all the way up to the White House to schedule a concert, yet what sort of legal impediments, or judicial obstructions did these lynch mobs have to overcome?

Lynching is perhaps the flag bearer of what we might refer to today as past mistakes or historical burdens, but it is merely just another form of organized violence, whose echoes and palpitations are still today ever so present. The spectacle of the lynching is no longer there, in that it is no longer done in such an overt, almost cavalier, way. However, the brutality of it is still today with us, especially the part where everyone involved with the lynching goes on their separate way afterwards, completely unpunished. Eric Garner's killer, a white police officer from the NYPD, was acquitted just last week from a grand jury – today is December 8, 2014. The crime was also filmed by someone who

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[7] *Strange Fruit*, Dir: Joel Katz. Milton Gabler, Amina Baraka, Amiri Baraka, Abbey Lincoln, Michael Meeropol. PBS, 2002. Documentary.
[8] Idem.

was there, yet someone not the least bit fascinated, but outraged. The video shows Garner being put in a chokehold by a police officer, while 3 other officers also forced him to the ground. Just before the video stops many more police officers start to appear, one of them is not wearing uniform. Garner keeps saying "I can't breathe, I can't breathe." The motionless body can be seen on the ground, and a man in a suit puts his hand over the camera lens and orders the person who is filming all this to stand back, move away. Is there anything new to this? What has changed? Emmett Till had purportedly whistled at a white woman who passed in front of him, and Eric Garner was approached because he was allegedly seen selling loose, therefore untaxed cigarettes, a federal crime. Garner's death was, obviously, not as shocking and gory as lynchings were, but it certainly sends the same message: If you are black, you better watch out, and know your place.

"Strange fruit" was written by a Jewish high school teacher called Abel Meeropol. Meeropol was in no way a fervent militant, or political activist, rather he was just another livid citizen who believed that lynching had nothing to do with what the United States stood for. Not long after Lady Day did the first recording of the song, in 1945, another song written by Meeropol received a lot of attention; this time for different reasons. Meeropol wrote the title song of a short film starred by Frank Sinatra, called "The house I live in," and whose central message opposed anti-Semitism. The short film begins with Sinatra recording a song. After a take he leaves the studio to smoke a cigarette, while the band which is playing with him gets ready for the next song. Outside he sees some kids chasing one kid, and intervenes. He asks the gang of kids what all the fuss is about. The kids and Sinatra have a brief

argument, in which they tell him to stay out of it, but then they eventually tell him that they do not want the other kid living next to them because they do not like his religion. Sinatra then tells them that only Nazis or stupid people do not like people because of their religion. He goes on to say that God made everyone the same, and that America was made of "100 different people, with 100 different ways of talking, and 100 different ways of going to church, but they are all American ways."[9] He then tells the kids a story of an American plane which bombed a Japanese ship during World War II, and that inside that plane, working together, were a Presbyterian and a Jew; and, as Sinatra says to the kids, they "smacked that Jap right in the middle." The kids like the story, and understand they were wrong. Sinatra then starts to go back to the recording studio, but the kids ask him what he does for a living. He replies he is a singer, so they ask him to sing a song. He laughs and consents with a head nod, then sings "The house I live in."

"The house I live in" is a patriotic song which praises the 'melting pot' ideology behind the spirit of the nation, and compares America to a house of freedom and liberty. It talks about how all the different people around the narrator are part of the same 'family,' they are all Americans; it ends with: "But especially the people, that's the true America to me." (23) However, what most people do not know is that, ironically, a verse from the song was cut out in the short film. The first line, from the third stanza reads: "The house I live in, my neighbors white and black." (7) Sinatra did not sing that line. On the documentary "Strange Fruit," by PBS, Meeropol's adopted son, Michael, says that

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[9] *Strange Fruit*, Dir: Joel Katz. Milton Gabler, Amina Baraka, Amiri Baraka, Abbey Lincoln, Michael Meeropol. PBS, 2002. Documentary.

when his father went to see the film, together with the whole family, as soon as Sinatra omitted that line, he started shouting: “Shit! Shit! They have ruined my song!” and was eventually thrown out of the movie theatre.[10] What is even more curious about the short film is that all the kids are white, everyone in the band which is playing with Sinatra is white, there are no black faces in the film; even though it won an Honorary Academy Award, as well as a Golden Globe award in 1946, its undisclosed message seemed quite clear: The United States did not tolerate anti-Semitism, but it seemed quite alright in ignoring African-Americans.

“Strange fruit” is still with us, its by-products and after effects are still with us. That first stanza still sends shivers down spines: “Southern trees bear strange fruit / Blood on the leaves, and blood at the root. / Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze / Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.” (1-4) These trees have blood on their leaves because someone has just been brutally murdered there, but they also have blood at their roots, which is perhaps even more disturbing, because it says that such killing is part of their genes, traditions, and culture. Those eyes that stare in fascination at the bodies were still around when Lady Day sang “Strange fruit,” and they certainly are still around, only slightly disguised under new nomenclatures, as stop-and-frisk operations, presumption of guilt, racialization of crime, racial profiling, *et al*. The fact that we still see unpunished police brutality, political disenfranchisement, as gerrymandering, geographical segregation with the consent of the government, as well as a total economic collapse of many regions known as inner-cities, or ghettos,

[10] Idem.

and which, in many cases, are inhabited predominantly by blacks, also lets us know that lynching is but the superficial manifestation of an infection which runs deeper than any river. The fact that the federal government never managed to outlaw lynching, not even today, is yet another baleful reminder to us all that Sterling Brown's poem "Old Lem," is still scary. Its second stanza reads:

> They got the judges
> They got the lawyers
> The got the jury-rolls
> The got the law
> They don't come by ones
> They got the sheriffs
> They got the deputies
> They don't come by twos
> They got the shotguns
> They got the rope
> We git the justice
> In the end
> And they come by tens. (22-34) (Brown)

3.3 Expansions: Duke Ellington's Negro music

> "*Black, Brown, and Beige*" is the beginning of a new American music which has its roots right here and cannot be judged from European standards of composition. Its historical and sociological backgrounds put it into the category of "heart music," or folk music if you will, and out of this super-sophisticated, intellectualized realm of art. (Cohen 234)

Few years after Lady Day recorded "Strange fruit," on January 23, 1943, another African-American made history when he performed at America's most prestigious venue, Carnegie Hall. For the concert, Edward Kennedy Ellington, better known as Duke Ellington, had organized his most daring and unconventional work, its very title was in a league of its own: "*Black, Brown, and Beige*: A tone parallel to the

history of Negro in America." Perhaps Duke thought that the best thing to do at that point was not exactly to write something about the history of African-Americans, but instead to orchestrate this history, transform it to music: he replaced words for rhythms, melodies, harmonies, silences, timbers, and tones. The audience was racially-mixed, which, in such a context, was already something outrageous. The media coverage had been disproportional; after *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the *New York Times* ran articles about him some mediums were even talking about "National Ellington Week." (Cohen 207) The jazz-opera, as some called it, was about being black in America, about the highs and lows of the history of African-Americans, ever since they were first abducted from Africa, advancing through the American Revolution, Civil War, Emancipation, Spanish War, World War I, and Ellington's days. It was about the struggle of Black folk, about being proud of being Black, and about overcoming all the obstacles in your way.

The famous music producer, John Hammond, had already organized a jazz concert at Carnegie, which was also about the history of the music of African-Americans. Hammond organized the concert in such a way that the first presentations would be Spirituals, and it would end with swing bands; the very name of the concert was *From Spirituals to Swing*. Famous musicians, like Count Basie, Big Bill Broonzy, James P. Johnson, and Benny Goodman, presented themselves during two nights in a row, the 23rd and 24th of December 1939. Hammond's concert was a huge success, in that it brought many black musicians to the forefront, not to mention that it also made African-American music reach a whole different audience than it was used to. Their importance in historical and cultural terms in invaluable, yet, in contrast with

Ellington's concert, Hammond's were somewhat diluted, or previously digested, almost as if they had been made to fit the audience's conceptions and understandings. Whereas Hammond's concerts were almost didactic, in that they were displaying this vast body of music, but with sufficient pauses and explanations in between acts as to make it all understandable and meaningful, Ellington's was a non-stop narrative, a 'tone parallel.'

However, it is also very important to point out that despite mixed reviews nationwide, and even the fact that the Carnegie concert was a career changer for Ellington, in terms of there being a significant increase in revenue after the concert, and a lot more places were trying to schedule shows with him, most reviews coming from New York, Duke's turf, were not the least bit positive and enthusiastic about the Carnegie concert. It seems that that body of bad criticism got the best of the Duke. Ellington did one more "*Black, Brown, and Beige*" concert at the Symphony Hall in Boston, and never again after that. He never recorded it like the original presentation, as a continuous flow. His 1958 album, "*Black, Brown, and Beige*," is composed of separate tracks. It was only after Duke's death, in 1977, that Prestige records released the original 1943 concert in vinyl. He did include some of the songs which composed the concert, as "Come Sunday," and "Work Song," in his regular repertoire, but he never presented "*Black, Brown, and Beige*" in its original format after the Boston concert, neither did he seem to talk about it all that much.

Many critics had a hard time to understand and categorize Ellington's "*Black, Brown, and Beige*," they thought it was too unrefined to be placed together with classical music, yet too complex to

be placed together with other jazz compositions. Many called it a ‘jazz opera,’ or ‘negro opera,’ as if to place “*Black, Brown, and Beige*” within the safe zone of European music standards, and from that viewpoint try to criticize it; after all it was the Carnegie. What had the Duke done this time? What was this non-stop performance of approximately 40 minutes, which tried to tell the history of African-Americans through music? It was nothing like a typical Duke ‘hit,’ as “C Jam Blues,” or “Take the A Train,” songs of less than five minutes, with a whole lot of swinging, a swaying beat, and perfect closure. Back in 1943, only classical music was done in such long takes, an endeavor out of reach for a jazz musician, and basically something unimaginable for an African-American. If you wanted radio play, if you wanted a contract with a record company, if you wanted to make money and be noticed, you had to make swing hits which obeyed the curfew of the three minute format of popular songs, nothing longer than that would sell, and certainly would not be recorded because the phonograph record of the time, 78-rpm, usually had enough space for only three to five minutes of sound. Once again, the Duke had outdone himself, and baffled his admirers, critics, supporters, and followers

It was the beginning of 1943. As quickly as World War II had escalated, so too had the American economy been boosted; nothing kicks offs the economy like a war. With the war going full-bore the Depression finally left the country. Once again Americans ignored their grievances, exalted patriotism, bought their war bonds, enlisted themselves, did their duties; and the capitalists were as happy as they could be. By this time, swing was at its heydays. It was a perfect example of the American spirit of the time: full of energy, power, and

life; Benny Goodman, whom the press had named the ‘king of swing,’ even went to Europe and did shows for Allied troops. Yet, the more swing had popularized itself, the more it had become a standard, in that the more it could be reproduced and copied. In one of the chapters of “*Blues People*,” Amiri Baraka discusses this transformation which swing underwent; explaining that it started as a verb, but gradually became a noun.

As the Great Migration of African-Americans spread throughout the country, so too did their music. By the 20s, swing had become a national phenomenon. Americans were going crazy over that beat. It was something completely new, nothing sounded quite like that: The syncopated and swaggering beat, and those exquisite sounds and hollers coming from the instruments. The great musicians of the time, as Ellington, Count Basie, or Willie ‘The Lion’ Smith, were, like Marian Anderson, a perfect example of the New Negro. They had developed extraordinary techniques of their own, and the image they created for themselves was carefully tailored with tones of distinction and pride, almost nobility, as some of the nicknames adopted suggest.

Nevertheless, by the time Ellington made his Carnegie concert, swing was a defaulted music, it had become big business. The way Baraka sees it, one of the results of this ‘commercialism’ was that by the 40s swing had completely lost its significance to African-Americans, but had become the reigning fad amongst white middle-class. He argues that ever since the Depression, which had devastated many African-American communities, swing no longer reflected or talked to most African-Americans, ‘blues people.’ Many no longer saw themselves in that music.

> Swing had no meaning for blues people, nor was it expressive of the emotional life of most young Negroes after the war. Nevertheless, by the forties it had submerged all the most impressive acquisitions from Afro-American musical tradition beneath a mass of 'popular' commercialism. And most of America took the music to heart. There were swing radio programs throughout the country, the most popular swing musicians had their own radio shows and were almost as well-known as movie stars. Big-band jazz, for all practical purposes, had passed completely into the mainstream and served now, in its performance, simply as a stylized reflection of a culturally feeble environment. Spontaneous impulse had been replaced by the arranger, and the human element of the music was confined to whatever difficulties individual performers might have of reading a score. (Jones, 181)

In the 40s, records catalogued as swing sold approximately 30 million copies;[11] which meant a lot of cash flow, not exactly for the artists, but certainly for the record companies. It also meant that if you wanted to be a musician, to have a contract with some studio or company, a 40 minute long 'negro opera' about the untold story of African-Americans was out of the question, even for someone as influential and powerful as the Duke; yet Ellington was not known for being told what to do.

"*Black, Brown, and Beige*" was not the Duke's first attempt at creating longer musical pieces. He had already done so a decade earlier with "Creole Rhapsody" (1931), and "Reminiscing in Tempo" (1935), a eulogy he composed for his mother. Both were much shorter and had way less 'things to say' than "*Black, Brown, and Beige*," but were already strong indicators that he was all together a different kind of artist. Both daring experiments with sound revealed Duke's quite unique ability to think like a band, to become this massive sound potency.

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[11] *Jazz*. Dir. Ken Burns. PBS, 2000. Documentary.

Together with his orchestra, and assisted by the talented hands of Billy Strayhorn, the music which Ellington created had a stunning presence, in that it was deep, filled with different tones, pitches, and timbers, but it was also very dynamic, the dialogues between the instruments are very precise and highly contrasting. His music seemed to be able to find a note that could mirror a sentiment or feeling, just listen to "A tone parallel to Harlem," with all its different ambiences, the instruments talking amongst themselves, while the drums keep the song moving through the streets of Harlem. The riffs he created filled a lot of musical space, yet still gave plenty of room for the other instruments to establish their own dialogues. His playing style had all the sophistication and rhythm of the stride piano players of the New York scene, listen to "Perdido," but also a lot of the classic tradition of European music, which he inherited from his middle-class upbringings in Washington D.C., listen to the brief, yet colorful attacks he makes on "In a mellow mood," which, even though syncopated, still carry a vague trace of some cheerful Italian operetta.

He developed a cool intertwining of the syncopated blues thump, with the affected and flourished classical movements. Like no one else, he wore only the finest clothes, developed an image of nobility, and never seemed to be out of his league, nothing seemed to stop this man's sound explorations, and business endeavors. How many African-Americans in the 20s, black-and-white days, could make almost everyone in the country call him a Duke? Even though he lived great part of his life in an extremely racist society and had to confront situations like not being allowed to have his mother come to many of his shows because of her race, or having to sleep in segregated and

deteriorated hotels after having played at extremely fancy places, even with all that he still managed to become a world celebrity, and to make a lot of money through his talent, proving himself a savvy businessman. He presented himself many times at the White House, and after World War II he became somewhat of an Ambassador of American culture, as the government thought it could sway Russians away from communism through the help of his music. The Duke was also known for being extremely well-read and well-versed, and having a keen sense of humor. Rumor says that when he met Nixon, he kissed the president's cheeks four times, and, afterwards, backstage, when Nixon asked him why he had done that, he replied that he had given him a kiss for each cheek.[12] That was the Duke. Music was never an end for him, but a means: A means of making a living, of transforming ideas and possibilities into sound, of fighting for full-citizenship, civil rights, and against racism and oppression, and of reaching out to people, and telling us stories about ourselves and our history. Ellington was a fundamental figure in the development of the music of African-Americans, what he called Negro music, because he contributed a lot to the expansion of its vocabulary. "*Black, Brown, and Beige*" was not a small project, and neither was anything else he did.

> Ellington's accomplishment was to solve the problem of form and content for the large band. He did it not by trying to play pure New Orleans blues and stomp music rearranged for large bands, as [Fletcher] Henderson did, but by re-creating all the elements of New Orleans music in new instrumental and harmonic terms. What emerged was a music that could be traced back to the old roots and yet sounded fresh and new (Finkelstein, 192).

[12] *Jazz*. Dir. Ken Burns. PBS, 2000. Documentary.

Like all great composers, he created dazzling and timeless stories through his music. The more he became familiarized with his band, the better was the material he wrote for his musicians. He had an incredible ear, and knew exactly what to write for his musicians. His compositions were not envisioning a specific instrument playing some notes, but rather a specific musician playing his instrument. Together with his orchestra, Ellington managed to create new sound platforms which combined all the sophistication and technique of swing, with all the refined and complex cadences of European music. His music was a form of communication, an ever-changing life form just like us.

Right before he started the third and final movement of "*Black, Brown, and Beige*," he made some quick remarks to the audience about what they were about to hear, a brief summary about the context of their notes and melodies. This is what he said:

> The first theme of our third movement is…the veneer we chip off as we get closer and find that all these people who are making all this noise and responding to the tom toms, there are only a few making a living…many do not have enough to eat and a place to sleep, but work hard and see that their children are in school…And it develops until we find ourselves today, struggling for solidarity, but just as we are about to get our teeth into it, our country is at war and in trouble again, and as before, we, of course, find the black, brown, and beige right in there for the red, white, and blue (Cohen, 224).

Like few other musicians of his time or any other time, Ellington used his art to change things he did not agree with. His music, even though many did not manage to fully grasp that, was extremely political. By mixing many elements of the blues with the refined techniques of classical music, Ellington created a truly American sound. He managed to expand the vocabulary of his music, which he deemed as Negro

music, so much that it became completely entwined with American music. As Baraka points out, “by the thirties the ‘race category could be dropped from Ellington’s records” (Jones, 162). Ellington wanted to go beyond race, even though he certainly did his part in the desegregation of the United States, and he wanted to go beyond the imaginary lines which delimited the terrains which songs could venture into. He somehow found a way to look miles ahead of the barriers which other people saw. He turned his orchestra into a self-sufficient organism, they could play any song, and it would always have their style imprinted in. He was not just composing songs, but also fabricating a new vocabulary for future musicians.

3.4 Oh bop sh-bam a klook a mop: new grammars, new frontiers

> “Re-Bop certainly sounds like scat to me,” I insisted.
> “No,” said Simple, “Daddy-o, you are wrong. Besides, it was not Re-Bop. It is Be-Bop.”
> “What’s the difference,” I asked, “between Re and Be?”
> “A lot,” said Simple. “Re-Bop was an imitation like most of the white boys play. Be-Bop is the real thing like the colored boys play.”…
> “You must not know where Bop comes from,” said Simple, astonished at my ignorance.
> “I do not know,” I said. “Where?”
> “From the police,” said Simple.
> “What do mean, from the police?”
> “From the police beating Negroes’ heads,” said Simple. “Every time a cop hits a Negro with his billy club, that old club says, ‘BOP! BOP! … BE-BOP! …MOP! … BOP!”
> “That Negro hollers, ‘Ooool-ya-koo! Ou-o-o!’”
> “Old Cop just keeps 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 piano keys that plays it” (Hughes 117-118).

Few months after Duke's Carnegie concert, in August 1, Harlem was up in flames. In no way was it an isolated event, as many other race riots were erupting all throughout the country, as Detroit, Chicago, and Newark. Such hot-spots were solid indicators of the psychological upheaval which was taking place within the country. African-Americans were tired of waiting, dying, and especially of their subhuman condition. They had gone to fight for freedom and democracy in Europe, in a segregated army, only to return to a segregated country. Some African-American soldiers, upon arrival back home, and still in uniform, were lynched; they had managed to survive the atrocities of the war theatre, only to be brutally murdered back home.[13] A lot of the agitation on social and political fronts which had happened after World War I, and had helped galvanize movements to fight against inequality, but had almost disappeared during the Depression, as many people were struggling just to survive, was now, during the 40s, resurfacing, and with a lot more anger and determination. In 1941, for example, African-Americans threatened a massive march on Washington if FDR did not include them in the defense program of America, which was stimulating the economy, and hiring countless people to work in the military industry. As a result, the Fair Employment Practices Committee was established. This sort of participatory culture grew exponentially among African-Americans throughout the 40s and 50s, as did their resentment and dissatisfaction with American society as whole, because of the kind of treatment they had been receiving ever since they first got to the country, as well as with the government, for its ineptitude and lack of

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[13] *Strange Fruit*, Dir: Joel Katz. Milton Gabler, Amina Baraka, Amiri Baraka, Abbey Lincoln, Michael Meeropol. PBS, 2002. Documentary.

action in guaranteeing that such abhorrent practices would cease once and for all.

Economically, the war was partially good for African-Americans. “The Negro secured more jobs at better wages and in more diversified occupational and industrial pattern than ever before” (Weaver 306). In 1933-34, in the South, “19 per cent of Negro children of high school age were in high-schools” (Frazier 436). By 1940, that percentage had turned to 35 per cent (445). There was definite increase in the number of middle-class African-Americans, but it came with a price: acculturation. As Baraka points out, there was, obviously, a cultural side-effect that accompanied any African-American who managed to make it into the respectability of the middle-class, and that was the disappearance of blackness, or anything which could in any way associate this person with other blacks:

> [T]he only assimilation that society provided was toward the disappearance of the most important things that the black man possessed, without even the political and economic reimbursement afforded the white American (Jones, 186).

This kind of mentality was not new. A similar reasoning had already paved the way for people like Booker T. Washington to rise to prominence; the culture leveling politics of assimilation. The idea being an African-American can become, in varying degrees, someone influential, so long as he or she remains submissive and obedient; so long as the black man ‘knows his place,’ he can amount to something.

Politically, all the temporary stability and unity, which had been produced by the tension of war, was gone. With no more war to unite the population under patriotism and the fight for freedom, all the problems which had been put on hold now returned with even more

force. The vast majority of African-Americans were still confined to ghettoes, no matter how much money they made it seemed that whites simply did not want to live with them. Most were still treated as subhumans. Many still did not vote. Countless others did not even have basic government assistance or civil rights. However, instead of helping the millions of desperate African-Americans, or offering any kind of support, Truman concentrated all his political actions abroad, and the holocaustic mania of the Cold War began. According to Howard Zinn, by 1949, to China alone, the United States had given $2 billion in aid; money which went to Chiang Kai-shek's forces, the dictator who was fighting against the Red Army (427). That same year, Chinese Communist forces took over the country; money well invested.

A year after, on June 25, 1950, when North Korean armies, backed by a socialist dictatorship, marched across the 38th parallel, thus invading the territory of South Korea, a right-wing dictatorship, the Korean War broke out. The United States' response to this invasion was a clear sign of what would become common place in its foreign policy. Because it was the most powerful member of the newborn United Nations, when Truman declared that the United States would back the army of South Korea, what effectively happened was that he transformed the American army in the U.N. army, and yet another globally conducted, locally fought, war broke out (Zinn, 427). Things go so out of control, that on December 16, 1950, Truman proclaimed a national state of emergency in order to fight 'communist imperialism.' It is almost ironic the fact that instead of desegregating America, Truman chose instead to desegregate the army; so it is okay for a black man and a white man to share a war barrack many miles away from home, but

not okay for them to share a restaurant back home? It is also important to mention that chemical weapons, as Napalm, so commonly associated with the war in Vietnam, were already been used, indiscriminately, in Korea, which reaped approximately 2 million lives.

Culturally, it is significant to point out that there was a major surge in a revivalist orientation towards music. Jazz critics and aficionados, and major record company alike, began going after long forgotten artists, and moldy and unheard of catalogues from lesser known, and many times extinct, record companies or radio stations. Many believed that the only ‘true’ and ‘original’ music of the time was in the past, in Dixieland jazz, early 20th Century New Orleans jazz, in musicians like Buck Johnson, a pivotal figure in the gestation of jazz, but who made his first recording only in 1942, when he was more than sixty. Curiously, there was also a swell in bands which played Dixieland jazz, or tried to, but whose members were as white as cotton; something quite paradoxical, to put it lightly. As Baraka points out:

> By the forties the popularity of ‘Dixieland’ bands was enormous at colleges throughout the country, or at any of the other places that young white middle class gathered. The ‘revived’ Dixieland music was a music played by and for the young white middle class. It revived quite frankly, minstrelsy and black face (203).

On the one hand, there was a ‘museumification’ of black music, in that many critics and record companies of the time, basically the people in charge of the material production of this culture, considered that what was being done by contemporary African-Americans was not ‘original’ music, there was no commercial or cultural interest in it. ‘Authentic’ music, the kind of music which ‘mattered,’ was the defunct style of Dixieland; that sold a lot of records, and made old white folks dance

again. On the other hand, there was the cheap emulation, with a tinge of good old racism to it, of all those white college bands which sounded like those 'ancient' New Orleans bands. Would it be too far-fetched to say that this economic strategy of valuing the past more than the present, as well as this cultural orientation of stereotypically trying to 'sound black,' was yet another way of ideologically imprisoning African-Americans within a distant, controlled, and 'safe' framework?

Another very popular music style which emerged during the late 40s and early 50s was cool jazz. It eventually became known as 'West Coast' jazz due to the fact that a lot of its production was made in Los Angeles. As the sales of records sky-rocketed more and more capitalists wanted a slice of the pie. Very quickly, cool jazz became big business, Hollywood's music, the kind of music you might hear in most FM stations of Beverly Hills. All of a sudden, A & R (artists and repertoire) personnel of major record companies, as Columbia and Capitol, were running around frantically from bar to bar, looking for the next Gerry Mulligan, Bill Evans, or Paul Desmond. Many musicians associated with the style made a considerable amount of money, as Chet Baker and Dave Brubeck. However, almost all musicians and producers involved with cool jazz, basically the people who profited with the production/consumption cycle of it, were white. Miles Davis, who until today is seen as somewhat of a mentor or precursor of cool jazz, already in the early 50s, had drifted far away from it. Even though a lot of the creation process of cool jazz happened in New York, in a racially integrated environment, basically in Bill Evans' apartment,[14] which

[14] *Jazz*. Dir. Ken Burns. PBS, 2000. Documentary.

Davis, among many other famous musicians, often frequented, it gradually moved westward, and whitened itself.

Socially, there was also much unrest among many African-American communities, organizations, and institutions. In the late 30s, early 40s, many organizations, as A. Philip Randolph's labor union Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), and the NAACP, were getting stronger by the day. On 1942, the Pittsburg Courier, one of the most read black newspapers of the country, began the 'double v' campaign, which called upon African-Americans to go to war and fight for democracy overseas, but also called upon the government to fight for equal rights within the country. If both 'combats' could be won it would mean a double victory for all Americans. By the late 40s, Black Nationalist organizations, as the Nation of Islam, were also becoming incredibly powerful. A significant victory also came on 1954, when the supreme court, in the *Brown v Board of Education* case (which was composed of a total of five cases, Brown being one of them), decided that separate public schools was unconstitutional. The courageous and extremely effective Montgomery Bus Boycott started the very next year, and would, a year later, lead to the outlawing of segregated public transport in Alabama. On 1957, the governor of Arkansas, white supremacist Orval Faubus, ordered the National Guard to block the students from entering into Little Rock Central High School. Even after the federal government stepped in, Faubus still did everything within his reach to postpone the integration of public schools in Alabama. He lost, of course, but the fact that he did manage to create means to avoid integration been carried out with 'all deliberate speed,' as had been determined by the Supreme Court, says a lot about the social, cultural,

and political matrices of the South. The fact that still today certain governments in the South can, through gerrymandering, for instance, prevent African-Americans from 'properly' voting goes to show just how the United States still struggles against many of these issues.

A lot of the agitation and unrest of the 40s and 50s inevitably showed up in the sounds many African-American musicians were producing. It is during this period that we first hear from bebop, hard bop, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, funk, soul, and free jazz. During the early and mid-40s, there were the tempestuous and unpredictable improvisations of bebop, with the complex new phrasings of musicians like Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, and Max Roach. Going in a different direction, during the early and mid-50s, there was the gospel oriented, back to black blues searching, of many hard boppers, as Art Blakey, Cannonball Adderley, Charles Mingus, and Miles Davis. During the mid-50s, screamers like Little Richard, Fats Domino, and Bo Diddley, among many other eccentric performers, developed bridges between the hypnotic throb of rhythm and blues and the fast and furious beat of rock and roll. Still in the screaming department, but in a whole different context, there was a lot of soul searching behind the shrills of Ray Charles, Etta James, and Sam Cooke. Almost as a continuation of hard bop's 'return to the roots,' and still in the mid-50s, other musicians, as Elvin Jones, Wilbur Ware, and Sonny Rollings, were experimenting with the "harsher, rawer, more classic timbers of old jazz" (Jones 217); critics, always having to come up with new terms, decided to call this 'new style' funk, or funky. Finally, during the late 50s, musicians like John Coltrane, Sun Ra, and Ornette Coleman, began to take music to a whole different level with their

cosmic sounds. If during the 40s it had been incredibly hard to manifest any sort of dissatisfaction with the government and its politics, or American society at large, because of the relentless 'communist purge' which dominated the country, during the 50s a lot changed. Especially for African-Americans, the 50s was a most revolutionary decade.

Frank Kofsky writes about this change of attitude, of cultural politics, which happened during the 50s in the realm of music, in his book, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music* (1970). According to him, during the 50s there were more African-American musicians overtly expressing their blackness, their African ancestry, and their pride of being black, than hitherto. Kofsky calls our attention to the intentional utilization of what he terms as 'Afro-American and African themes' in titles of songs and albums. Concerning the former, Afro-American themes, he gives examples of:

> [C]ompositions which deal with anything specifically and uniquely black, whether pertaining to the Afro-American religious experience (examples: The Sermon, The preacher, Right Down Front), manifestos of cultural pride (Bronze Dance, Black Diamond, Dis Hyeah ["this here" in the dialect of the streets]), references to black history (Work Song, an attempted recreation of the singing of slaves in the antebellum South), panegyrics to leaders in the struggle for black liberation (Max Roach's composition Garvey's Ghost), and so on (46).

Concerning the latter, African themes, he writes about many black musicians of the time who: "[i]n addition to giving their pieces names that in some way or other related to Afro-American culture, […] made their consciousness of ethnic heritage explicit by using African-derived titles" (48). Examples of such titles include: Dakar: Tanganyika Strut, Africa, African Lady; Bantu; Uhuru; Kwanza; Kucheza Blues; African Violets, Katanga; Dahomey Dance; Message From Kenya" (49); among

others. In addition to this, many musicians were also exploring each time more the visual part of their albums, from the front and back cover to the liner notes, which had a sizeable increase, sometimes a famous critic or writer would contribute with some words, making the details of the material artifact much richer. These are just a few examples of this new direction which African-American music took during the 50s. The technology involved in the process had also changed significantly. Albums could record more music; with the new 33 1/3 saucer invented by Columbia Records in 1948 each side could play a little over 20 minutes, quite a lot if compared to the old 78 revolutions. A lot changed during the 40s and 50s, concerning African-American music. However, the biggest changes happened during the first five years, and also during the last five years. In the early 40s we have the 180 degrees turn of bebop, from the point of view of swing and Dixieland jazz. If with the music of artists like Duke Ellington we can notice a new vocabulary emerging and being expanded, with bebop we have the creation of new grammars. Swing was about playing the song with clockwork precision, while bebop was about improvisation within extended chord structures. Bebop musicians were bringing a whole different sound to the instrument, treating it as merely an extension of the body. Baraka writes about this by means of comparing Paul Desmond's (white) style with Charlie Parker's (black) style. He writes:

> Thus an alto saxophonist like Paul Desmond, who is white, produces a sound on his instrument that can almost be called legitimate, or classical, and the finest Negro alto saxophonist, Charlie Parker produced a sound on the same instrument that was called by some 'raucous and uncultivated.' But Parker's sound was meant to be both those adjectives. Again, reference determines value. Parker also would literally imitate the human voice with

> his cries, swoops, squawks, and slurs, while Desmond always insists he is playing an instrument, that it is an artifact separate from himself. Parker did not admit that there was any separation between himself and the agent he had chosen as his means of self-expression (30-31).

This section's title, oh bop sh-bam a klook a mop, is also a good example of this new way of self-expression which could be heard in the early phase of bebop. It refers to the scat singing done by Dizzy Gillespie in his 1946 song called "Oh bop sh-bam." Klook a mop refers to a combination of sounds produced by the drums; more specifically that of a rim shot on the snare drum, followed by a punctuation on the bass drum. This scat, oh bop sh-bam a klook a mop, is repeated throughout the song, and it is punctuated by the orchestration of different instruments. Sadly, however, with the ban on records of 1942-1944, due to war cut-backs, a lot of the initial outbursts of bebop were never recorded; but the after-effects were more than visible.

As for the latter part of the 50s, more and more musicians started to explore the album in its totality, in that it was no longer just a collection of singles, but a cultural artifact that presented a historical narrative; it mirrored different social, political, and cultural contexts through music. From 1955-1960 the album became something completely different, it was no longer an end, or the finished and polished product which displayed part of the catalogue of a musician, but a means, it became one of the ways in which musicians could explore new sound patterns and frontiers, as well as their own personal image or life style. Some examples of this important change in attitude and affirmation can be seen in albums such as the 1958 album arranged by Charles Mingus, and Leonard Feather, and with Langston Hughes reciting verses over jazz music, called *The Weary Blues*. Its liner notes

were also written by Hughes. It was light years away from the habitual record of the 40s. There was a cross-over between arts, a famous poet/writer participated in its makings, not to mention it is certainly a prototype of rapping. There are different narratives and interrelationships embedded in it, as Hughes' verses, Hughes' verses in dialogue with the 'phrases' coming from the musicians, and the musicians' phrases in dialogue with each other.

Two other good examples of this shift in recording albums are Charles Mingus' "Mingus Ah Um," and Ornette Coleman's "The Shape of Jazz to Come," both from 1959. The painting of the cover of Mingus' album was by the influential graphic designer Sadamitsu Fujita, already something which connoted certain sophistication. There are many tracks which reference icons of African-American music, as "Good-bye Pork Pie Hat," (Lester Young), "Open Letter to Duke," (Ellington), "Bird Calls," (Charlie Parker), and "Jelly Roll," (Jelly Roll Morton), which makes the album become almost a history lesson, a mix between an homage and a reinterpretation of the past. It also contained the inflammatory "Fable of Faubus," whose lyrics I have quoted and discussed in the previous chapter. It was such an outrageous album that, not surprisingly, Mingus had a hard time finding stable work during the 60s.

As for Coleman's album, the very title and front cover are already quite self-explanatory, inside are the visions and ideas of a man who managed to transform his instrument into a prosthesis of his body. Coleman's ideas of what was jazz, or how to play it, were, in different manners, a lot freer and unrestricted than anything which came before it. As theorist George Russell writes about his music:

> Ornette seems to depend mostly on the overall tonality of the song as a point of departure for melody. By this I don't mean the key the music might be in. His pieces don't readily infer key. They could almost be in any key or no key. I mean that the melody and the chords of his compositions have an overall sound which Ornette seems to use as a point of departure (Russell, 9).

Coleman had been through hard times during the 50s, he was ridiculed for playing a plastic saxophone, and almost no one understood his technique and style, musicians and critics alike, based more on feelings and emotions than on musical notations. His solos, which many times had nothing to do with the song's melody or tone, brought him more disdain and contempt from his peers than admiration and acceptance. His music was termed as free-jazz, which by itself is already something as redundant as contradictory. Redundant in the sense of how can something as free as jazz have a prefix 'free'? Contradictory because by saying he played a free-jazz, you would be implying that jazz is not free. Either way, it goes to show just how much people did not understand Coleman's music, and also how 'way beyond' he envisioned his music coming from and going to. Among his admirers and supporters, John Coltrane being one of them, what would usually grab people's attention at first was the fact that the band never counted to start a song, there was no time reference they would just start playing.[15]

Both albums, Mingus' and Coleman's, are good end points to the 50s. Both are examples of recordings which transformed music into an extension of life, an extension of the artist; of how albums became a means by which the musician could reach out to us through time and space, and tell us their stories, versions, and visions. These musicians

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[15] *Jazz*. Dir. Ken Burns. PBS, 2000. Documentary.

managed to develop multiple concepts within their albums by orchestrating layers of signification, as if there were cultural matrices intertwined not only within the songs, but also within the material artifact of the record album in its totality. “Mingus Ah Um” was a history lesson, while “The Shape of Jazz to Come” was about planting possibility seeds for the present and future. These musical experimentations created sound landscapes which referenced possibilities and ideas, such as freedom, citizenship, and blackness, through a whole different perspective. This way, they shaped new musical grammars which gave plenty of room for future generations of African-American musicians to expand, rework, and reinterpret them. When we peer into albums like “Mingus Ah Um” or “The Shape of Jazz to Come” we see glimpses of the 60s already, and how albums would steadfastly become a means of social placement and cultural affirmation for musicians. Throughout the 60s, the album became more and more an ethnic artifact, a black vernacular technology; not only a connection to the past, but also a means of positioning oneself in the present, and imagining a better future.

3.5 Right on: What’s happening brothers and sisters?

> You’ll get your freedom by letting your enemy know that you’ll do anything to get your freedom; then you’ll get it. It’s the only way you’ll get it. Or they’ll call you an extremist or a subversive, or seditious, or a red or a radical. But when you stay radical long enough and get enough people to be like you, you’ll get your freedom (Breitman 1965, 145).

Throughout the 60s more and more albums began to chronicle the day-to-day life struggle of African-Americans. By listening to them,

we learn of what was happening in the streets, homes, and minds of many African-Americans. They were a good thermometer of the cultural, political, and social climates of the nation. If the music of the 40s and 50s had established new grammars, and the Negro music before it, as that of Duke, had created a musical vocabulary, one onto which these new grammars would eventually attach themselves to, during the 60s there were a lot of sonic experimentations carried out which sought to use these vocabularies and grammars to create new (hi)stories, myths, legends, and folklore, but also to address contemporary issues by establishing points of resistance and dissent, as well as means of articulation and agitation.

The decade already started with much turmoil and unrest. On February 1, four university freshmen students sat down at a segregated lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. They were denied service, but refused to go away. So they were arrested. This first protest sparked much outrage and anger, but soon many more supporters were also participating in these sit-ins. However, people's reactions to such acts were also getting out of control. It was quite common for the participants of the sit-ins to be beaten, humiliated, and harassed. However, a year after the first sit-in,

> more than fifty thousand people, mostly black, some white, participated in demonstrations of one kind or another in a hundred cities, and over 3,600 people were put in jail. But by the end of 1960, lunch counters were open to blacks in Greensboro and many other places (Zinn, 453).

On May 4, 1961, CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) organized the 'Freedom Rides,' in which an interracial group of 'freedom riders' got on two buses in Washington D. C., and headed down to New Orleans; or

so they thought. They never got to New Orleans, as mobs of angry whites eventually ended this first attempt to call the country's attention to the problem of racism and segregation in the Deep South. But these protesters would not yield, and they kept on organizing more Freedom Rides; eventually even SNCC joined their struggle. Very quickly the situation escalated out of control, and news about the horrible things which were happening to the riders soon reached the country. All of a sudden, the Kennedy administration had a lot at stake. The sanctity of the 'Southern Way of Life' was being threatened; and no southern gentleman liked that. The South's problem was also Kennedy's problem because a lot of his money and support came from what was called the 'Solid South,' 'Kennedy's men' down South who not only helped him get elected with a lot of votes, but also pumped a lot of money into the Democratic Party. The governor of Alabama, pro-segregation John Patterson, was one of these people. Kennedy and his brother, Robert, the attorney general, summoned John Seigenthaler, to intervene, and do everything he could to stop the riders. They had been informed by their advisors that a young student from Fisk University, named Diane Nash, was co-organizing one of these rides. Nash's group was leaving from Nashville, Tennessee, and heading down to Birmingham, Alabama. Seigenthaler, commenting on his first contact with Nash, many years afterwards, said that the conversation went more or less like this:

> I understand that there are more Freedom Riders coming down from Nashville. You must stop them if you can. Her response was: "They are not going to turn back. They are on their way to Birmingham, and they will be there shortly." […] And I felt my voice go up another decibel, and another, and soon I was shouting: "Young woman do you understand what you are doing? You are going to get somebody killed! Do you understand that you are going

> to get somebody killed?" And there is a pause, and she said: "Sir, you should know we all signed our last wills and testaments last night before they left. We know someone will get killed.[16]

By November, the number of Freedom Riders had surpassed 430. Time and again, these riders had been severely beaten, they had watched the police simply stand by and watch everything from a safe distance, and they had also seen the federal government's incapacity and seeming unwillingness of guaranteeing their constitutional rights. However, their efforts eventually paid off, and in November the ICC (Interstate Commerce Commission) finally outlawed racial segregation on interstate buses and trains, as well as on terminals, drinking fountains, and waiting rooms.

Throughout 1962 and 63, there were also a lot of people organizing voter registration in many Deep South states, such as Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama. Like the riders, these organizers were also greeted in the old Southern manner: They were threatened, beaten, chased, humiliated, and harassed. One of these encounters was noted by a SNCC member, who, along with James Crawford, another SNCC organizer, was taking people to the county courthouse to vote. This is part of their account:

> REGISTRAR: What do you want?
> CRAWFORD: I brought this lady down to register.
> REGISTRAR: (after giving the woman a card to fill out and sending her outside in the hall) Why did you bring this lady down here?
> CRAWFORD: Because she wants to be a first class citizen like y'all.
> REGISTRAR: Who are you to bring people down to register?

[16] *Freedom Riders*. Dir: Stanley Nelson. John Lewis, Raymond Arsenault, John Seigenthaler, Clayborne Carson, Diane Nash. PBS, 2010. Documentary.

> CRAWFORD: It's my job.
> REGISTRAR: Suppose you get two bullets in your head right now? (Zinn. 455)

This sort of reception was not unusual; just another election day. In September 15, 1963, a church was bombed in Birmingham, and four girls were killed; three of them were 14 year olds, the other was only 11. Of the four men involved with the terrorist bombing, one was convicted only in 1977, one eventually died, without ever having been formally accused of anything, and two were convicted in 2000. 1964 was no different, in June, three civil rights workers, James Chaney, black, and Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, white, were arrested in Philadelphia, Mississippi, for an alleged traffic violation. Without any phone call or advance notice, they were thrown out of jail, and ended up being caught by an angry mob which had been waiting for them. Their bodies were found only 44 days afterwards, in the Mississippi river. Even though their families wanted it, they were not buried side-by-side because of Jim Crow laws which segregated cemeteries. All throughout 64 and 65 urban race riots were happening all over the country. In August 1965, one of the biggest urban outbreaks of the 20th Century happened in the black ghetto in Watts, Los Angeles; triggered by the arrest of a black driver which 'went bad.' The National Guard had to be called in, 34 people were killed, and property damage was estimated to be more than $40 million.

A lot of this rage, frustration, and anxiety were also surfacing in the music of the time. Even though the album "We Insist! Max Roach's Freedom Now Suite" was recorded in 1960, it already offered clear glimpses of what African-Americans could expect for the decade which was then just beginning. Already the cover was damned straightforward;

with Max Roach there were no gimmicks, tricks, or personifications. It is a direct mention of the sit-ins which were happening at the time. Roach was known for having a firm and committed positioning concerning race related issues. The name of the label which released it, Candid, printed in large black letters in the bottom right corner of the front cover was also quite suggestive of the potential of the album. That lonely white man behind the counter does not seem just about ready to tell these gentlemen that they do not serve their kind in that establishment. He seems more nervous and scared than anything else, which suggests that Roach and his companions are in control. Their long and penetrating stare is hard to miss.

The first song of the album, "Driva man," (composed by Roach and Oscar Brown), which according to Nat Hentoff, who wrote the liner notes, is about the overseer of slaves, starts this way: "Driva man he made a life / But the Mamie ain't his wife" (1-2). Not the habitual ballad beginning, one might say. The song talks about the day-to-day life of a slave at a plantation, and how the driva man is always there to make sure that slave works faster and more; "Get to work and root that stump / Driva man'll make you jump / Better make your hammer ring / Driva man'll start to swing" (7-10).

Even though the second song, "Freedom Day," (also composed by Roach and Brown), is about the Emancipation of slaves, its overall feeling is of impatience and anxiety, accentuated by the quick beat of the drums, the long notes followed by short ones of the horn section, and Abbey Lincoln's nervous voice. It seems that Lincoln is being chased throughout the song by the other instruments; if they catch her, she loses her freedom. She tells us more than once about the rumors that are going

around: “Whisper listen, whisper listen, whispers says we’re free. Rumors flyin’, must be lyin’. Can it really be? Can’t conceive it, can’t believe it. But that’s what they say. Slave no longer, slave no longer. This is freedom day.” But the song ends in an eerie mood, as the horn section and the drums seem to create a whirlpool of noise around Lincoln, and the last sound of the snare drum seems to drop her into an abyss of silence.

“Tryptych: Prayer/Protest/Peace,” (composed by Roach), the third song, is certainly the most brutal and violent track of the album. It is divided into three different sections, in each one all we hear is a dialogue between Roach’s drums and Lincoln’s voice. During the “Peace” part, Lincoln emits long cries, and Roach plays his drums as if he were preparing soldiers to shoot someone. Their dialogue becomes almost a chant of mourn and bereavement, a funeral procession; it lasts for 3 minutes and 37 seconds, and ends with Roach playing a crescendo and then hitting the snare drum as if a shot had been fired. The second part, “Protest,” begins immediately after the ‘gun shot,’ with Roach hammering his drums in a most destructive manner; it sounds like the trampling of feet of a multitude, when a bomb explodes in their midst. Lincoln screams her soul away, as if she is being whipped, beaten, lynched, burned, rapped, and ripped apart; it lasts for one minute and fifteen seconds. Roach hits the drums more than he plays them, and Lincoln blares out these screeching sounds which send jolts of fear up our spines. It ends abruptly with Roach smashing his cymbals, and silence befalls like a heavy and deadly load. The next and final part, “Peace,” lasts for three minutes and fifteen seconds. In the liner notes, Hentoff writes that Roach told Lincoln that this final part was supposed

to be “the feeling of relaxed exhaustion after you’ve done everything you can to assert yourself.”[17]

The following track is called “All Africa.” It was composed by Roach and Brown. In it, Roach is accompanied by Nigerian percussionist Michael Olatunji, and Cuban players Mantillo, and Du Vall. Lincoln begins by saying:

> The beat has a rich and magnificent history, full of adventure, excitement, and mystery. Some of it bitter, and some of it sweet. But all of it part of the beat. The beat. They say it began with a chant, and a hum, and a black hand laid on a native drum.

She then starts to chant the name of African tribes, and as an answer, “Olantunji relates a saying of each tribe concerning freedom – generally in his own Yoruba dialect.”[18] The track displays a polyrhythmic drum pattern, which sends it to different directions. As Hentoff writes: ““All Africa” connotes both the growing interest of American Negroes in the present and future of Africa and also their new pride in Africa’s past and their own pre-American heritage.”[19]

The last track of the album, composed by Roach, is “Tears for Johannesburg.” It also has a polyrhythmic beat to it. It starts immediately after the last hiss of the cymbal of “All Africa.” A running bass riff sets the pace. Lincoln swoops in with a long one syllable chant. Soon other percussion sounds join them both. They maintain this conversation, until Roach comes in with his drums, and the horn section fills the remaining space with their elegiac melodies. An intense communication between all instruments ensues, with the drums and

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[17] Max Roach. *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite*. Candid, 1960. LP.
[18] Idem.
[19] Idem.

other percussion elements performing solos. According to Hentoff, who was present when the album was recorded, “Tears of Johannesburg”:

> sums up, in a large sense, what the players and singers on this album are trying to communicate. There is still incredible and bloody cruelty against Africans, as in the Sharpeville massacres of South Africa. There is still much to be won in America. But, as the soloists indicate after Abbey’s wounding threnody, there will be no stopping the grasp for freedom everywhere. […] What this album is saying is that FREEDOM DAY is coming in many places, and those working for it, mean to make it stick.[20]

We can learn a lot about the 60s, especially the first half of the decade, by listening to “We Insist! Max Roach’s Freedom Now Suite.” “Driva Man” is a direct reference to the life of a slave, to its working and living conditions; making it a counter-narrative of a historical moment. Yet, working and living conditions for African-Americans at the time the song was recorded were still precarious, to put it mildly. Labor laws were still flat-out racist. The vast majority of African-Americans lived in rat infested slums. Many still had to survive in Jim Crow environments, and the likes. If we think about the racist and forlorn sociopolitical contexts operating behind the production of the album, its makings, the unsettling environments in which these musicians were self-asserting themselves, would it be too big a leap to say that “Driva Man” is also an indictment against the government of their time? Consider the last verses of the song: “Ain’t but two things on my mind / Driva man, and quittin’ time.” (35-36) It is as if driva man also refers to something other than solely the overseer, as if it is also ‘the grind,’ ‘the hustle,’ ‘the system.’ After all, the figure of the overseer was but a form of monitoring and punishing, by itself it is but a function of a system.

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[20] Idem.

But if we think about what is behind this figure, the system which operates it, then a lot more contexts emerge. Therefore, it is not just about going to work, making your hammer ring, and the likes, or else this evil driva man will whip you, it is also about the kind of social, political, cultural, and economic framework which allows for this kind of repeated/defaulted function to occur. What is most despairing about these last verses is that all that is left for this person is their job, and everything which goes with it (driva man, rape, whip, servitude, submission, passivity), and the thought of quitting this job. Driva man feeds you, but kills you; like a self-destruct operation which you must perform to be part of the social world. Therefore, as much as "Driva Man" tells us something about slaves and slavery, it also tells us a lot about the nuts and bolts which operate behind the American Way of Life, as if revealing what has to happen for there to be the American Dream.

"Freedom Day" also says a lot about the environment of the time the album was produced. Shortly after the church bombing in Birmingham, as the Emancipation centennial approached, Malcolm X gave an interview to a television program, in which he talked about the living conditions of Negroes, as he commonly put it, in the United States, in 1963.

> One white man named Lincoln supposedly fought the civil war to solve the race problem, and the problem is still here. Then another white man, named Kennedy, came along running for president, and told Negroes of all he was going to do for them if they voted for him, and they voted for him, 80%. He has been in office now for three years and the problem is still here. When police dogs were biting black women, and black children, and black babies, in Birmingham, Alabama, Kennedy talked about what he could not do because no Federal law had

> been violated; and as soon as the Negroes exploded, and began to protect themselves, and got the best of the crackers involved in Birmingham, then Kennedy sent for the troops. […] So we are within our rights, and with justice and justification when we express doubt, concerning the ability of the white man to solve our problem. And also when we express doubt, concerning his integrity, his sincerity, because you will have to confess that the problem has been around here for a long time, and whites have been saying the same things about it for the past one hundred years, and it is no nearer a solution today than it was a hundred years ago.[21]

In an interview to *Jazz Times*, Roach told the reporter, Ingrid Monson, that when they recorded the song, "they could never finish it. It [still] isn't finished" (Monson). The song is about the coming of freedom, the fulfillment of the promise, but the way Lincoln sings it, her grasping voice, saying things really fast, it sounds like it is still just another promise, too good to be true, that nothing will change in real terms. She even distrusts what she hears twice: "Can't conceive it, don't believe it. But that's what they say." Her tone and performance, talking about something good but in a doubtful and fearsome manner, are very similar to the great divide between the nonviolent and law abiding rhetoric, which many black leaders of the time were adopting, and the brutish and racist reality of day-to-day life African-Americans had to withstand. As Roach said in the *Jazz Times* interview: "We don't really understand what it really is to be free. The last song we did, "Freedom Day," ended with a question mark."[22]

As for "Tryptych: Prayer/Protest/Peace," "All Africa," and "Tears for Johannesburg," the parallels and correspondences between

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[21] *Malcolm X: Make it Plain*. Dir: Orlando Bagwell. Malcolm X, Ossie Davis, Alex Haley, Betty Shabazz. PBS, 1994. Documentary.

[22] Idem.

them and the day-to-day life of African-Americans are a lot clearer, in the sense that no inferring is necessary; they are self-evident. Lincoln's desperate cries in "Tryptych: Prayer/Protest/Peace" were no different from the screaming of black men, women, and children, when they were lynched, beaten, rapped, and brutally murdered. Roach's explosive drums sound like the machine guns and bombs of the time; like boots marching and kicking; like dogs biting and mangling; like mobs clubbing and hitting. "All Africa," and "Tears for Johannesburg" talk about the struggles for freedom and independence happening throughout the African continent. During the 60s, many African-American activists who were fighting for civil rights were also conscious of all the international struggles happening, especially in Africa. As Monson writes in the *Jazz Times* article:

> The "Freedom Now Suite" draws on both long-standing musical symbols of African-American cultural identity, […] and more immediate historical contexts, such as the civil rights movement, African independence, and the Sharpeville massacre, to weave a web of musical interrelatedness.[23]

By 1965, Kennedy was dead, and so was Malcolm X. The rhetoric on the streets was becoming more aggressive and inflammatory, and way more slangs and cursing were heard. Urban riots were happening more frequently, and with bigger proportions as well. Even Martin Luther King began to change the 'focus' of his discourse, from nonviolence to the monstrosities which capitalist America produced not only within its own borders, but also in global scales. He was no longer talking solely about African-Americans, he was now also relating their struggles, with the struggles of other minorities around the world, as that

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[23] Idem.

of the poor people of Vietnam, who were also being killed by the tens of thousands. Racism was entrenching itself within state apparatuses in such a savvy way that its transformed and diluted new form was each time harder to grasp, define, or even detect. Many blacks in the South could at last count on the support of the federal government to ensure their voting rights, but such prerequisites in the voting process, as the infamous literacy tests done before voter registration, were still downright racist, not to mention unconstitutional.

Black power was now the noise in the streets. Stokely Carmichael had set the tone for the second half of the 60s, when he gave his speech in Greenwood, Mississippi, in 1966. "This is the twenty seventh-time I have been arrested and I ain't going to jail no more! The only way we gonna stop them white men from whuppin' us is to take over. What we gonna start saying now is Black Power!" (Jeffries 187). Things got so out of control in 1967 that the federal government created the National Advisory Committee on Urban Disorders, which became known as the Kerner Commission. According to its report, released in 1968: "Of the 164 disorders reported during the first nine months of 1967, eight (5 percent) were major in terms of violence and damage, 33 (20 percent) serious but not major outbreaks, and 123 (75 percent) were minor disorders" (Kerner Commission). There was a surge in the emergence of resistance groups and organizations, like the Black Panthers, or the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. The FBI's Counterintelligence Program (known as COINTELPRO) was at its height. As a result of this program, key figures of black activism were killed, falsely accused and exposed, politically discredited, and sent to jail. By the end of the decade, with Nixon at the White House,

nonviolence rhetoric and politics was yesterday's news, and Black Nationalism was at its peak.

Similar changes were also noticeable in the music of the time, which became more and more aggressive and committed. Jimi Hendrix began his January 1, 1970 concert with one of his bloodiest songs, "Machine Gun." He started the concert by saying:

> Happy New Year, first of all. […] I'd like to dedicate this one to, uhm, it's sort of a drag this scene that's going on, to all the soldiers fighting in Chicago, Milwaukee, New York, oh yes! and all the soldiers fighting in Vietnam. I did a thing called "Machine Gun."[24]

Not exactly what one might expect to hear during a concert on the first day of the decade, especially coming from one of the icons of the love generation. The song's lyrics were also unusual for Hendrix, instead of the wild and imaginative lines, "Machine Gun" was explicitly political:

> Machine gun, tearin' my body all apart.
> Evil man make me kill you, evil man make you kill me.
> Evil man make me kill you, even though we're only families apart.
> Well I pick up my axe and fight like a farmer.
> But your bullets still knock me down.
> The same way you shoot me baby
> You'll be goin' just the same, three times the pain (1-7)

Fred Hampton's assassination comes to mind, in which some 200 rounds of ammunition were fired into his apartment; Chicago Police raided his place five in the morning. In 1969, a group of writers/poets, called Watts Prophets, released their debut album called "Rappin' Black in a White World." A year afterwards, they released: "The Black Voices: On the Streets in Watts." With songs like "There is a difference between a black man and a nigger," and "I'll stop calling you niggers

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[24] Jimi Hendrix. *A Band of Gypsies*. Capitol, 1970. LP.

(when you start acting like a black man)" they managed not only to say their message loud and clear, but also to scare the Jesus out of middle-class white America. It was a most caustic brew between poetry and music, as in the song "Saint America," which starts like this:

> We knew all the time, even when you denied it most strenuously, that you had intestinal troubles when the riots came. There you were: Holy, pure, almost immaculate, but intentionally dishonest to the core, to your young, your poor, your blacks, to all of your people who are yearning to be free. (1-2)[25]

The very covers of both albums were already quite polemic. The first one shows a picture of Malcolm X, and also a picture of a child embracing a machine gun, which is bigger than him, and the second one shows the black power fist.

In 1969, Sly Stone released the album *Stand!,* which had "Don't call me nigger, whitey." It was a song which talked about the general atmosphere of the country, and all the fighting and name calling which were killing so many people, and keeping the nation torn apart. In 1968, James Brown recorded his famous hit: "Say it loud! I'm Black and I'm Proud." Much like the kind of talk one could hear on the streets, Brown was also affirming his blackness. In 1967, Aretha Franklin recorded Otis Redding's "Respect," a song very much in-tune with the kind of attitude the black youth of the country began to have each time more. In 1965, Sunny Murray released his album called "*Sonny's Time Now*." It was a blend between spoken word poetry, jazz, blues, and African-American history. It had Amiri Baraka's song/poem "Black art," which had lines like: "We want poems like fists beating niggers out of Jocks, or dagger

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[25] Dedeaux, Richard, Hamilton, Amde, O'Solomon, Otis. "Saint America" *The Black Voices: On the streets in Watts*. FFRR, 1970. LP

poems in the slimy bellies of the owner-jews." (12-15) That same year, Archie Shepp recorded the album "Fire." It had perhaps the first recorded song which talked openly about the death of Malcolm X, "Malcolm, Malcolm, Semper Malcolm."

These are but a few examples of how the music of the second 60s reflected the major sociopolitical issues of the country. It shows how each time more musicians were becoming involved with civil rights, black power, and the struggle for citizenship. These songs and albums set the tone for the upcoming decade, when emerging artists like Gil Scott-Heron and Curtis Mayfield would take the struggle to still another level, and influential artists like Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye would become each time more politicized. For example, Wonder's 1972 album "*Talking Book*," had the song "Big Brother," which talked about the hardships of life in the ghettoes, with verses like: "You've killed all our leaders/ I don't even have to do nothing to you/ You'll cause your own country to fall;" and Gaye's 1971 "*What's Going On*," which sort of did a recapitulation of the 60s, by, not knowingly, doing a prophetic forecast of the 70s, and had songs like "Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)," with verses like: "Inflation, no chance/ To increase finance./ Bills pile up, sky high./ Send that boy off to die." By listening to these songs and albums we can better understand how those years changed and affected African-Americans, and also what did it mean to be black in America at the time; a question which I will be returning to quite often in this research.

4. Gil Scott-Heron: A black bullet through the heart of white America

4.1 Placing the pieces and setting the rules

> If the Nuremberg laws were applied, then every post-war American president would have been hanged. (Chomsky)

Many people refer to the 60s as a decade of beauty and exuberance, with the emergence of the hippie movement and flower power, however, for many African-Americans it was an extremely truculent and explosive decade; there was destruction and outrage down South, in Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia, Watts, Harlem, Oakland, Bronx, prisons, colleges and universities, impoverished communities, churches, and the list goes on. So much had changed in just a decade: The government had fabricated yet another global threat, this time it was a communist takeover in Southeast Asia and Latin America, and both could possibly trigger a domino chain-reaction. People's awareness had 'expanded,' in terms of self-awareness and also in terms of collectivity, which brought about micro-level changes, and in interpersonal relationships as well as subjective relationships, and also macro-level changes, as changes in social orders and hierarchies, as well as behavior, attitudes, and feelings. The economy seemed to have reached its summit sometime along the decade only to begin thereafter to plummet. Meanwhile, the streets were on fire with riots, protests, killings, and marches. However, as much as the 60s proved to be a decade of rebellion and change, of hopes and promises, its aftermath was not the least bit encouraging. By the end of the decade, the Vietnam War, as well as the country's unofficial involvement in Laos and Cambodia, was

completely out of control, not only did it drain each time more resources and money, and lead more and more American soldiers to their death, not to mention kill innocent civilians over there, it also tore the American population apart, leaving people utterly dissatisfied and disillusioned with the government. This incredibly oversized military operation was to be yet another war which was never officially declared by the government, and for that matter unconstitutional; yet another murderous intervention which leveled an already poor and unstable country, producing an incalculable civilian death toll. This meant that the military budget (defense) increased each time more, while other budgets, as health, education, or infrastructure, received each time less attention and money. To top things off, the man who assumed the presidency in 1969 (Nixon), and had sworn to take the country out of the war, 'peace with honor,' as he claimed, not only intensified America's involvement in the war, but also intensified a war back home to purge the nation of all its undesirables; and thus his Law and Order program was established.

Quite ironic that a man who was later discovered to be involved in all kinds of criminal activities, and who did everything he could to get what he wanted done, be it spread false accusations, 'pull the plug' on some of his closest associates, lie to congress as well as the nation, or be directly responsible for the killing of thousands, perhaps millions of innocent people, created a program called Law and Order. Nonetheless, it did represent his style of Law and Order, and it certainly represented what the nation's undesirables (basically anyone who disagreed with him) had to, henceforth, consider to be Law and Order. It was the beginning of a new decade, one which would be marked by an increase

in police brutality (which continued to go by unpunished), the sprawling of ghettos or inner-cities (a by-product of corporate capitalism and the blatant neglect of local and federal governments), the demise of communitarian organizations (due to, in parts, the criminal intervention of the government and its agencies, as the FBI and CIA, with such intelligence programs as COINTELPRO), the intensification of urban violence and degradation (especially in impoverished neighborhoods), and a substantial decrease in egalitarian economic growth, as a result of: 1) the de-industrialization of the country, in which manufacturing was shipped off-shore, and 2) the economic shifting towards financial institutions and the business interests of giant trans-national corporations.

Despite the Watergate scandal, Nixon was reelected in 1972. However, as investigations brought about scandal after scandal, scheme after scheme, Nixon lost his support not only among the population, but also within the House of Representatives and Senate. He resigned in 1974. Gerald Ford, who had assumed the Vice-presidency in 1973, replacing Spiro Agnew, who also had had to resign as part of a deal which would absolve him of a tax fraud accusation, became president; he had not been democratically elected for either position, rather he was appointed. Less than a month after taking office he gave a full pardon to Richard Nixon, a strategic action which drastically affected further investigations into Watergate. It was to be yet another political maneuver carried out on a national and state level, which managed to purge the system of its ‘bad apples,’ but maintained the system in full operation. Unemployment was rising in a rate similar to Depression standards, the economy was in a period of recession, yet the spending of

money with war overseas, and military technology, was at a record high, which fostered a general feeling of hopelessness and dismay among many poor and less-privileged people. According to the historian Howard Zinn:

> A citizenry disillusioned with politics and with what pretended to be intelligent discussions of politics turned its attention (or had its attention turned) to entertainment, to gossip, to ten thousand schemes for self-help. Those at its margins became violent, finding scapegoats within one's group (as poor-black on poor-black violence), or against other races, immigrants, demonized foreigners, welfare mothers, minor criminals (standing in for untouchable major criminals). (564)

It was a moment of intensified cruelty and violence, of tricky-Dicks (as Nixon) and silent-Bobs (as H. R. 'Bob' Haldeman, Nixon's Chief of Staff, who did an incredible cover-up job of all the illegitimacy going on, until they were caught), a time of wars, an all-out attack against people on welfare, immigrants, gays, lesbians, feminists, Chicanos, Natives, African-Americans, Mexican-Americans, and Asian-Americans. Basically, anyone who did not fit the All-American profile was suspicious. Such was the overall scenario of the early 70s, the many different and inter-connected contexts into which Gil Scott-Heron was both thrust upon, and deliberately placed himself in as a political activist.

4.2 Gil Scott-Heron: Immediacy poetics, incendiary verses

> Look over your shoulder motherfucker, I am coming.
> ("Enough" 1970)

As Amiri Baraka or The Last Poets, Gil Scott-Heron understood the power of music and words, the seriousness of both once you bring

them to the present moment, right now, and deliver them, perform them, as something urgent, unfiltered, unembellished, and raw. He made music function as the news – people listened to him to know what was happening in the country or in other neighborhoods and communities. His songs and poems are like thermometers of what was going on, they measure intensities, affinities, and animosities of both individuals and groups of people; they redouble these people's voices. His verses disassemble everyday life by referring to things and situations which most people were familiar with, but in an entirely diverse manner. For instance, his song "Whitey on the moon" (1970), contrasts the miserable living conditions of many African-Americans with the millions of dollars the government used from tax money to send a white man to the moon. One of its verses reads: "I can't pay no doctor bills / But whitey's on the moon / Ten years from now I'll be paying still / While whitey's on the moon." (5-7) In other words, the moon landing means one thing to the government, which invested a lot in it, but it means something entirely different for someone who never received similar and due attention from the government. Instead of looking at it as if it were some kind of undeniable proof of the super-human powers of the US government, he claims that the moon landing only attested to the neglect of the government, it was proof that these poor neighborhoods had been completely and deliberately ignored by the government, which had 'spent' billions to send three white men to a deserted satellite, but was incapable of 'investing' similar proportions in social programs within the country. Some of his incendiary verses unearthed older memories and ideas, which were never really forgotten or surpassed, and related them to the present moment. For instance, "The prisoner" (1971), starts

like this: “Here I am after so many years / Hounded by hatred and trapped by fear / I’m in a box, I’ve got no place to go / If I follow my mind, I know I’ll slaughter my own.” (1-4) Something about these lines leaves us aghast, and groping for answers to question like: What kind of prisoner is this person? What kind of prison is this? Why would he or she slaughter his or her own? How many convicts think in very similar terms still today? In the middle he sings:

> Black babies in the womb are shackled and bound
> Chained by the caveman who keeps beauty down
> Smacked on the ass when they're squalling and wet
> Heir to a spineless man who never forgets
> Never forgets that he's a prisoner, can't you hear my plea?
> Because I need somebody, Lord knows, to listen to me
> I'm a stranger to my son
> Who wonders why his daddy runs, yeah. (9-16)

He seems to be constantly reminding the listener that there is no escape from prison for him; his future has been cast already from his mother’s womb. He binds together slavery to modern day life. He ends the song by singing: “My woman, she don't say but she hates / To see her man chained this way, yeah / Help me, I'm the prisoner” (25-27). As much as it sounds like an actual convict thinking, it is also clear that this is not a common prisoner, nor prison, life has become a prison, and his day-to-day relationships are as debasing as prison life. These songs are like a calling, a black bullet through the heart of white America, to hear them is to be awakened by them, as Scott-Heron’s 1970 hit said: “You will not be able to stay home, brother / You will not be able to plug in, turn on and cop-out […] Because the revolution will not be televised” (1-4) (“The revolution will not be televised”). Artists like Scott-Heron created a kind of sound which was not in any way the standard show business number; they seemed more concerned in sounding real and unedited,

and truthful to the problems of people, than with record sales. Back in Law and Order days, songs about revolution, Malcolm X, Black Panthers, the CIA, FBI, urban riots, and the likes, did not have much market potential. Those types of song certainly did not please the establishment or 'the Man,' but they spoke to heart of the common man and woman. They reached these people because they seemed to be part of ordinary life, as though their lines were talking about something happening right now. That is part of what calls my attention in Scott-Heron's music, its immediacy, or its ability to involve us with what he is singing about. The way he says things is enthralling, with his direct and straightforward manner of presenting his ideas; it sounds like he is a field-reporter or correspondent from the battle-field.

He manages to de-construct and dissect complex subjects in a very simple manner, with words which most people can understand and relate to. His song "Evolution (and flashback)" (1970), is good example of this, it starts like this:

> In 1600 I was a darkie
> Until 1865, a slave
> In 1900 I was a nigger
> Or at least that was my name.
> In 1960 I was a negro
> And then brother Malcolm came along
> And then some nigger shot Malcolm down
> But the bitter truth lives on. (1-8)

By using heavily loaded terms, which African-Americans were more than familiar with, he joins together almost 400 years of struggle and counter-struggle. In just a few lines he relates present-day struggles of African-Americans to historical struggles; deep yet intimate, old inasmuch as new. He talks about things which were never settled or resolved, and it seems as if he is passing the baton to us, expecting some

form of reaction from us. First, he remembers these names, these words which define human beings as everything but human beings. After that, he brings this centuries old struggle to our front doors, to today, to a moment where not only whites are maiming and killing blacks, now blacks are killing blacks. All this to conclude that no matter what happens, no matter how inhumane and forlorn things get, the bitter truth lives on; therefore somehow, might not be today or tomorrow, but somehow things will change. This is part of the immediacy of his poetry and songs: He talks about macro-level relationships and social orders, as the country's history, or race-racism, in a manner which places the listener right in the middle of all this; in a sense, he 'brings the war home,' he brings to the forefront what has been omitted from the media, forgotten by the government, and denied by official history. His poetry interweaves individuals to collective spheres, past struggles to present ones, macro relationships to micro relationships; it binds together 'me' with 'we.'

This is another characteristic trait of his work: He uses the pronoun 'we' quite often in his songs, as if always placing himself within something greater, and always in an affirmative manner, asserting himself, never as a passive participant, always proactive. Therefore, there is the idea that this is not just about a lone ranger kind of fight, rather it is the plight of a group, it is part of a movement. A good example of this can be seen in the first song of his first album, which starts like this: "Good evening, my name is Gil Scott-Heron, my accomplices are […]" ("Introduction / The revolution will not be televised"). This was his way of introducing himself to the phonograph community. In one line, the first thing the man tells us, there is already

the idea that he is part of the undesirables mentioned above. To make it 'worse,' he tells us that he is not alone in his 'criminal' endeavors; he is part of a group. It sounds like a testimony, he is giving his statement to the court, addressing the jury.

The immediacy of his verses brings the listener to the forefront. An example of this can be seen in another track from his first album, called "Enough," which ends in this manner:

> I hope you do not think that a vote for John Kennedy took you off my shit list because in the street there will only be black and white.
> There will be no Democrats, Republicans, Liberals, Conservatives, Moderates, or any of the rest of that shit you have used to make me forget to hate.
> There ain't no enough.
> There ain't no surrender.
> There is only plot and plan, move and groove, kill.
> There is no promise land.
> There is only promise.
> The promise is not vowel until we have been nerve gassed, shot down and murdered, or done some of the same ourselves.
> Look over your shoulder motherfucker, I am coming (15-23).

His purposes are quite clear, and subtlety is definitely not his strong point. He places these concepts, one by one, over our heads, and then obliterates them. He sings this part in less than a minute, in less than a minute he tells us that there is no such thing as bad apples, it is a bad tree, from root to top; and the only crime is getting caught. As if that was not 'enough,' he follows through full-bore: talks about killing people, brothers and sisters being killed, and signals that he is close-by, and charging against us. Another example of addressing the listener in an unconventional and direct manner comes from the closing lines of the first song of his first album, which reads:

> The revolution will put you in the driver's seat.
> The revolution will not be televised, will not be televised, will not be televised.
> The revolution will be no re-run, brothers;
> The revolution will be live" (54-57) ("Introduction / The revolution will not be televised").

These lines are a good example of immediacy through music: There is that feeling, that edginess in his work, which leaves us at the brink of reality – it is as dangerous as enticing. This same feeling happens after listening to him say that he is charging behind us and shouting: "Motherfucker, I am coming;" there is something to the sound of that, and when he sings this in the album's version he is accompanied by a rapid percussive beat, which makes us wonder, "is he actually there?" as though the words reach out and touch us. Like he says, it will 'put you on the driver's seat.'

Some other examples of this feeling of immediacy come from his live recordings, for instance, the song "Pardon our analysis (we beg your pardon)," from the 1975 album *The First Minute of a New Day*. Judging by the way people react to what he says, it sounds like it is something in-between a stand-up comedy show, and some kind of ceremony, because people are laughing hysterically, but also screaming and shouting things like: "right on!" or "yeah!" Most of all, he seems to conduct the audience with his voice, it rises from the crowd, then there is dead silence, then he sings, and the crowd explodes. For example, when he says things like: "We beg your pardon America, because the pardon you gave this time was not yours to give," (7) or:

> Anytime you find someone in the middle, anytime you find someone who is tepid, anytime you find someone who is lukewarm, anytime you find someone who has been in congress for 25 years and no one ever heard of

> him, you've got Oatmeal Man [referring to Gerald Ford] (37-41).

The crowd responds with deafening roars and claps. It is hard not to think about porridge or sense nuances of debility and passivity when you look at pictures of Ford after listening to this song. His live performances of the song "Johannesburg," (1976) many of which are available on Youtube, are also good examples of this immediacy. In this song, he talks about people in South Africa who are defying the government: "They tell me that our brothers over there are defying the Man" (7), and also refusing "to work in the [coal] mines" (17). He also states that those people fighting over there need to know that: "we on their side" (19); again the idea of "we," instead of "me." The catch phrase is when he says/asks: "What's the word?" (and he repeats this over and over), because, as the people who are familiar with the song know, this is when everyone is supposed to say "JOHANNESBURG!;" in fact, this is what we can hear the crowds from all these different concerts, in different places throughout the world, screaming in unison. Sadly, it is rumored that the only place where nobody in the crowd responded to his call was actually a show in South Africa. After the apartheid, Scott-Heron and his band went there to play, and were taken by surprise when nobody answered the call: "What's the word?" Only after the concert were they told that their song had been banned in the country, and that, therefore, nobody knew what the word was. Another curious fact involving this song is that the first time it was presented to the public was at the television program *Saturday Night Live*, in which the polemic and boisterous comedian Richard Pryor was the guest star. One of Pryor's conditions for appearing on the show was that Scott-Heron be the guest musician. Pryor's face is dead serious when he

introduces Scott-Heron: “Here is a man I wanted on the show and his organization […];” even Pryor calls it organization.

All this is part of Scott-Heron’s immediacy poetics. His songs engage people with ideas, things, and situations. There is urgency in his rhetoric, in his style, which brings the listener closer to him; there is a strong sense of intimacy. His music stands miles away from entertainment music, and extremely close to direct action, involvement, commitment, and taking sides. His poetics gravitates towards the social function of the poet/musician, it is about being conscious of the struggles of people who have been marginalized, excluded, written out, wiped out, whipped out, ripped out, and thrown out of history and the world. It is about recognizing these people and their plights, and transforming these historical conflicts into present day wars. It is about pointing out who is part of the establishment, explaining why there is an establishment, and denouncing how the establishment works; basically it is about setting things straight.

4.3 A new black poet: Talking to the people

> You see, in poetry a lot of times people who fancy themselves intellectuals, academically oriented people, make things more complicated, instead of making them more simple. A poet's function should not be to make things more complicated -- anybody can do that. A poet's function should be to take and distill thoughts, making

> them as simple as possible. When I write, it's to make sure that everybody can understand it.[26]

The cover of his first album, "*Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*," says a lot about the poet, his poetry and poetics. The image shown is already very impacting. It is a picture of Scott-Heron sitting in some dodgy alley; he stares directly at the camera. It is a black-and-white picture, which makes part of his bodily contours reach out into the full darkness of the alley. This ominous contrast transfixes the eyes, and warns us of the unsettling things which will bubble up here and there in his lines; that moment where these dark and hidden memories, his counter-memories, will crawl out of the sullen alley darkness and onto his body. Right above the image a small description reads:

> Gil Scott-Heron takes you Inside Black. / Inside, where the anger burns against / The Ones Who "broke my family tree." / Inside, where the black man sorts his miseries / "while white man walk on stars." / He penetrates the core, where, blurred by / the "plastic patterns" of a culture not his own, / dulled by drugs, or held down by unremitting / poverty, the Black's rage smolders, ready to / flare into riot. / In Small Talk at 125th and Lenox, Gil Scott- / Heron, twenty-year-old poet speaks for his / people with an eloquence that has won him / recognition as a major new talent. He is the voice / of a new black man, rebellious and proud, / demanding to be heard, announcing his destiny: / "I AM COMING."

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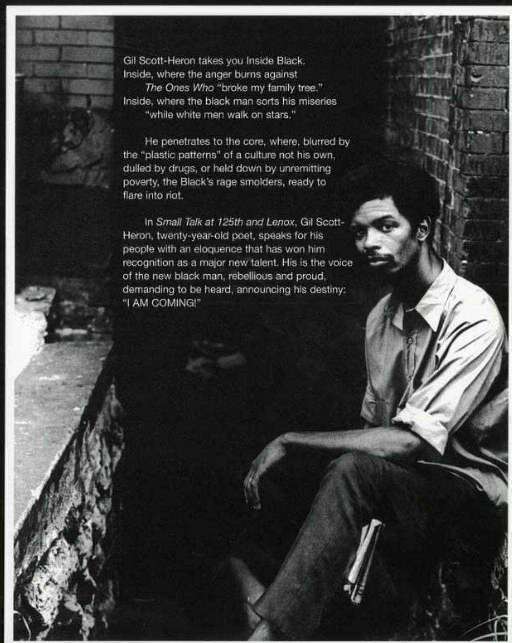
[26] Scott-Heron, Gil. Music and Politics with Gil Scott-Heron. *Ann Arbor Sun*, March 14-28, 1975. Avaiable at: < http://www.negroartist.com/writings/BLACK%20PANTHER%20NEWSPAPERS/13%20no%20166.htm > Accessed in February 8, 2015.



Above his name, but written in a smaller font, the 'head stone' reads: "A new black poet." This heading, his name, and the name of the album are written in white capital letters, which makes them dabble over a sea of blackness, the color of the background of the cover. The choice of sudden and stark contrasts, as black and white, is in and by itself quite representative in terms of what the whole album is about: blacks and whites living in the same space. Beneath his leg, a folded newspaper seems to hover over darkness. There is the idea that all these stories, scandals, deaths, and reports, all that is in the newspaper, all of it part of the album. His long stare is embedded with the kind of attitude and

posture so characteristic of the intellectual/activist/militant of the time; it whispers things like: “This ain’t no joke,” or: “You’re damn straight I just said all this.” Yet, in between this roughness there is also something comforting and assuring about his eyes. They tranquilize his brothers and sisters by reminding them that he sees them, he feels them, he recognizes them; this other side seems to murmur things like: “I hear you, brothers and sisters,” or “I got your back.” The fact that he calls it small talk, and places such talk in the heart of Harlem, or what Harlemites call ‘Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard’ (125th) and ‘Malcolm X Boulevard’ (Lenox), is extremely significant and somewhat intriguing. Significant because of the symbolic importance of the place, as it ‘contains’ a lot of history, as well as possibilities and ideas. Intriguing because the title is somewhat ambiguous, as small talk is usually about something not that serious, even though the album talks about very serious problems African-Americans faced (sadly still face) in their day-to-day lives. Therefore, we do not really know if he is being ironic by saying it is small talk, because it is everything but small talk, or if he is saying that all these unapologetic lines are in fact what most people in Harlem are talking about; like asking: “Why so surprised? Everyone in Harlem is talking about this. Over there it is just small talk.”

All throughout *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox* Scott-Heron plays with words, their significance and meaning, their associations and connotations, what lies beneath them, what lags behind them, and why do we say them. When you listen to the album, and pay attention to what he says, and how he says it, it becomes clear that he knows the way the streets talk, he knows the way revolutionaries of his time talk.

He recalls Malcolm, Medgar Evers, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and Nat Turner, but also calls out to the people listening to him. Even his shorter songs are already full of information and images; a stanza can sum-up a lifetime. For example, this is a 34-seconds-long song from the first album entitled “Paint it Black”:

> Picture a man of nearly thirty
> Who seems twice as old with clothes torn and dirty
> Give him a job shining shoes
> Or cleaning out toilets with bus station crews
> Give him six children with nothing to eat
> Expose them to life on a ghetto street
> Tie and old rag around his wife’s head
> And have her pregnant and lying in bed
> Stuff them all in a Harlem house
> And then tell them how bad things are down South (1-10).

In ten lines, he managed to cover thirty years, which seem more like sixty. It is as livid as it is vivid. As much as it sketches a picture of a man, and it is very detailed and specific, or context-based, it also sketches a picture of many African-Americans, who live under the same conditions, and have almost the same appearance; local, yet national, speaking to one and all. In 2005, the BBC hired musician/movie maker, Don Letts, to direct a documentary about Scott-Heron, called “*The revolution will not be televised, a film about Gil Scott-Heron*.” In the opening sequence, in just less than two minutes, many artists, poets, and musicians sing a few lines of Scott-Heron’s famous song from his debut album, which is also the title of the documentary. Among them are: Sarah Jones, the Tony and Obie award-winning playwright and performer, Richie Havens, musician/activist, Abiodun Oyewole, member of The Last Poets and hard-line activist, Linton Kwesi Johnson, the Jamaican-born, UK-based dub poet and activist, and Chuck D, from

Public Enemy. In this short sequence we see such a vast array of people, covering diverse areas as literature, theatre, music, politics, and activism, that it gives us an awareness of the depth, scope, and importance of his work and life.

His debut album already foretold a lot of this. Curiously, even before he released this first album he had already published a novel, entitled "*The Vulture*," and a book of poems with the same title as the album, *Small talk at 125th and Lenox*, which contained all the songs from the album, but in the form of poetry (it has since become a valuable collector's item). By the age of twenty he had already published two books. His novel is still today being published in re-editions as well as translated, and countless people around the world still quote lines from his first book of poems. If that was not enough, he had also recorded an album, which still today sounds as poignant and daring as it was back in 1970. Both, the novel and the book of poems, were well received; both displayed Scott-Heron's capability of saying a lot with a few words, and his keen sense of the conditions of and limitations to being black in the United States.

The novel is about the death of a young man named John Lee, and it is narrated by four different characters, each with a different view of the killing. It is filled with colloquial language, as slangs, and neologisms, and also depicts drug abuse, homosexual and heterosexual love, gang violence, and police brutality, in a very straightforward manner. The more we get into the story the more it seems like anyone can get killed. The setting, Lower Manhattan, is characterized as a no-man's land, or gang land, with many places where one goes either to kill or be killed. In the end, it is the jealousy of a minor character which

makes him kill John Lee, but the way the story is told we get the feeling that life in the ghetto is what actually killed John Lee. The actual murder was but the tip of the iceberg, a scapegoat; another poor black on poor black kind of violence. The novel reveals an author who knows quite a lot about life in the ghetto, but also someone who manages to see through it, to understand it in terms of 'why are those people there,' 'why are they killing each other,' 'how come the government does not do anything about it,' and 'how do they see themselves and the world which surrounds them.'

As for the book of poems, it is a quick glimpse into the mind of a man whose career would cover more than four decades. In it, we can notice his ability to disrobe the US of its portentousness and self-proclaimed virtues. He sees through and beyond the necessary illusions which had been created, or better, fabricated in order to maintain systems and spheres of power and control. For example, in the poem "The revolution will not be televised" he discusses the ways which corporate media tries to create illusions through television ads and programs in order to divert people's attention from the real world, where revolutions happen. He also does not accept many of the delusions he sees. For example, the poem "Whitey on the moon," which refers to the landing on the moon as if it were part of the delusions of grandeur of people in power, says that even though America had sent some white folks to the moon, within the US many people were still striving to survive. There are also some poems which discuss the absurdities and inconsistencies happening even within the black communities. For instance, the poem "Brother" refers to certain African-Americans who insist that they are part of the Black struggle, that they are

revolutionaries, yet they also see themselves as 'blacker' than most African-Americans (blacker than thou reasoning) just because they have an afro hair, or wear a dashiki. Scott-Heron also points out that these so-called 'brothers' run away at the first sign of real danger: "But you're never around when your B.A. is in danger. / I mean your Black Ass" (14-15). Overall, this collection of poems shows his ability of cutting deep into the US, its political, social, economic, and cultural spheres. He takes us to a place where bitter and haunting truths are plainly visible. The book also shows us a man who fathoms America's racism, prejudice, and historical blunders, as well as the unconstitutionality of many day-to-day things and situations which most African-Americans take for granted, or understand as just being part of life, inevitable. This is the case, for instance, of the poem "Enough," which expresses Scott-Heron's anger and frustration over what Blacks have had to endure throughout history, and still endured at the present time of the poem. He says things like it was not enough that Blacks were brought to this world as property, and shackled; now they continue to be treated inhumanely. The way he sees it, all the talk about integration which had been happening in the country represented something different than what the government and the establishment were in fact doing: "Somehow I cannot believe that it would be enough for me to melt with you and integrate without the thoughts of rape and murder" (5). It is extremely explicit and threatening, and, as discussed above, it ends in a very violent manner. It is the off-shoot of what would happen if we were to combine Max Roach to Fred Hampton. Another example of his ability to analyze the manifold layers and hierarchies of the United States can be found in the poem "Evolution (and flashback)," which, as the title

suggests, reports a different history, one told by African-Americans. In it, he uses different names African-Americans have been given by white people, as darkie, slave, nigger, and negro, to make parallels with different moments in history. There is a moment where he says that: “We are tired of praying, and marching, and thinking, and learning / Brothers wanna start cutting, and shooting, and stealing, and burning” (24-25). It stretches back to the banned part of John Lewis’ speech at the March on Washington, which said that the changes and improvements happening all over were ‘too little, too late.’ It reaches back to the fear and anger of watching another lynching, or hanging, or quartering, or burning, and turns that to gun powder. It mentions the frustration and hopelessness which jolts through the body and mind when one learns that most social problems happening in impoverished areas are political creations, nothing more than man made decisions, and demands immediate reparations. Overall, Scott-Heron makes it perfectly clear that it means nothing that some white folks ‘vote for Kennedy,’ in the sense that they might be pro-integration and equal rights, and many brothers and sisters are proud of their afro hair style, their afro-clothes, and their pseudo-militant activism; it all means shit to him because the real world, history, the political and economic system, and its establishment of joint ventures, corporate capitalism, interest rates, profits and revenues, off-shores and outsourcings, still reek of ‘black-and-white’ type of zeitgeist.

Chronologically speaking, he is part of this ‘stemming’ of new black poets, whose seed had been planted in the 1920s and 30s, and whose initial sprouting was in the mid-60s. As I already discussed in the historical contextualization, this movement was rooted in the idea that

'poems are bullshit unless they are teeth,' unless they 'make things,' or create ideas and possibilities. These 'new' poets were trying at all costs to approximate poetry (art), to life, to talk about things which the common person knew about, and in a manner which he or she could understand, in his or her own language. This seemed to be the back-bone of Scott-Heron's work: To be understood by people, not to be misinterpreted, not to be vague, not to be wordy or verbose, but objective and up-front. What mattered for him, what many of these new poets wanted, was to be heard or read by as many people as possible; to spread the word, communicate. It must be underscored that many of these artists, Scott-Heron included, brought poetry to these people and places, which would otherwise have never known about the existence of this powerful communicational tool, and, above all, they delivered poetry to these people in a way that they actually enjoyed it, and understood it as a form of resistance, a weapon. The idea was not to make people be awe-struck by the vastness of art, but rather to make people react to what was being exposed/said/sung; to capacitate people, pollinate their minds, activate their spirits. Therefore, there was an underlying concern among many artists and intellectuals of the time with being understood, they wanted to able to communicate with people, all people, not just a select group of people. After all, if art (culture) was to be understood or interpreted as a form of participatory action, as an awakening tool, then, logically, the more people related to it, or interiorized and externalized it in some manner, the more chances there were of creating effective revolutions, or provoking collective and individual changes.

An example of Scott-Heron's concern with being understood can be seen in a film about him called *Black Wax* (1982). It shows him in different places, for instance, reciting some poems in a studio set beside wax dolls of famous people, like John Wayne and Ronald Reagan, and also performing live. There is a moment during one of these live performances where he starts talking about Ronald Regan, and does a sort of introduction to his song called "B-Movie" (1981). This is how he begins this introduction:

> We would like to do a tune for you. Actually, the tune was put together a little over a year ago, so the problem…well there were several. But the main problem was what we were going to call the tune. And after we had put the tune together, and looked at it, we decided we was [sic] going to call it "Real to reel." This was going to be, R-E-A-L to R-E-E-L [he spells both words letter by letter]. And that was certainly going to be the max. But then we said "no, might be some people that don't get it." So we decided we was going to call the tune "From Real, to reel, to surreal," and we was going to draw a lot of lines under surreal, so that everyone would know that that was the main one. So we said "no, that may not do it." Then we decided that we was going to call this particular idea "From Shogun to Raygun," that covered everything that we was going to talk about (1-10).

'They' were concerned that people might not understand that, with the way things were going, with the sharp government turn to the right, towards conservative politics, (death penalty, for example, was soon thereafter reinstituted), the man in charge, "Hollyweird," as Scott-Heron called him, would do all he could to turn things into a film, so that he could once again utter some nonsensical cliché like: "Get off my planet before sunset," while he rode alongside his cavalrymen and killed the 'bad' guys. People might not remember or know that the actor/president had already been the Governor of California, during which period,

according to Scott-Heron, "he acted like General Franco." The people might not remember that the first time that Mr. Hollyweird declared that he was running for president was at a State Fair, back in August 3, 1980, in Neshoba County, just a few miles away from Philadelphia, Mississippi. In his speech, Hollyweird declared that he was for State's rights; as if saying that Federal government was the problem, and State and local governments were the solution. This was the same place where, back in 1964 three civil rights workers, two white and one black, were brutally murdered, and local governments did nothing to prevent it, and even less to punish the culprits, in yet another blatant disregard to Federal laws. Perhaps people would miss the surreal atmosphere to all that, so Scott-Heron and the band decided it would be best to keep it simple and call him for what he really was: a left-over from a time when "movies were black-and-white, and so was everything else;" a kind of bridge over a gap between the old-West and the new-West, from "Shogun to Raygun." I cannot help but picture an old-West, but with shoguns and samurais side-by-side with sheriffs, cowboys, and Indians, and the meanest toughest man is the one who 'shows his gun' the fastest, the most feared and respected 'shogun' in town, one straight-shooting son of a gun; that would be Mr. Hollyweird, Raygun, the man who will zap you out in a flash. Of course, the way he explains the concerns that he himself and the band were having, how they were doing their best to be objective and easily understood, is hilarious. All three titles are extremely humorous (humor being another underlying characteristic of his work, humor as a weapon of resistance), they follow the perfect order for the perfect joke, with a good whiff of word play; there is the punch-line and the response, punch-response, punch-

response. However, these comic lines are also mordant and bizarrely revealing of a man he describes as, amongst other things: "The ultimate in synthetic selling: A Madison Avenue masterpiece – a miracle, a cotton-politician." This brief introduction shows us his ability to use certain literary refinements in a very ordinary way, using common words and expressions; for instance, in the "Real to reel" short extract he uses irony (ironic that an ex-Hollywood star would govern the country as if he were still acting), sarcasm (is he governing or acting?), alliteration (real, to reel, to surreal), metaphor (reality as a b-movie), metonymy (Shoguns become an attribute of Reagan), and pun (reel, and surreal).

Nevertheless, it must be underscored that all this does not place Scott-Heron in something like 'a league of his own,' in terms of the kind of poetry and aesthetics he proposed. On the contrary, he was part of an emergence of artists and intellectuals, most of whom were hands-on activists, which sought to create means to or possibilities for change and revolution: Art as a weapon. In another moment of *Black Wax*, Scott-Heron also says that the kind of politics "we" discuss is not bipartisan, or Republican or Democrat, but rather "common-sense politics." The cover of *Small Talk* had already alerted us of all this, as a new black poet did not refer to a man who was all alone, but to an individual who was part of a collective movement. He was floating with the same current which had propelled BAM, the same current which other voices had already navigated, as the Black Panthers, Malcolm X, Baraka, and Dr. King; he was just a couple of years down the stream. Scott-Heron's poetry and music is a live link from the heart of Black America, where

liberty, justice, and equality 'smell' and feel more like control, lynching, and second-class citizenship.

4.4 Tales of a bluesician: America has got the blues

> The blues has always been totally American
> As American as apple-pie
> As American as the blues
> As American as apple-pie
> The question is why? ("Bicentennial Blues" 1978)

The blues is one of the tropes of Scott-Heron's poetry. Sometimes it functions as a song format, its modes and scales and feelings, other times as a form of talking about some of the country's problems, or about someone's misfortunes, or an unpleasant situation. The blues' recurrence in his work gives us an idea of just how important the word, the music, and all the feelings attached to it, were to him. However, it was during the 70s that he seems to have been most intertwined with the blues, more so than in the 80s, 90s, and 2000s. It was a blues decade for him: Beyond the bad craziness of Nixon, the porridge tepidness of Ford, and the second to none inconsistencies of Carter. For him, during the 70s, America had the blues.

In different moments throughout the decade, for example in the song "Bicentennial Blues" (1976), Scott-Heron calls himself a bluesician; or a musician who attempts to define certain meanings and modes related to the blues. Much in the same reasoning as Baraka in *Blues People*, Scott-Heron also argues that: "You can trace the evolution of the blues / On a parallel line with the evolution of this country / From Plymouth Rock to acid-rock / From 13 states to Watergate" (29-32) ("Bicentennial Blues"). Also in "Bicentennial Blues" he says that: "The

blues has grown / but not the home / The blues has grown / But the country has not / The blues remembers everything the country forgot" (33-37). The way he sees it, blues musicians had travelled all over the world, they were internationally renowned, which meant that the blues had grown. Nevertheless, the country did not match this growth. On the contrary, the country shrank at an alarming rate. The economy was bad, the recession plagued national morale much like the Vietnam War, there was high unemployment, and deficit seemed defaulted. Social problems felt more like political problems disguised as social problems. The ghetto, for instance, seemed nothing but a political construct. It was as though one could trace the process of degradation which these demarked areas in the city underwent back to specific government actions. The ghetto became the ghetto due to dubious legislations, profit-motivated deals with real-estate speculators, and massive disinvestment in many areas, as sanitation, public health, public schools, or any form of social assistance. The country did not grow, and Scott-Heron's blues knew why. His blues did not forget that every year Ford was president there was a deficit in the economy, and that some of his closest advisors were people like Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, (Chiefs of Staff) and George H. W. Bush (Director of the CIA); the same power trio which would also assemble, many years later, the Gulf War. His blues did not forget that the man who took over after Ford, Jimmy Carter, talked about how crooked laws were in the United States because they served the rich, while he himself was a peanut farmer millionaire. His blues did not forget that even though Carter got the support of people who were against the war in Vietnam, and also people who were against foreign policies of the time, and even led the Democratic party to believe that it

was possible to reduce defense expenditures without hampering national interests and security, "by 5 to 7 billion dollars annually" (Zinn, 570), as soon as he took office his first budget proposed to increase the military budget in 10 billion dollars (Idem). His blues certainly did not forget that Richard Nixon personally supervised illegal and deadly activities, not only in South East Asia, but also within the United States, reaching into the FBI, CIA, the army, the judiciary, and local police forces.

Overall, it was a blues decade for people and the country. No longer was the blues solely an African-American 'thing,' perhaps more than ever it was then something which the country had and perpetuated, within its borders and abroad. The blues became as American as apple-pie, and if the question was why, his answer was: "Well, America provided the atmosphere" ("Bicentennial Blues"). An atmosphere of hatred, as his song "Home is where the hatred is" (1971) reminds us:

> Stand as far away as you can from me and ask me why
> Hang on to your rosary beads, close your eyes and watch me die[…]
> Home is where I live inside my white powder dreams
> Home was once an empty vacuum that's filled now with my silent screams
> Home is where the needle marks
> Try to heal my broken heart
> And it might not be such a bad idea if I never, if I never went home again (7-19).

An atmosphere of fear of an atomic holocaust, as the song "We almost lost Detroit" (1977) reminds us. The song's title comes from the John G. Fuller novel from 1975 which talks about the meltdown of Fermi I, a nuclear power plant located close to Detroit, which suffered a disastrous melt down back in 1966. It starts like this:

> It stands out on a highway
> Like a creature from another time
> It inspires the babies' questions,

> "What's that?"
> For their mothers as they ride
> But no one stopped to think about the babies
> or how they would survive
> and we almost lost Detroit
> This time […]
> Just thirty miles from Detroit
> stands a giant power station.
> It ticks each night as the city sleeps
> seconds from annihilation (1-14).

An atmosphere of mistakes and predictability, as his 1979 song "Jose Campos Torres," reminds us. The song is about the Hispanic army veteran who had been severely beaten by six police officers in Huston, the prior year; it was a very bluesy way of making the checks and balances of what had been the 70s, and what to expect from the 80s. The song's lyrics are in the appendix section of this research. Perhaps calling back to his 1970 song/poem "Enough," back to the haunting image of him saying 'look over your shoulder, motherfucker, I am coming,' but now it is the image of rabid mad (motherfucking) dogs chasing anyone who did not fit the All American profile, because, as he recalls, the semantics had changed in 1979. Back then, Mexicans, Chicanos, and Orientals were all niggers, the unwanted element in the community, and needed to be brought down, neutralized, or stunted.

It was also a blues decade abroad, as the title of his 1974 album suggested, *From South Africa to South Carolina*. The kind of blues Scott-Heron talks about in this album had spread throughout the world because of the seemingly tireless efforts of people like Henry Kissinger, who reasoned, in a rather Orwellian manner, that 'world peace' could only be attained through war, through military intervention; peace through war. As Scott-Heron reminds us in "Bicentennial Blues," Kissinger was the "international godfather of peace." However, after

calling him that he plays with the ambiguity between 'peace/piece,' which are pronounced the same way, by continuing as follows: "A piece of Vietnam / A piece of Laos / A piece of Angola / A piece of Cuba" (115-118). It was also a blues decade in the African continent, as Scott-Heron reminds us with his song 1975 song "The liberation song (Red, black and green)." The song starts like this:

> I've seen the red sun in the autumn
> And I've seen the leaves turn to golden brown
> I've seen the red sun in the autumn
> And I've seen the leaves returning to golden brown
> I've seen the red blood of my people
> Heard them calling for freedom everywhere (1-6).

The colors red, black, and green, mentioned in the title, make reference to the colors of the pan-African flag. The song pays homage, and supports the struggles, fighting, and revolutions happening all throughout the African continent against colonial powers and systems of control. It was indeed a blues decade for the world, just like it was a blues decade for the United States, as Scott-Heron reminds us in one of his performances of the song "Johannesburg," during the *Saturday Night Live* program. To the end of the song he says: "Detroit is like Johannesburg, New York is like Johannesburg."

Scott-Heron and his band also demonstrated their support to many of the revolutions happening all over the globe by creating a gorilla mascot, called Hugo, for the band. Hugo appeared on the cover of three of the eight albums Scott-Heron released in the 70s. He was an allusion to all the guerrilla soldiers fighting for freedom, justice, and equality; yet another word play with gorilla/guerrilla. His first appearance was on the 1975 album called *The First Minute of a New Day*. Its cover is a drawing of Hugo sitting in a wicker chair; an allusion

to a famous picture of Huey P. Newton (Black Panther) in the same position. Then came *From South Africa to South Carolina* (1976), and *It's Your World* (1976). In a 1975 interview to the Ann Arbor Sun, Scott-Heron was asked what the image of the gorilla represented, to which he answered:

> There's a song on our album called "Guerilla." The Midnight Band mascot is a gorilla named Hugo. Some people advised us to take a Rin Tin Tin, or a Morris, or a tweety-bird, or goldfish in bowls. But we prefer Hugo, because gorillas/guerillas don't take no shit off nobody. You don't hear about nobody grabbing on a gorilla. We advise people to stand up for themselves. Whether it be guerilla or gorilla, take your pick, but be sure you're a guerilla.[27]

Here are the covers of these albums, in chronological order.

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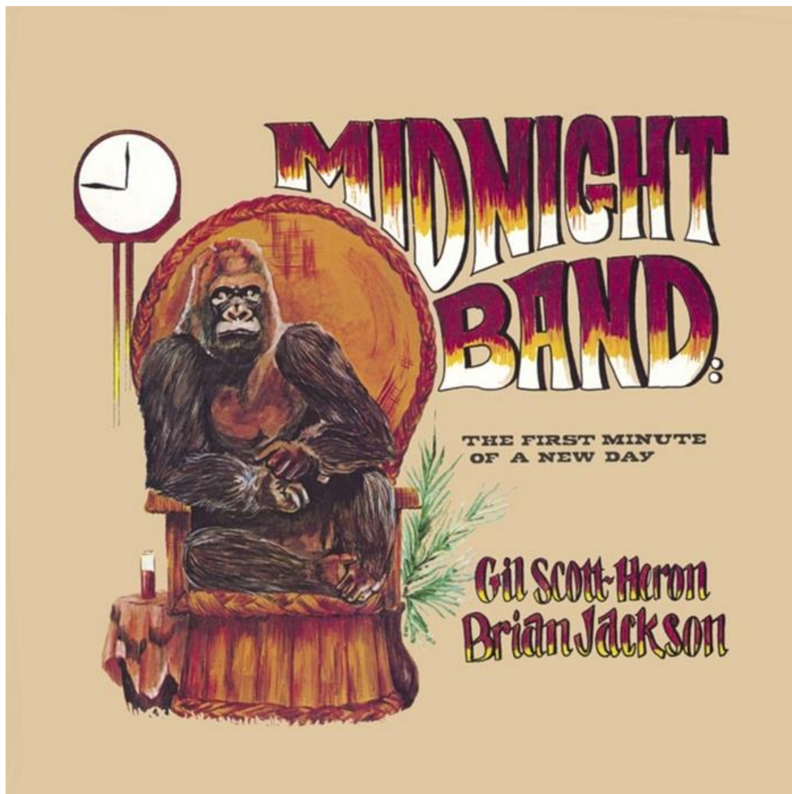
[27] Scott-Heron, Gil. Music and Politics with Gil Scott-Heron. *Ann Arbor Sun*, March 14-28, 1975. Avaiable at: < http://www.negroartist.com/writings/BLACK%20PANTHER%20NEWSPAPERS/13%20no%20166.htm > Accessed in February 8, 2015.



The back cover had another drawing of Hugo, but holding a machine gun with one hand, and smoking a joint with the other; he is dressed in army clothes.

Beneath is the original picture of Huey, which the front cover referenced.

[28]

[28] OMCA Collections. Available at: <http://collections.museumca.org/?q=system/files/imagecache/2000_wide/2010.8.1_DGAL_897_02.jpg> Accessed in July 25, 2014.

The next cover shows Hugo grabbing South Africa with one hand. The back cover shows him grabbing South Carolina with the other. The machine gun remains there, but now he also has a grenade. Behind Hugo there is a picture of the world seen from outer space, it makes him look disturbingly big, but also reveals the global perspectives which Scott-Heron began to develop.

The last cover is a drawing of Hugo which 'contains' Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson, as well as a lot of Indian symbolisms.

The more the country was drained into the 70s, the angrier and more lucid Scott-Heron's songs became. Even though the government and the establishment were putatively trying to tell the country that as Nixon went, so too did all the bad apples, that Ford was responsible for negotiating peace treaties around the world, and that with Carter came a new kind of politics, Scott-Heron saw all that as a smoke screen tactic. While media wizards, pundits of all sorts, and many think-tanks were talking about all the purging that was been carried out, Scott-Heron was talking about all the blues he saw throughout the country. While the

country celebrated its bicentennial independence, Scott-Heron was talking about how it seemed more like a buy-centennial year:

> Buy a car
> Buy a flag
> Buy a map
> Until the public in mass has been bludgeoned into bicentennial submission
> Or bicentennial suspicion
> I fall into the latter category
> It's a blues year
> And America has got the blues
> It's got the blues because of partial deifications
> Of partial accomplishments
> Over partial periods of time
> Halfway justice
> Halfway liberty
> Halfway equality
> It's a half-ass year (61-75).

Buy a car, one of the pillars of the economy, an asset which binds together the auto-industries to the oil industries. Buy a flag, join in the world race of land acquisition because as George Ball, former Undersecretary of State for economic affairs of Kennedy, also former director of investment banking firm Lehman Brothers, said at the 1967 International Chamber of Commerce: "Political boundaries of nation-states are too narrow and constricted to define the scope and activities of modern business" (Zinn, 561). Buy a map, it will come in handy, it will be useful to understand the global expansion of the industrial/military complex of the United States.

Even when the United States seemed not to be involved with expansionist and imperial wars overseas it still was, be it through the undisclosed involvement of the CIA and its 'family' agencies or partners, or by giving economic and military aid to right wing tyrannies across the globe; it always found a way to clear the path for corporate

businesses' interests. An example of this is Carter's presidency, after all he was a president who had the support of antiwar voters, of people who wanted a sharp decrease in the defense budget, and were also extremely critical of foreign policies. Overall, he managed to develop a rhetoric and image with most media so as to be associated with humanitarian practices; still today. Nonetheless, during his presidency the United States supported regimes known to have violated human rights, for instance, it supported the despotic rule of the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlevi in Iran, it supported the murderous 'presidency' of Ferdinando Marcos in the Philippines, it supported the invasion of East Timor by Indonesia's dictator Suharto, and supported Nicaragua's dictator Somoza. As for the hellish dictatorships in South America, as in Uruguay, Brazil, Argentina, and Chile, all of which were ongoing during Carter's presidency, and all of which the United States army was directly involved with, Carter's administration did no great effort to curb their monstrous practices, much less stop them. As Scott-Heron puts it in "Bicentennial Blues,":

> And we would be silly in our knowledge
> In all our self-righteous knowledge
> When we sit back and laugh and mock the things that happen in our lives
> To accept anything less than the truth
> About this bicentennial year
> And the truth relates to 200 years of people and ideas getting by […]
> It got by Jimmy Carter
> Skippy
> Got by Jimmy Carter and got by him and his friend the colonel
> The creators of southern-fried triple talk (76-111).

In this song, Carter becomes the delusional skipper of the US war ship, who managed to go beyond the average double talk of most politicians.

It was a blues decade for the United States, and the countries and people it disliked or wanted to control. Already in the liner notes of his 1974 album, *Winter in America*, Scott-Heron pointed towards the catastrophic future he foresaw for the country. Already in 74 he seemed conscious of what the country was becoming and would become. Already in 74 he predicted the enormous backlash which would come from the people who had been excluded from the 'system' for too long:

> It is mid-Winter in America; a man-made season of shattered dreams and shocked citizens, fumbling and frustrated beneath the crush of greed of corporate monsters and economic manipulators gone wild. There are born bitter winds born in knowledge of secrets plans hatched by Western Money Men that backfired and grew out of control to eat its own. (Liner notes)

4.5 Aliens in an alien nation: Ain't nothing but a movie

> The first thing I want to say is: Mandate my ass. (The opening lines of Scott-Heron's song "B-Movie")

As Scott-Heron reminds us in his song "B-Movie," a curious thing happened in the 1980 presidential election of Ronald Reagan. Of the total number of people registered to vote, only 54% voted (Zinn, 611). From those 54%, 43 million voted for Reagan, 51.6%. This meant that, of the total number of people eligible to vote, only about 27% actually voted for Reagan, while more than 69 million people did not vote for him; showing a "landslide in the other direction,"[29] as Scott-Heron points out. Not only did all this indicate that many people did not vote for Reagan, more than half of the total number of registered voters, but also that way more than 26 million people did not show up to vote at

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[29] *Black Wax*. Dir. Robert Mugge. Gil Scott-Heron and band. Channel Four Films. 1983. Documentary.

all, roughly 23% of the total number of registered voters. Scott-Heron understood this rather unusual situation as Americans refusing to "recognize that today is actually today."[30] The way he saw it, an increasing number of people were wistful of the good old days, when the United States still had much prestige with the rest of the world, before Vietnam, before Watergate, before the disastrous campaigns in places like Cuba and Cambodia, back in the days when: "Heroes weren't zeroes / Before fair was square / When the cavalry came straight away" (30-32) ("B-Movie"). For him, Reagan's election was the beginning of a new era, one which signaled that people were so disillusioned with the government and politics in general that they were willing to accept anyone who reminded them of some moment in history, the 'good old days.'

> The idea concerns the fact that this country wants nostalgia. They want to go back as far as they can - even if it's only as far as last week. Not to face now or tomorrow, but to face backwards. And yesterday was the day of our cinema heroes riding to the rescue at the last possible moment. The day of the man in the white hat or the man on the white horse - or the man who always came to save America at the last moment - someone always came to save America at the last moment - especially in "B" movies. And when America found itself having a hard time facing the future, they looked for people like John Wayne. But since John Wayne was no longer available, they settled for Ronald Reagan and it has placed us in a situation that we can only look at like a "B" movie (23-29).

As the government seemed each time more preoccupied with the market, the economy, and the free circulation of money, and each time less concerned with the citizens and their environments, a feeling of alienation began bubbling up in people's minds. Life was as

[30] Idem.

implacable as the old-West, but now the market was the new sheriff in town. All through the 80s, new paradigms were being established, a different ideology was sweeping the country, and whoever did not accompany such changes, or fit its needs (and they were many), was out. It was part of that free-markets ideology of 'you either have or you do not,' and if you had it, you were in, you were ok, but if you did not have it you were out, and that was that. The government seemed to be defaulted to work as a trigger happy gunslinger paroling the streets, while the market and the financial sector were given each time more draconian powers. For many people, as the lower middle-class and the poor, as well as an expressive percentage of 'minorities,' as Asian-Americans, Latinos, and African-Americans, it must have got to a point where it did not matter if the nation's leader was a Republican or Democrat, or if the economy was good or bad, things seemed too perennial to change. Ironically, Big Bill Broonzy's song from the first half of the 20th Century, "Black, Brown, and White," was as pertinent as it was contemporary still in the latter part of the century; as bluesy as ever. According to him, this is what 'they' will say to you: "If you are white you're alright / If you are brown stick around / But if you're black, oh brother / Get back, get back!" (5-8) Stick around, as in we might need you to clean something, or fetch us something, and get back as in go back to the fields, go back to work, go back to the jungle, go back to Africa; the Reagan-Bush administrations seemed to have brought back the classic b-movie cliché: "Get off my planet before sundown."

The 70s had gone by like a 'bad trip.' Beneath the cloak of liberty, justice, and equality there was the Vietnam fiasco, the Watergate

scandal, the unforgiving pardon, the clandestine operations, the bipartisan consensus on all-out war against whoever or whatever, and whenever, and, to end the decade, a tarnishing economic crisis pumped up by high unemployment and high inflation (stagflation). One of the results of such historical conditions was that citizens began, as Scott-Heron puts it: “Not to face now or tomorrow, but backwards / And yesterday was the day of our cinema heroes riding to the rescue at the last possible moment” (25-26) (“B-movie”). In Reagan’s second presidential election he received roughly 59% of popular vote, a historical landslide. Sadly, such figure represented about 29% of the voting population. This refusal to face now, of which this inexpressive voter turnout was a by-product, indicated that the citizenry not only felt disillusioned with the whole, but also alienated from it.

The great divides citizens faced, social, economic and political, seemed each time more inflexible, almost impossible to overcome. The surprising egalitarian economic growth of the 50s and 60s, by the end of the 70s, was rapidly giving way to the corporate world of personal wealth. The more power trans-nationals had, the bigger the financial market became, the more deregulated the economy got, the narrower the top of the social hierarchy became; it was the ultimate accumulation of wealth. The 60s was the decade of mass movements, the 70s of mass disillusionment, and the 80s of mass alienation. There was a strange blend of circumstances: Deindustrialization, deregulation, and intense technocracy. A new wave was going on, Americans were reinventing themselves and their way of approaching things and people. They were living life in a free-markets style, late-capitalism manner, where

anything goes if you are ‘in,’ and anything goes to be ‘in.’ The outpour of such national zeitgeist was an extreme individualism.

The further the corporate/financial sectors seemed from most citizens, in that people were relegated to being but the nuts and bolts of both, but never part of their decision making processes, the closer such sectors seemed to the government, in that no government decision would be made without prior consent of such sectors. It might have meant big bucks for a small group of people, yet for a significant part of the population it meant they were aliens living in an alien nation, a place which triggered in them feelings of estrangement and detachment more so than familiarity and belonging. No wonder during the 80s the anarchic alienation of the punk scene reached the masses – the do it yourself and now culture which bred in people a jittering end-of-the-world nihilism mindset, followed by, like an all-consuming hang-over, pleasure seeking destructive spasms.

None of this, however, seemed to surprise or shock Scott-Heron, quite the contrary he seemed to have been trying to tell people all about it ever since 1970. For instance, the fact that there was an increase in the black middle-class during the 80s, less so than during the 70s, but still expressive, did not mean that these African-Americans would be accepted as peers by the white middle-class; out in the streets it was still black and white, as he had reminded people already in 1970. There was still plenty of police brutality against most African-Americans, regardless of their social class, the white middle-class still called these middle-class African-Americans ‘uppity niggers,’ because they did not ‘know their places,’ and most of them had a hard time to rent or buy real-estate in ‘white’ neighborhoods. There was, on the other

hand, a much more substantial increase in the number of African-Americans in need of social assistance and unemployed during the 80s. The nation's overall annual unemployment percentage could add up to a number, but such percentage would be much higher when calculating the percentage of unemployed African-Americans; as Scott-Heron puts it: "As unemployment spirals toward 7 percent, it seems like 70 percent in my neighborhood" (80) ("Pardon our analysis").

The way he saw it, the average African-American should expect from Washington D.C. nothing but trickery, unfulfilled promises, secrets, and lies. History had taught him that, and it seemed that nothing was de facto changing:

> During Reconstruction time there were folks who had been promised 40 acres and a mule
> And they were told a man with their legal papers could be expected on a train from Washington.
> There were folks who waited for him and there are folks still waiting for him
> But you can't depend on the train from Washington, it's 100 years overdue. […]
> You can depend on politicians, yeah
> Always got a point of view.
> They are contemporary court magicians, yeah
> Sleight of mouth will dazzle you
> You can depend on the repositions from them
> Changes that you've got to go through
> But don't depend on the train from Washington
> It's one hundred years overdue (1-25) ("The Train from Washington").

Reagan's 'trickle-down' all-out war against social programs, combined with his inactions within the country, juxtaposed by his manifold multi-billion dollar actions overseas, were but the coal which made the train from Washington go. The conductors of this train were capable of creating new and fantastic rules and regulations, new 'tracks' for the limitless expansion of corporations and the financial market, 'tracks'

which would go to the ends of the world in search of profit and resources, but they were incapable of making the train reach Harlem, or Selma, or Philadelphia, Mississippi. For Scott-Heron, the nation's capital reeked of laundered money, of piss and excrement, of bureaucracy, and of death. As he wrote in the song, "Washington D.C.," (1982):

> Symbols of democracy, pinned up against the coast
> Outhouse of bureaucracy, surrounded by a moat
> Citizens of poverty are barely out of sight
> Overlords escape in the evening with people of the night
> Morning come and bring the tourists, craning rubber necks
> Catch a glimpse of the cowboy making the world a nervous wreck
> It's a mass of irony for all the world to see
> It's the nation's capital, it's Washington D.C.
> It's the nation's capital
> It's the nation's capital
> It's the nation's capital, it's Washington D.C.
> It's the nation's capital
> Got you feeling capital
> Punishment is capital in Washington D.C. (29-42)

D.C. was nothing but a toilet of bureaucracy, kept out of reach, at a safe distance from the people. The people in charge, those in command of this outpost, prone to mischief as they were, escaped every night, as fugitive prisoners, to spend public money on the many untaxed services offered after 18:00. D.C., the nation's capital, from whence the main powers emanated, meant to symbolize democracy, was but a place where you either killed or were killed. The surroundings of this vicious outhouse were always crammed with flashy tourists and poor people, all waiting to catch a glimpse of the warmonger cowboy in charge of the show, the director of the act. It was part of the collective delusion also

known as America, land of the unfree, home of slave, the country of mass irony, mass contradiction, and mass alienation.

Reagan, Bush, bipartisan consensus, corporate take-over, and market deregulation, all that, for Scott-Heron, was just business as usual:

> As Wall Street goes, so goes the nation. And here's a look at the closing numbers: Racism's up, human rights are down, peace is shaky, war items are hot. The House claims all ties. Jobs are down, money is scarce, and common sense is at an all-time low on heavy trading (76-78) ("B-movie").

It was part of the game, part of the rules and (de)regulations which controlled the country. A country alien to many of its citizens, a ghastly alien nation. Those who were not included in the game, who were not part of the business, were treated as aliens, regardless if they were citizens or not. What could be more alienating than having the government tell it to your face that you do not belong to the place where you were born and raised in, and have helped to build, that you have no basic constitutional rights? What is more alienating than recognizing your own second-class citizenship? What is more alienating than being forced to withstand structural segregation each new day? It was part of the plan, part of the war: A war against poor people disguised as a war on drugs. It was an attack against African-Americans and other ethnic 'minorities' perpetrated by the government, disguised as the 'necessary losses' in the maintenance of the market and the economy. It meant high-times for some white-collar workers, especially for venture capitalists, but it also meant the end of the line for many blue-collar workers. Scott-Heron talks about these discrepancies in his 1982 song "Blue Collar." He begins the song like this: "I been down in

Pennsylvania / Where I was working in the mine / And I been down in Cincinnati / They laid me off the assembly line / Yeah, they got me looking everywhere / But I ain't too proud of what I found" (1-6). He was absolutely right, after all why should these workers be proud of their labor, if in the end they did not enjoy most of the benefits, profits, or surpluses they produced? Why should they be proud, if all that went to 'the Man'? Why should they be proud of being laid-off by the thousands because of some unscrupulous offshore? They should be outraged, they should be saying: "Enough."

Scott-Heron is adamant about the participation of the State and private enterprises on the belligerent exclusion of African-Americans, the way he understands it, the conditions operating behind historical and current second-class citizenship of many African-Americans are directly linked to well-orchestrated actions coming from different levels of government, and different spheres of society. Many questions come to mind after listening to him: Why are there way more liquor stores and drug points than schools or libraries or hospitals or community centers in these poor neighborhoods? Why are these ghettos maintained as 'gated zones,' as a 'controlled environment,' or a place where nobody leaves nor enters without being monitored and surveyed? Is this inhumane exclusion of the ghetto a never-ending cycle which, statistically speaking, tends to maintain those places just the way they are: gated zones inhabited predominantly by poor non-whites? For Scott-Heron the ghetto was just another nuance of Jim-Crow and slavery and structural segregation; yet another casualty of corporate America and its business interests. The math, or better, the logics of it was very simple: that with segregation degradation and criminality were

unavoidable; ghetto = criminal. This positioning he had is very clear in works like the novel *The Vulture* (1970), which talks about a lot of the correspondences between criminality and poor living conditions within the ghetto. In songs like, "Home is where the hatred is," and "Pieces of a man," he talks about how the disintegration of individuals will eventually lead to the disintegration of collectives, of whole neighborhoods. In songs like "King Alfred plan," or "No knock," or "Billy Green is dead," he points out that many times the government is directly involved with this disintegration of individual lives and whole neighborhoods. In "B-movie" he claims that the State alienates the people in such a way, that issues as racism and structural segregation, pillars of the ghetto, are perceived as 'necessary illusions.' The way Scott-Heron sees it, there seems to be a never-ending cycle within these poor neighborhoods: Segregation breeds desperation, desperation breeds criminality, criminality breeds violence, and violence breeds desperation; to top things off, bring in a trigger happy police for an ostensive patrol of the people.

Some of the biggest problems these poor neighborhoods faced during the 80s were drug related: Crack was rapidly becoming an epidemic. More and more people were being sent to prison and on parole or probation, and many times the accusations were made-up, as the drug might be planted on the person. Violence and criminality were steadfastly growing out of control. Police brutality was common practice. Government investment in social programs within these neighborhoods was inexpressive when compared to the amount of money which had to go to the construction of more prisons or to police operations which sought to combat the drug problem, but were many

times complicit with drug lords and their operations. It was all another never-ending cycle. Reagan's War on Drugs certainly did not make things better, quite the contrary it intensified poverty, class and race related conflicts, the marginalization of an expressive part of the population, among other things. Nowadays, when we look at charts and graphs which show the expressive growth in numbers of drug-related arrests and imprisonments which began during the 80s, and is still today quite steady, it is easy to understand how much things changed when Reagan privatized the management-level jobs in prisons in 1983, which basically transformed prisons into a multi-billion dollar enterprise almost overnight. Reagan's privatization of prisons, (some procedures of prisons, as cleaning or catering, had already been privatized since the 19th Century), generated catastrophic consequences in these 'gated zones.' In capitalist terms what Reagan was saying was that henceforth prisoners meant money. When we look at the multiple 'whys,' as 'why did they build prisons but not schools?,' and 'hows,' as 'how did they get so much money to build prisons?,' behind this privatization, the statistical fact that the vast majority of prisoners were non-white, most of them were African-Americans, is quite revealing, and not the least bit surprising.

Scott-Heron was well aware of all this. The multiple maladies that drugs brought not only to the addicts, but also to whole families and neighborhoods, was a recurrent theme of his work; ever since his first novel and book of poems. He knew a lot about all this because he had seen the devastating effects first-hand. Some of his songs which discuss these side-effects of drugs, which talk about different contexts within the 'drug culture,' as a fractured home, the degeneration of interpersonal

relationships, and the disintegration of whole neighborhoods, are: “The needle’s eye” (1971), and “The bottle” (1974). “The needle’s eye” is about heroin addiction. It starts like this: “A circle spinning faster / And getting larger all the time / A whirlpool spelled disaster / For all the people who don't rhyme” (1-4). His description of the heroin high has a cathartic sound to it, there is a mix between confusion and torpor and danger. According to him, in the beginning this vice gives its user: “A brand new sense of freedom / A brand new sense of time / Him may go and stand alone now / And leave the hate and fear behind” (8-11). The solitude and numbness of heroin are clear in these lines, the user stands alone, but there is also an underlying magical sensation, a redemptive quality to it, the user acquires novel senses of freedom and time. Yet, as the song progresses social problems begin to emerge, problematic interpersonal relationships, due to drug abuse, end up shattering peoples’ minds and lives, and there is always some form of reflex of this in bigger contexts, such as the community or neighborhood. He mentions things like: “All the millions spent for killing / Seems the whole world must be dying / All the children who go hungry / How much food we could be buying” (12-15), and: “People wake up every morning / And simply push their lives aside / They seem to carry all their feelings / Crushed and crumbled up inside” (23-26). These forlorn situations make the narrator have a breakdown, he feels totally helpless and alienated. It all seems to clear the way for addictions and vices of all sorts. The next problem he talks about reaches into families, and domestic relationships. He writes: “So I went to see my father / Many questions on my mind / But he didn't want to answer me / God, the whole world must be blind” (30-33). Thus, he starts by talking about

problems in a macro-level, as in 'millions spent for killing while the world is dying,' and 'people pushing their lives aside for their 9-5 jobs.' However, something seems to snap inside the narrator when he tries to talk to his father, but the father does not answer him. That is when his disintegration is complete, when he becomes completely alienated from his surroundings; the whole world must be blind. The next time he talks about the high of the drug he includes one word in his description, and it changes everything: "Without a brand new sense of freedom / A brand new sense of time / Him may go and stand alone now / And leave the hate and fear behind" (37-40).

Therefore, even though heroin will drive the pain away (for a short period of time), it all comes with a price: Your life and family. The song references heroin, but it could be talking about crack or alcohol or methamphetamines just the same. The stories behind these addictions follow very similar routes. Usually, there is an already disconcerting reality, as day-to-day life in the ghetto, which receives a devastating blow to its very foundation, a drug addiction. Scott-Heron's analysis of the surroundings of the addict, and the addiction itself, gives us a very clear picture of how drugs are responsible not only for a person's steady deterioration, but also responsible for the environment's fast corrosion. First, the drug destroys the addict, afterwards, as a result of this, as more and more people get 'hooked,' the drug eventually corrodes the community. Within these poor neighborhoods drugs walk hand-in-hand with criminality and violence, and many times under the attentive look of the State, with its consent.

The other song which discusses drug addiction is "The bottle." It is about alcohol, and how its abuse has destroyed the lives of

countless African-Americans. It is, however, slightly different from "The needle's eye" because it is entirely focused on interpersonal problems, or micro level problems. The song begins like this:

> See that black boy over there running scared
> His old man in a bottle
> He done quit his 9 to 5
> He drink full time and now he's living in a bottle
> See that black boy over there running scared
> His old man got a problem
> And it's a bad one
> He done pawned off damn near everything,
> His old woman's wedding ring for a bottle
> And don't you think it's a crime when
> Time after time after time
> People in the bottle
> There's people living in the bottle (1-13).

Scott-Heron's positioning here is completely different from his positioning in "The needle's eye." Here, he calls this addiction, or better, he calls the complex interrelationships which involve this addiction as crime. The addiction is not only an unfortunate issue, it is a crime; but who should be blamed for such crime: The addict or the State? He seems to indict the State; as though he sees the root of the addiction coming from the State, as if implying that it knew about all this, about how manic and self-destructive life in the ghetto was, yet invested more money on war abroad than on preventive programs against drugs within these neighborhoods, or invested more on building prisons than on building schools or hospitals or community centers, or invested more on military aid to third world dictatorships than on basic infrastructure of these neighborhoods. Therefore, because the State has blatantly 'abandoned' these communities, because these people were left with nothing, they resort to things like drugs. Later on in the song he talks about the narrator's addiction as if it were the same addiction of

many people in the streets. He talks about a personal problem as if it were a collective problem: “I'll tell you a little secret / If you ever come looking for me / You know where I'm bound to be / In the bottle / Turn around / Look around on any corner / If you see some brother looking like a goner / It's going to be me” (44-51). He ends the song by saying that all that the narrator wants is the bottle; the vicious cycle is completed.

Even though both songs are very similar in their characterization of the drug problem as something bigger than itself, for example, depicting it as a political problem, or a social problem, they have different approaches to this problem. While the “The needle’s eye” deals more with social issues which may make people seek out drugs, “The bottle” talks about the consequences that a drug addiction might have on a social level. While the former depicts a bigger context, tracing parallels between different social instances and the narrator/addict, a somewhat vertical relationship between the addict/drug and their surroundings, the latter talks more about interpersonal relationships, and in what ways are they affected by the drug, a somewhat horizontal relationship between the addict and the people that come in contact with him/her. The vertical relationships which “The needle’s eye” talks about, the correlations between different social levels and the narrator/addict, will undoubtedly lead to a breakdown in the horizontal relationships which “The bottle” talks about, the interrelationships between people of a community, and vice-versa. “The bottle” is slightly more radical in its criticism because not only does it talk about the devastating consequences of the abuse of alcohol, but it talks about this addiction in terms of it being a crime which is not unavoidable. It is

revealing and insightful concerning the 80s context because it addresses key issues which contributed to the degradation of neighborhoods, and to the deterioration of interpersonal relationships within these neighborhoods, for example, the indirect connivance of the government, the lack of opportunities within these neighborhoods, and the intense despair and marginalization the people from these 'gated zones' had to endure every day. Therefore, even though both songs were from the 70s, sadly they were still quite relevant in the 80s.

Other songs, as "Waiting for the axe to fall" (1980), and "Gun" (1981), are also good examples of Scott-Heron's awareness of what it meant to be black in the United States during the 80s. In "Waiting for the axe to fall" he talks about how many of his 'brothers and sisters' seem to be living on the verge of things, how many African-Americans, who have been 'chained' while still in the womb by external factors, (social, cultural, economic and political), seem to be merely waiting for the axe to fall on their heads so that they can finally be liberated. It starts like this:

> Brother living in a cell
> Doing time in a county jail
> Now you might think his life is hell
> But he told me, first room he ever had to himself
> He's just, waiting for the axe to fall
> Sometimes lord I think that's all
> When your head is on a block ain't no way for it to stop
> You're just waiting for the axe to fall (1-9).

In the next stanza he talks about a man who fought in Vietnam, but then decided to 'turn around on Uncle Sam' because no one gave a damn, and now he is just 'waiting for the axe to fall.' In the stanza after that, he talks about a woman on welfare, who struggles to survive and provide for her kids, who never "thought she would be cheating and lying" just

to do that, and now is 'just waiting for the axe to fall.' Then in the last stanza he talks about how his grandmother got robbed, and how she no longer feels safe in the neighborhood, and now is 'just waiting for the axe to fall.' By talking about four different characters, or four different contexts, he already offers a clear picture of the multiple problems these neighborhoods are forced to constantly face. There are a staggering number of people who never had a chance, who were never offered opportunities, who are constantly under surveillance and being punished, and, not surprisingly, end up just waiting for the axe to fall.

In "Gun," he talks about all these people he meets in the streets of the ghetto who are carrying guns for protection. It is a strong criticism of the gun culture which permeates not only the ghetto but also the nation, and contends that people that carry guns want merely to have the "freedom to be afraid." The gun might be a symbol of justice, but it is always important to ask: Justice according to whom? Whose justice? The ways he talks about the gun issue it is as if he implies that if you live by the gun, your will die by the bullet. Having a gun will but give you an illusion of protection, and transform your next door neighbor into a potential enemy. No wonder the government did not seem that preoccupied in trying to control the gun problem within these neighborhoods during the 80s, as more people owning guns, also meant that there were more chances of people getting shot. Some of its lines read:

> This is a violent civilization
> If civilization's where I am.
> Every channel that I stop on
> Got a different kind of cop on
> Killing them by the million for Uncle Sam.
> Saturday night just ain't that special.
> Yeah, I got the constitution on the run

> 'Cause even though we've got the right
> To defend our home, to defend our life,
> Got to understand to get it in hand about the guns.
> Everybody's got a pistol.
> Everybody got a .45.
> The philosophy seems to be,
> At least as near as I can see,
> When other folks give up,
> I, I'll give up.
> Saturday night just ain't that special.
> Freedom to be afraid is all you want.
> Yes if you don't want to be next.
> You've got a family to protect.
> 9 out of 10, you've got a friend, you've got a gun (15-33).

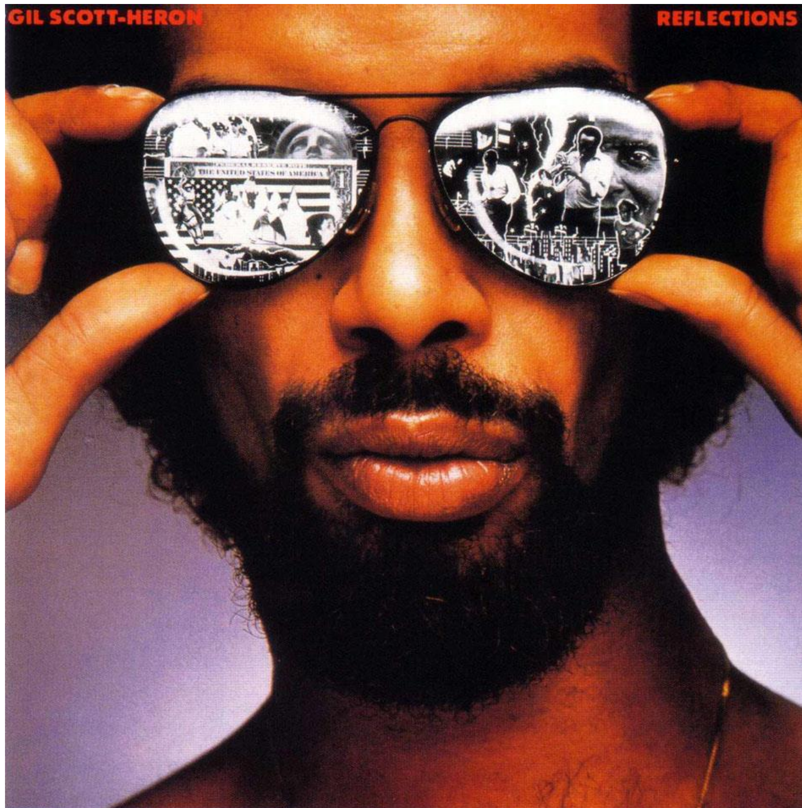
There is a lot in there which criticizes the rhetoric of 'more guns means safer people,' and 'why should I disarm myself if it is my constitutional right to arm myself?' or 'why should I do that if the bad guys are arming themselves to the teeth?' The song points to the inconsistencies behind that philosophy by talking about its rationality: If you keep arming people by spending each time more money on military contractors and the war industry, you will maintain this situation ad infinitum, it is another never-ending cycle which historically and statistically speaking is unsustainable and ineffective. A practical example would be to set up a chart to measure how much net profit corporations like McDonnell Douglas or Lockheed-Martin, involved with the military industry, as the manufacture of weapons, had during the 20th Century. After that measuring line, which cuts across the decades and tells us how much monetary capital these corporations were generating to their executive officers passes the 1980s, it never goes down; it flies like a nuclear rocket. This is the never-ending cycle which Scott-Heron talks about in "Gun." In the song, the ghetto is the 'gated zone' where poor blacks kill

poor blacks, and the police, more than anything, just adds more casualties. The song starts like this:

> Brother man nowadays living in the ghetto
> Where the dangers sure enough real.
> Well, when he's out late at night, and if he's got his head on right
> Well, I lay you 9 to 5 he's walking with steel (1-4).

The last part, I lay you 9 to 5 he is walking with steel, is a good example of ghetto life, of the gun philosophy which generates the never-ending death cycle. There is the double meaning behind it, that of betting on something on the 'leverage' of 9 to 5, which is another way of saying 'of course this is so,' but there is also the parallel with the 9 to 5 jobs, in that Scott-Heron lays it to us, or tells us, that from 9 to 5 (the average working hours in offices) these people will be walking with steel; instead of being in an office they will probably be using a gun.

Two of Scott-Heron's album covers of the 80s are also very symbolic of his participatory politics and personal commitments: His 1981 album "*Reflections*" and also "*Moving Target*" (1982).



The picture shows a close-up of his face, but we do not see his eyes, rather he wears sun-glasses. The images reflected on his glasses, which would correspond to us in visual terms, are very symbolic of what the album talks about, what was going on in his head at the time, what kind of things were troubling him, inspiring him, motivating him, and vexing him. In the left lens there is an image of police officers staring at what seems to be a black person. Right beside it, part of the head of the Statue of Liberty gazes upwards, almost oblivious to everything depicted in the cover. Underneath these images is the tip of a dollar bill, and over it, immediately beneath it, the nation's flag; the money/flag juxtaposition is

very direct. Over the flag, in its lower left side, is an image of a cowboy riding a horse, possibly the hero who would save America at the last possible moment. Beside the cowboy is an image of Ronald "Hollyweird" Reagan. He seems to be laughing, as if enjoying all he sees. Beneath all these images is a ghostly portrait of a city, dark clouds rise behind the city's skyscrapers, giving it 'gothic' overtones. In the right lens, there is a big portrait of Miles Davis playing the trumpet. Beside him, to his right, there is a huge portrait of a black face. Underneath Miles, also to his right, there is the portrait of a black kid, he/she seems happy, but the image seems cut-out from the lens, like a collage, an alien. Beneath Miles is another drawing of a city, more skyscrapers. These buildings are over a musical score, which gives us the impression that they serve as musical notations; the city is the music. Beneath the city's buildings there seems to be a small crowd of protesters. A frightening lightning is striking the top of one of these buildings, almost cutting this image in half.

The other album cover is "*Moving target*."

The picture is almost self-explanatory, as it leaves little room for misinterpretations. It calls back to that eerie image of him saying: “Look over your shoulder, motherfucker. I am coming!” Because the record has songs like “Blue Collar,” and “Washington D. C.” (discussed above) it is easy to understand why he is a moving target which needs to be eliminated. The criticisms found in the album were explosive, and the cover certainly conveys that message. However, if the cover shows the target aim of something like a sniper, some questions immediately come to mind: Who is the sniper? Who ordered the ‘hit’? Why was this ‘hit’ ordered? The last song of the album, “Black History/ The World,” gives

some hints to the answers of such questions. There is a moment in the song where he says:

> I was wondering about our yesterdays,
> And starting digging through the rubble
> And to say, at least somebody went through a hell of a lot of trouble
> To make sure that when we looked things up
> We wouldn't fair too well
> And that we would come up with totally unreliable
> Pictures of ourselves.
> But I compiled what few facts I could,
> I mean, such as they are
> To see if we could shed a little bit of light
> And this is what I got so far:
> First, white folks discovered Africa and they claimed it fair and square.
> Cecil Rhodes couldn't have been robbing nobody
> Because, hell, there was nobody there (19-34).

Certainly not what many politicians or academics or businessmen or financial investors or venture capitalists of the time would want to hear, which hints at what kind of people perceived him as a moving target, a threat, or a time-bomb. The Cecil Rhodes (exponent of British Colonialism in South Africa and mining mogul) remark is definitely applicable to Columbus, as well as the pilgrims and settlers and the whole 'discovery' of America. In other words, it links the colonization of Africa to that of America, and both to the global expansion of capitalism. To the middle of the song he says that when white folks got to Africa and found all that land just lying there, unmapped by Europe's known world, the Dark Continent suddenly became quite attractive. The people that lived there had all these 'primitive' customs and artifacts,

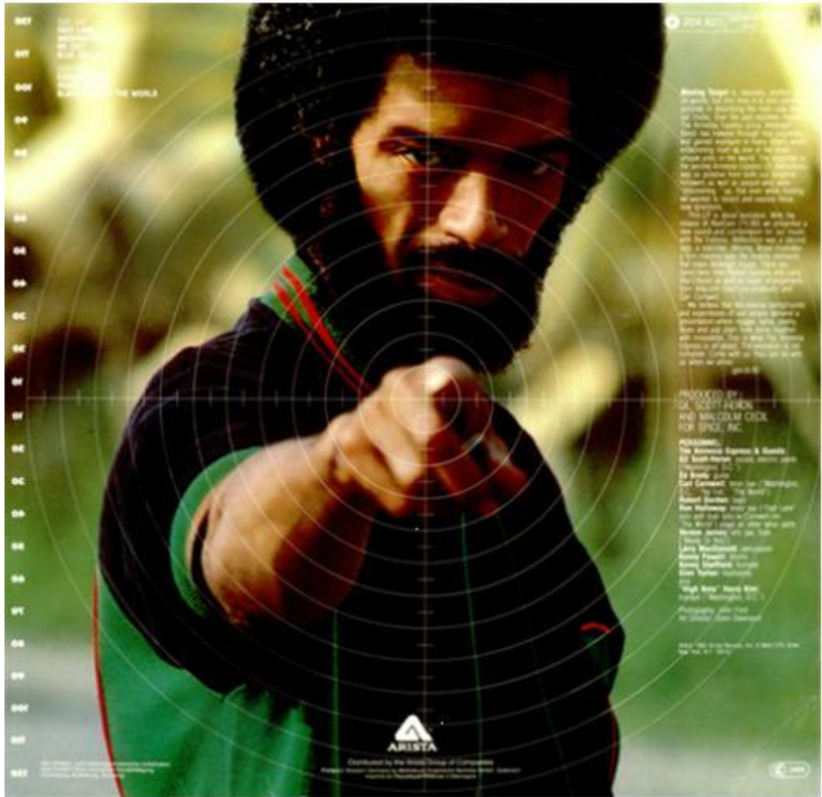
> But no paper and pencils and other utensils
> And hell, these folks never even heard of a gun.
> And this is why the colonies came to stabilize the land
> Because the Dark Continent had copper and gold
> And the discoverers had a plan.

> They would discover all the places with a promise.
> You didn't need no titles or deeds.
> You could just appoint people to make everything legal,
> To sanction the trickery and greed (57-66).

The underlying reasoning behind this illegal appropriation was that the colonies and Columbus et al. brought civilization to the savages which inhabited the land. As Columbus, the colonies had big plans, and if whole nations and peoples got in the way, the right kind of people would be appointed to blow the uncivilized away. The song ends like this:

> And still we are victims of word games,
> Semantics is always a bitch:
> Places once referred to as under-developed
> Are now called 'mineral rich.'
> And the game goes on eternally
> Unity kept just beyond reach.
> Egypt and Libya used to be in Africa,
> They've been moved to the Middle East.
> There are examples galore I assure you,
> But if interpreting were left up to me
> I'd be sure every time folks knew this version wasn't mine
> Which is why it is called 'His story' (71-82).

Unity is always kept out of reach, the past is always tuned down, and atrocities will effectively be glossed out by history textbooks; this is why ‘it is called His story.’ Geopolitical boundaries are created by men, and kept unstable by men in such a way that the constant flux of capital and the market will not be interfered with. The historical continuum of Western civilization could not be halted, even if it meant that things like genocide, annihilation, and plundering had to be done. The moving target becomes something much greater than Scott-Heron; it is all these voices which have been silenced for too many years. The back cover is also extremely significant.



He points straight at us, no mistake about it. His lofty afro hair bridges with a dense beard, covering his entire face – the vitality of the African mindset spirit joining with the irreverent wisdom of an old sage. His facial expression is a mix between aggression and impatience, making it look as though he is saying ‘you are next,’ but also ‘you better stop it.’ It is a disquieting image not only because the target aim is pointed directly at him, but also because he points his finger straight at us, which gives the impression that the target could actually be pointed at us; we are next.

Reagan and Bush were so savvy statesmen that by the time that both had left the oval office national debt was about $ 4 trillion. Under their administrations the country did an unprecedented turn towards deindustrialization, and the financial sector together with powerful corporations were offered incentives in a way which had last been seen in the 1920s, shortly before the crash. So called 'minorities' were the ones who ended up suffering the biggest consequences of such reckless profit driven type of government; like always. The situation was especially harsh on African-Americans, as Howard Zinn notes:

> Reagan-Bush years hit black families hardest, with their lack of resources to start with and with racial discrimination facing them in jobs. The victories of the civil rights movement had opened up spaces for some African-Americans, but left others far behind.
>
> At the end of the eighties, at least a third of African-American families fell below the official poverty level, and black unemployment seemed fixed at two and a half times that of whites, with young blacks out of work at the rate of 30 to 40 percent. The life expectancy of blacks remained at least ten years lower than that of whites. In Detroit, Washington, and Baltimore, the mortality rate for black babies was higher than in Jamaica or Costa Rica (581-582).

For many African-Americans there was an increasing feeling of alienation, of not belonging to the bigger picture of the country; as though they were aliens in an alien nation. Overall, more and more people were becoming nostalgic of the glory days America lived during the post-WWII years, especially during the 50s, and refused to face 'now.' The fact that Reagan was an ex-Hollywood actor is extremely symbolic, and makes us wonder if the people who elected him actually wanted something unreal, a mix between salvation and guidance. Electing an actor was as though the population wanted to go see a movie with some old-Western hero type of cowboy who would save the day

for the nation; people did not vote they bought a ticket. In the end of his song "B-movie" Scott-Heron says that if people were to get too nervous or worrisome with such a daunting reality, all they had to do was repeat to themselves that it was all just a movie:

> You don't need to be in no hurry.
> You ain't never really got to worry.
> And you don't need to check on how you feel.
> Just keep repeating that none of this is real.
> And if you're sensing, that something's wrong,
> Well just remember, that it won't be too long
> Before the director cuts the scene, yeah.
> This ain't really your life,
> Ain't really your life,
> Ain't really ain't nothing but a movie (83-92).

4.6 Looking back but moving forward

> But life courage determined to do more than just survive
> And too many homes have a missing woman or man
> Without the feeling of missing love
> Maybe they are homes that are hurt
> But they are no real lives that hurt without reach[…]
> Because men die, men lose, they are lost and they leave
> And so do women.
> I came from what they called "a broken home"
> But they ever really called it "a house"
> They would have known how wrong they were
> We were working on our lives and our homes
> Dealing with what we had, not what we didn't have (7-24) ("On coming from a broken home (part 2)").

After *Moving Target* (1982) Scott-Heron released only two more records with new material, *Spirits* (1994), and *I'm new here* (2010). After that he collaborated with a remix of *I'm new here* done by UK producer Jamie xx, called *We're new here* (2011). *Spirits* came after more than a decade of silence. Its opening track, "Message to the messengers," already indicated that he was now going in a different musical direction. It was slightly different from his previous compositions in that it seemed as a message from another moment in

time, disconnected from the present. Most of his songs had a potent message to people in an immediate sense, he addressed things happening now; his songs were a live news report. However, “Message to the messengers” sounds more like a calling for a wise-up coming from an undetermined moment in time. In it, he tells the musicians who are just coming into the scene, the fresh meat of the recording industry, that they have to be conscious of what kind of message they are delivering to people, what kind of image they are conveying, and, especially, that they have to be aware of what is happening around them, but he tells these things in such a way that it looks like he is watching things from a bird’s-eye view. It is as though he is saying to these new artists that, in the past, he has gone through similar problems as they are going through right now, yet his whereabouts are ambiguous in terms of where he is right now. All we know, in a sense, is where he has been and what he has done; there are no indications of where he is in the present moment, something rather new in his prose, as he habitually places himself within the different contexts he discusses. Because he says things as if he has been cut off from the present the song’s atmosphere is somewhat backward looking. This is his first message to the messengers:

> But if you're going be teaching folks things, make sure you know what you're saying
> Older folks in our neighborhood got plenty of know-how
> Remember if it wasn't for them, you wouldn't be out here now
> And I ain't coming at you with no disrespect
> All I'm saying is that you damn well got to be correct
> Because if you're going to be speaking for a whole generation
> And you know enough to try and handle their education
> Make sure you know the real deal about past situations

> It ain't just repeating what you heard on the local TV stations (6-14).

He acts as a mediator between the older and 'wiser' folks, and the young messengers of the communities. Indirectly, he could be referring to himself in the second and third lines, from the top of his forty-five years, which reinforces his distancing. Lines like, 'make sure you know what you are saying,' 'you damn well got to be correct,' or 'make sure you know the real deal about past situations,' sound more like wisdom bits coming from 'older folks' than his customary incendiary warnings and rants. He refers to problems happening right now, but he detaches himself from them. He no longer is a participant – now he is more like an observer or commentator. In the chorus, he sings:

> And if they look at you like you're insane
> And they start calling you scarecrow and say you ain't got no brain
> Or start telling folks that you suddenly gone lame
> Or that white folks had finally co-opted your game
> Or worse yet implying that you don't really know
> That's the same thing they said about us...a long time ago (35-40).

Behind such precautious remarks there is the idea of the never-ending cycles African-Americans faced: The challenges young artists faced then could be different than the challenges he faced in the past, but the conditions which led to these challenges, the underlying problems were still basically the same. It is as if he sees things in this manner due to his 'time' advantage, as though he has a kind of hindsight knowledge. This is how he begins the song:

> Hey, yeah, we the same brothers from a long time ago
> We was talking about television and doing it on the radio
> What we did was to help our generation realize
> They had to get out there and get busy cause it wasn't going be televised (1-4).

From the start, he already distances himself from the right now by placing himself in the past, yet he also places the past in the right now, suggesting that people still had not solved the problems of the past. In the last lines of the song he sends another alert: “Remember: Keep the nerve / Keep the nerve / Keep the nerve / Keep the nerve / I’m talking about peace” (76-80). If this song says anything about the album, and I think it does, it is this: Scott-Heron was no longer positioning himself within the present moment; rather he was distancing himself from it. Yet, he does not do it in any cowardly or elusive manner; he just seems to be creating different strategies, tackling the problems from different thresholds.

This is the case with other songs of the album. “Give her a call” is about an old love of his who said she would wait for him forever. In it, as he remembers her, he notices how time has gone by, and even though her lingering memory brings him to his feet, and makes him look around, it also seems to remove him from the present. It is only fifteen lines long, but covers a vast time-span:

> My life is one of movement
> I been running as fast as I can
> I've inherited trial and error directly from my old man
> But I'm committed to the consequences
> Whether I stand or fall
> And when I get back to my life
> I think I'm going to give her a call.
> She's been waiting patiently
> For me to get myself together
> And it touches something deep inside
> When she said she'd wait forever
> Because forever's right up on me now
> That is, if it ever comes at all
> And when I'm back to my life
> I think I'll give her a call (1-15).

Like a character from a Brecht play, who, by distancing himself from the play's action, comments on it, Scott-Heron seems to dislocate himself from his life in order to talk about it; he seems to glide over himself, like a phantasm, assuring that 'when he is back to his life' he will know what to do. Bits like, 'my life is one of movement,' or 'I been running,' or 'forever's right up on me now' also suspend him in time. This same distancing is clear in the song "Spirits past." Its very first lines go straight to the point:

> It's getting to be the time of year
> When people once spoke of love and good cheer
> Peace on Earth and good will to all men
> And we all believed that there'd come a day
> When peace would be much more than "on its way"
> Cause peace has been on its way since I don't know when
> And the folks who decide what will be
> They haven't confided in me
> And I don't think that everybody can wait 'til then (1-9).

Time references are vague and indefinable, as, 'it is getting to be the time when people once spoke of,' or 'we all believed that there would come a day,' or 'peace has been on its way since I do not know when.' Much like in "Give her a call," in "Spirits past" Scott-Heron seems disconnected from his environment, yet the more distant he seems the better he can comment on things and situations. As "Message to the messengers," "Spirits past" talks about the recurrence or significance of past events, how they can still affect the present. The song is about spirits from the past which haunt people who live under terrible conditions, and seem to have neither means of improving their present lives, nor future prospects. It is as though these people seem to be caught in a moment out of time, in-between the remembrance of brighter yesterdays, and the expectation of better tomorrows: A time

‘when people once spoke of love and good cheer,’ a time when ‘we all believed that there would come a day.’ Afterwards, he also says that: “But that seems like such a long time ago / And I am still a child I know / But it seems like we've lost much more than the time” (13-15). Again there is the idea of lost time, indetermination, and a backward looking point-of-view.

The longest track in the album, “The other side,” is divided into three parts; lasting almost twenty minutes. It is a reinterpretation of his 1971 song, mentioned above, “Home is where the hatred is.” He adds extensive new material to it and the recording is live. This intimacy of the live take reveals a faltering voice. Scott-Heron’s voice had significantly changed: It was deeper but weaker, softer but more painful. Whatever the reason, it was certainly a reflex of the hard times he was going through, ostracized by media, extensively and tirelessly touring with the band, and also with a nasty drug habit. Overall, it is a song about a man, a junkie, who feels completely displaced from his surroundings, and is constantly struggling with himself because one part of him wants to go back home, but another part of him wants to stay as far away from it as possible. It is quite tragic because one of the narrator’s biggest internal conflict is whether he should go back home or not, yet if home is also “where the needle marks,” such conflict only points to his own ruin. Therefore, most likely he will not find what he wants or needs back home. He says that he wants to go home to his mother and father, family, but he also says that he does not want them to see him like that. The narrator’s thoughts and actions seem to be driven by something much greater than himself, and they only take him to more suffering. Above all, there is a major displacement of the narrator from

his surroundings, as though he is in a state suspended out of time and space. It begins like this: “Sometimes I feel like I’m just wasting time / Looking for another side / Sometimes I feel like I’m losing my mind cause there ain’t / No other side” (1-4). In the middle he sings:

> I need to go home
> Momma could change it
> Daddy could help me
> Yes, I could go home
> Yeah, Momma don’t need to see me this way
> Know me this way
> Touch me this way
> Love me this way
> Find me this way
> I can’t go home. (40-49)

The narrator is confused and lost, as he goes on his way he ends up going nowhere, and when he thinks about what other people might be thinking about him, he is even more spaced out: “My friends all swear that they know / What I should do with my life / How I should run my life / What should be happening with my life / They’re on the other side / They’re on the outside / I’m on the inside” (23-29). In the second part of the song he also repeats many times that he cannot go home, and because the band is playing harder and faster there is a feeling that things have gotten worse; he seems more anxious and impatient. He begins this second part with a snippet of a line from the second stanza of the original song. He repeats “kick it, quit it” four times, as if setting the tempo of the song through alliteration, and ends this initial phrasing saying “home” the first time, and “can’t go home,” the second time, respectively: “Kick it / Quit it / Kick it / Quit it / Kick it / Quit it / Kick it / Quit it / Home / Kick it / Quit it / Kick it / Quit it / Kick it / Quit it / Kick it / Quit it / Can’t go home” (1-18). He begins the last part in the same way he began the original song: “Junkie walking through the

twilight, I'm on my way home / I left three days ago, no one seems to know I'm gone / Home is where the hatred is, and home is filled with pain" (1-3). Much like the other songs of the album analyzed above, "The other side," the song as a whole, is remarkably ambiguous concerning time and space, as if it were always in a continuum, like a never ending loop. As the other songs it is also backward looking, in that the narrator is distanced from his surroundings, he seems caught in-between moments, displaced, yet this enables him to talk about what is behind his problems, what causes him so much pain and suffering. As in the other songs, in "The other side" the past is still present; the past seems to haunt the present.

In the song that gives its title to the album, the long instrumental solos in between his screaming rants, which are sometimes unclear, sometimes out of tune, are a call back to John Coltrane, Pharaoh Sanders, Archie Shepp, and Duke Ellington. Its lyrics sound more like a prayer:

> The world spins around us
> We search for a balance
> The secrets lie in darkness and light
> Our lives are like treasures
> Unveiled as perfection
> A gift to us from spirits on high
> Equator.
> Divider.
> Equate us.
> Combine us.
> To seek the answers beyond our sight (1-11).

It is interesting that in the prologue of his actual 2012 autobiography, *The Last Holiday: A Memoir*, he has this to say about 'the Spirits':

> I believe in "the Spirits." Sometimes when I explain to people that I have been blessed, and that the Spirits have watched over me and guided my life, I suppose I sound like some kind of quasi-evangelist for a new religion. I

> am not and I do not have a personal church to promote. I believe, however, to paraphrase Duke Ellington, that at almost every corner of my life there has been someone or something there to show me the way (5).

This is exactly what *Spirits*, the album, sounds like: Someone or something there to show the way. It presents a different Scott-Heron, a narrator distanced from his environment, yet still as sharp as always. Curiously, the most political song of the album, "Work for peace," which has all the immediacy in the world to it, and is extremely critical of the Gulf War, was only issued in the cd version, it was omitted from the LP record. Overall, the album was very significant in that it showed us a different artist: No longer included in that "we," he seems more like a spirit which tells people what to do, where to go, what to look out for, etc.

His next album, *I'm new here*, also came after a long period of silence. Despite the title's embedded satire, given the length of his career, in many ways it is exactly what it implies to be. More than anything, it sounds like a man giving a confession in his death-bed, and who is willing to set things straight with the past. In that sense it seems to be an extension of his previous work, but it is even more confessional than *Spirits*. However, there no longer is the detachment and displacement of *Spirits*, in *I'm new here* he is back to the limelight, back to being a participant. What made the album represent such an extreme rupture from his past work, especially from what came before *Spirits*, and what made the title *I'm new here* mean exactly what it implied, was the fact that Scott-Heron was no longer a participant of mass movements, or a participant of a collective calling, he was not talking about bigger contexts or environments, like the government or the

economy; when he did talk about them, it was only indirectly, suggesting much more than implying. In *I'm new here*, his actions were absolutely mundane; the album dealt predominantly with (his) day-to-day problems. It was the first time that his music was more about him, about his irresolute actions, about his problems and inconsistencies, than about bigger problems, as State problems. Perhaps it was a consequence of the odd and self-destructive paths he had chosen for life, or perhaps it was part of still another change in his art. Whatever led to the kind of rupture the album stands for, one think is for sure: After having served two jail sentences (one of them in the dreadful Rikers Island), it seemed he had become the person he so candidly portrayed in songs like, "The bottle," "Angel dust," or "The needle's eye."

The immediacy and emergency of his past work was no longer there, they had been replaced by a backward gaze. *I'm new here* does not sound like a live news report, rather it sounds like the last words of a tribesman who possessed an older kind of knowledge, who saw things differently. However, the more intimate it gets, the more collective it sounds. We all know he is referring to himself, but his defeats and short-comings are not that different from those of many African-Americans. The things he talks about, the story he creates throughout the album has many similarities with the history of African-Americans; these parallels lie underneath the album's ordinary actions, embedded in them. The album is about the story of a man born in Chicago, raised in Jackson, and matured in New York. Migration, a concept so present in the history of African-Americans, is a recurrent theme of the album. As the album progresses its geography also changes, it has a migratory poetics. In the end, we find out that the narrator goes from a relatively small Southern

city to a big Northern urban center, and this movement provokes changes in the kind of problems he faces in each song. As the title of first song already alerts us, "On coming from a broken home," the album begins with a man telling us how he came from a problematic background. It is neither a romanticized depiction of his childhood, nor a fatalistic overview of his life; it is just about growing up under the auspices of a person who "was absolutely not your mail order room service type cast black grandmother," and in a troublesome overall environment. In the song "Running," he says that:

> Because I always feel like running
> Not away, because there is no such place
> Because, if there was I would have found it by now
> Because it's easier to run,
> Easier than staying and finding out you're the only one...who didn't run (1-5).

How many, like him, are always feeling like running? How many also cannot run away, or escape, or flee for something better? The song "The crutch" begins like this:

> His eyes half closed revealed his world of nod
> A world of lonely men and no love, no god
> His life of seeming nonchalance can't hide
> The pain and fear that in his mind reside
> From dawn until dawn his body houses hurt
> And none of us can truly aid his search
> We sit outside and sing clichés, the fool
> It's always easy to forecast other's doom
> The savage beast that once so soothed his brain
> Has reared its ugly head and staked its claim (1-10).

How many live under similar conditions? How many have been consumed by vice or addiction to the point of rotting? How many are just living a life of pain and hurt? These are but some of the similarities between the album and the history of African-Americans.

I'm new here also sounds totally different from everything he did, in that the *jazzness* of his music, which had accompanied him for so long almost as a guiding force, and had been widely acclaimed among critics and musicians alike, seemed long gone. It was forever obliterated by the first electronic sample of the first song, "On coming from a broken home." Unlike any of his previous albums, even his more synthesized stuff of the 80s, *I'm new here* is essentially an electronic music album. Such radical change marks a new awareness, a new style for his music, as never before had he deliberately used electronically modified sound for specific musical purposes. The album's drum machine samples create a rich dialogue between rhythms and sounds, but they never offer closure or safe spots, as predictable musical progressions. Rather, these electronic sounds and beats add grist to the albums' lack of resolutions or answers, they merely add depth and force to its raw and vulgar stories. This is noteworthy because even though the album deliberately assumes certain 'techno' elements, it does not do it in a simple manner, in that it certainly does not sound pop, or commercial, far from it, if anything it sounds frightening and unsettling, as in "Running," or "Your soul and mine," or "Where did the night go." Scott-Heron was assuming a whole different language in this album, which in musical terms, at least for his critics, meant he was steering away from jazz, or from his roots. Electronic music and jazz, sadly though surprisingly, have a very incongruous history together, they do not really get along that well, in that musicians, artists, critics, and producers associated to each style do not have the best of things to say about the music of 'the other side.' In that sense, the fact Scott-Heron assumes this kind of musical language, being who he is, is extremely

significant. The album as a whole, all its stories together intertwined with its use of electronic music, cuts deep into multifarious inconsistencies behind the history of black music, and asks further questions in another chapter of African-American history. Therefore, there are two aspects to it: It has a significance in a musical sense, in that it presented a renowned artist, with a vast career behind him, attempting a whole different language, a different perspective of sound orchestration, one which went into direct collision with his previous work; and it had a significance in socio-historical terms, in that the totality of its elements not only told new stories which help compose the vast database of African-American history, but also asked further questions whose answers might trod new thought paths for us today, in our struggles of everyday.

There are two songs in the album which are a good example of all this, as they say a lot about this new language he was going for, and shed new light onto certain tropes of African-American history and music. One of them is “Me and the devil.” It is a minimalist remix of a classic blues song by Robert Johnson; the man who sold his soul to the devil in exchange for a new technology: the blues. Scott-Heron transforms it into something unrecognizable, and does it through the use of electronic music. There is not one slide guitar in it, no even one guitar solo or recognizable blues element to it. Johnson’s ominous guitar from the original recording was substituted by a hard industrial beat. The big silences of the original recording, created by the contrapuntal relationship of Johnson’s dragged voice and his ghastly slow guitar playing, were replaced by a never ending pounding of what sounds like a compressing machine. Scott-Heron, a bluesician, a jazzman, retrieves

this old narrative so treasured by musicians, musicologists, historians, and scholars alike, but refuses to use its original form and style, choosing instead to drape it in new and exotic sound clothes. This is quite a move for him, for it is one thing to cover a song, and when people listen to it they recognize the original tune, but it is something completely different to transform that original song so much that when people listen to it they fail to see the connection; except, perhaps, in the lyrics, which was the case with "Me and the devil." The importance of what he did in this version is that he was bringing this old Southern narrative into the streets of poor neighborhoods today. For instance, one question which immediately comes to mind when listening to his version, but which would perhaps never occur when listening to the original one is: Is the devil a crack addiction? In that sense, he recontextualizes this narrative in such a way, that it addresses new problems; it touches the lives of even more people. Instead of retelling the already commercialized story of a man who sold his soul to the devil, Eric Clapton and Keith Richards have already told that a thousand times, he chooses instead to tell it in a wholly different manner.

The other song is "New York is killing me." It sounds like electronic gospel with its groovy combination of clapping hands and modified sounds mashed together; an electric sacred chant. In one of its lines Scott-Heron is accompanied by female voices, in a kind of redemptive gospel choir they sing: "Lord have mercy, mercy on me" (24). Even though its multiple rhythm layers and sounds evoke the religiousness and traditions of gospel music and Spirituals, it does so through the use of electronic music, which completely subverts these styles and tropes. When Ray Charles added a gospel flavor to his music,

he took that style, that narrative, out of the church environment, and brought it to the music industry. When Scott-heron got the gospel and filtered it through the distortion and reverberation of electronic music, he kidnapped it from the church and released it onto the streets as a kind of new virus. The song is heavily loaded with the redemptive motif of gospel songs, for instance, its opening lines are embedded with that feeling of 'Lord, I am sick and need a cure':

> Yeah the doctors don't know, but New York was killing me
> Bunch of doctors coming round, they don't know
> That New York is killing me
> Yeah I need to go home and take it slow in Jackson, Tennessee (1-4).

The song also contains that eternal fight between life and death, so present in gospel music, but it seems to peel-off the religiousness of it all, as though recontextualizing heaven and hell in a different geography, Jackson and New York. For instance, when he sings:

> Yeah you got 8 million people
> And I didn't have a single friend
> Don't you know, don't you know
> New York was killing me
> Yes, I was standing nearly dying here
> New York was killing me
> Seems like I need to start over
> And move back home in Jackson, Tennessee (16-23).

As in gospel, there is the sense of migration or search for salvation, got to get back home to Jackson, of displacement, New York was killing me, and of desperation, 8 million people and I did not have a single friend. However, differently from gospel, Scott-Heron does not see things as 'good' and 'bad,' rather things just are, and some things will kill you, while others might save you. Completely unlike gospel, his song ends in a rather somber and ominous manner. Not only do the

electronic sounds reinforce this, as there are many low frequency and low pitched sounds in the background, but the last stanza also does not conclude anything, nothing seems to change, he sings: “Yeah I need to be back home, need to be back home / Need to be back home, need to be back home, yeah / Born in Chicago but I go home Tennessee / Yeah, I born in Chicago but I [...]” (28-31); and leaves it there. In that sense he manages to use elements of gospel music, but in a different manner. He reworks gospel in a way which resignifies its conflicts, and by doing that he seems to extend the reach of this music style onto the streets and into more people’s lives. Some questions which come to mind after listening to the song are: Why is New York killing him? What kind of salvation can he find in Jackson? It seems that New York is killing him because the kind of life it instigates is unscrupulous and utterly lonely; ‘life in the fast lane.’ Whereas Jackson would be his sanctuary, his home, as it represents his grandmother and upbringings, a place where things and people go by at a slower pace; it is also the place where he wants to be buried, (“Yeah Lord have mercy, have mercy on me / Tell him to bury my body back home in Jackson, Tennessee” (25-26)), as though he will finally return home after having fought countless battles.

Both albums, *Spirits* and *I’m new here*, are very different, but they also have striking connections. In the former, Scott-Heron seems detached from his environment, and uses this displacement to describe things in a broader manner, he talks about a specific situation by means of bringing out the bigger contexts behind it; it is more related to foreseeing and counseling than leading or participating. In the latter, he also seems detached from the environment, but instead of discussing the bigger picture, he chooses instead to talk about micro-level interpersonal

relationships which compose our habits and day-to-day lives; these narratives talk about frustrations, set-backs, addictions, but also belonging, compassion, spirituality, and recovery. In both albums, Scott-Heron seems to be going in a whole different direction from his previous works. In that sense, even though they are different in musical terms, as the content of their lyrics, and form of their songs, both represent a new strain of his work, and one seems to be a continuation of the other. *Spirits* sounds like the tales of a man who had spent more than a decade living under forced alienation, in the underground, clandestinely; another survivor of the Reagan-Bush era. However, one of the results of this forced alienation is that he sees a world most people do not: Where he sees ruins and fragments of another time, other people see life; that is the strength of the most powerful song of the album, "Message to the messengers." While many people were extremely optimistic and delighted that 'ghetto culture' had finally made the cross-over and entered pop media, things like MTV, or in other words, hip hop culture was now big business due to its high commercial value, Scott-Heron was more suspicious and weary. He saw the ruins behind things like the emerging gangster culture, behind the gun packing nigga killing bitch calling MC, who was now a rapper; like he says, it is exactly what the Man wants you to do. *I'm new here* was certainly even more alien, it was beyond *Spirits*, with its heavy use of electronic music, and its bottomless sensation, running in parallel lines with Scott-Heron deepest voice ever. There no longer is that spirituality, that sense of guidance; the most spiritual the album gets is with gutter gospel "New York is killing me." *I'm new here* is much more intimate, most of its narratives have very confessional verses which run deep and thick as

blood, as when he sings in “On coming from a broken home (Part 1),”: “She had more than five senses / She knew more than books could teach / And raised everyone she touched just a little bit higher” (20-22). In both albums he seems to have a backward gaze, his immediacy is no longer there, as if he is has stopped somewhere along the way, and now is broadening his message, through echoes, by talking to us from a distance; showing different ways and means of resistance.

Whatever shortcomings or lacking both albums might have, they certainly seem quite in-tune with their surroundings, the different contexts in which they were produced. Throughout the 90s and 2000s nothing radically new shook the political scene in terms of social programs, local-level politics seeking to improve living conditions; especially for the many which most needed it. It was the same kind of corporate beneficiary democracy and business motivated government which had been taking shape ever since Carter, and in some ways even before that. Bill Clinton himself said on his inauguration that ‘big government’ days were over, which, judging by his political actions, could only mean that it was over for social programs and economic reforms, because he maintained the same kind of military industrial complex politics as his predecessors. As Howard Zinn reminds us:

> According to the business magazine *Forbes*, the 400 richest families owned $92 billion in 1982, but thirteen years later this had jumped to $480 billion. In the nineties, the wealth of the 500 corporations of the Standard and Poor’s index had increased by 335 percent. The Dow Jones average stock prices had gone up 400 percent between 1980 and 1995, while the average wage of workers had declined in purchasing power by 15 percent (662).

As always, the military budget increased by the billions. Clinton's successor, George Bush Jr., who had quite a record of prisoner executions during his mandate as governor of Texas, seemed much more obstinate in bringing that same thirst of blood to the oval office, than a new kind of politics, more focused on guaranteeing justice, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to all people. He tried to relive his father's Gulf War, and, after 9/11, began an unprecedented global jihad against terrorism, even though his critics have argued that his very methods and tactics, as the use of torture, the unwarranted imprisonment of people, and the killing of innocent civilians, could also be classified as terrorism. Bush's successor, Barack Obama, campaigned on the idea of hope and change (like Clinton did, and Carter before him), yet did not seem so willing to promote these things once elected. Even though some of his actions, as trying to implement a universal health care system, are indeed symbolic of such proposals, when the 2008 crisis, one of the worst in history, hit the country, he chose to bailout the very few who were too big to crash, instead of the many who had help elect him.

In this sense, Clinton was right: 'Big government' days were over, in terms of having a government invest in the creation of jobs which improve the quality of life of a vast number of people, across the board, or invest in social programs, or in health programs, or cultural programs, or even a government which proposes economic reforms which benefit the population as a whole, and not only the superrich; those days were long gone. Clinton ratified the NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), which destroyed countless small businesses not only within the country, but also abroad, especially in Mexico. Bush Jr. ratified the USA Patriot Act, which gave unlimited

power to the country, basically affirming that the US could bomb and annihilate anyone they wanted; the enemy was now invisible. Obama beefed up the military drone project to such an extent, that there seems to be no more limits to global war; now whole blocks are being blown to smithereens by someone standing thousands of miles away, and who merely presses buttons and holds joystick-like controllers. Overall, some assessments to be made from all this are: Today US corporations are interfering with global democracies in unheard of manners, US foreign policy is helping to destabilize governments all over the world, and directly and indirectly killing innocent civilians, and the US financial market as well as its military industries and contractors are one of the biggest 'economies' in the world. If we take all this into consideration, then Chomsky's remark which opens this chapter: "If the Nuremberg laws were applied, then every post-war American president would have been hanged," are extremely revealing and preoccupying.

It seems Scott-Heron was aware of this. Instead of following or accepting any nationalist fervor, patriotic credence, or even a collective belief that change was coming because 'yes we can,' he seemed more concerned with alerting people that things did not seem that different or that better, when analyzed in their totality, in the long run, concerning significant and consistent grass-roots changes. I think that is what makes his last two albums so different: He was no longer deconstructing present situations, and talking about them through a different perspective, rather he seemed to be telling people that all the talk about change and improvement, so thoroughly advertised by media, the government, and the establishment, all that was but a repetition of things which had already been said and done, but which had not settled or

solved the nation's, or better, people's problems; the dogs are still out in the motherfucking streets, as he had said many years before. In this sense his last two albums are much more backward looking than his previous works, most likely because he did not see major changes or improvements happening where they needed to happen; politics was business as usual. This does not mean, however, that his criticisms were direly pessimistic, and that he did not think that things could or would change at all. Instead, I think that as much as he acknowledged that certain changes had happened, he also knew that if the government did not initiate much more radical changes in its politics, including economic changes, political changes, social changes, and cultural changes, things would not change in the long run; we would still be merely cutting off branches from a contaminated tree, getting rid of the bad apples, but never touching its roots. Nonetheless, even though his albums are backward looking, in that they seem to look at things from a certain distance, as if looking back on things, or from a certain vantage point, essentially they seem to rummage through the past, or adopt this gaze, in order to make sense of the present, and think of alternatives for the future: They are backward looking, yet always forward thinking.

5. A journey through words and sounds

5.1 Poetry as a living reality: Black music and speech and the new Black poetry

> The central problem again is the printed page. Perhaps it will remain with us as a reminder of our compromise with a cold technology. Perhaps not. Though some of the poetry even on the page is highly effective, we are still confronted with Larry Neal's challenge of "the destruction of the text," in which the text of a poem is merely a "score," a single possible form of a poem. […] Structurally speaking, however, whenever Black poetry is most distinctly and effectively *Black*, it derives its form from two basic sources, Black speech and Black music (Henderson 30-31).

This is an extract from Stephen Henderson's influential study, already discussed in the theoretical section of this research, about the kind of poetry which was emerging in the early 70s in the United States, which he called the 'new Black poetry.' His main argument, delineated above, was that this new poetry was in-synch with the street lexicon and cadence, as well as in-tune with the sound experiments which Black musicians were performing. He sensed that however diverse these poems could be, there were certain underlying themes, structures, styles, and contents to this Black poetry. It was collective yet personal, related to Blackness and the Black Experience, and uplifting yet visceral, a by-product of the interminable changes and shifts the collective Black psyche underwent during the 60s, from Martin to Malcolm, from Larry Neal to cosmic poet Askia Muhammad Touré:

> Despite its variety the poetry of the sixties is informed and unified by the new consciousness of Blackness. As this consciousness shifted from Civil Rights to Black Power to Black Nationalism to Revolutionary Pan-Africanism, the poets changed too (183).

This poetic higher ground which he envisioned already in the early 70s became the solid foundation for the kind of poetry which African-Americans are still today inventing – one saturated with rhythms and rhymes of the streets, and heavily embedded with the beats and sounds of Black music; if one, indeed, has to make such distinctions. It is important to note that Henderson was not alone in his understandings of poetry, the way he approached what these new poets were producing, and what he saw as future possibilities and paths for both poets and poetry. Like himself, there were other critics who were receptive of what these new poets were creating, who were open-minded to different possibilities for poetry within other mediums, as the LP record, and who were trying to think about poetry and discuss it as something which needs to connect with the real world, something which makes no sense by itself; poetry's magic and force happened not on printed page, but in living reality, when people related to it, and it catalyzed changes and transformations.

There are important parallels and similarities between Henderson's conclusions and findings concerning this new Black poetry, and Amiri Baraka's and Larry Neal's ideas about Black poetry and art expressed in "Black Fire;" which I have previously discussed. The main arguments of Henderson's study totally support Neal's understanding of poetry as something much broader than just the printed page. Henderson repeatedly talks about Neal's 'destruction of the text,' or poetry transcending the written text; and argues that we need to think about poetry as a type of musical score which will serve as a base for its live performance. Neal and Henderson suggest that many times the greater significance of poetry happens when it is performed, especially

with regards to this new Black poetry. For Henderson, the idea behind Neal's 'destruction of the text' was that there should be no distinction between 'singing Black songs,' and 'reading Black poems.' He writes:

> By "destruction of the text," Neal, if I understand him correctly, refers both to the relegation of the printed poem to the status of a "musical score," and to a lack of concern with "permanence" in the Western, Platonic sense of IDEAL FORM (61).

By "lack of concern with 'permanence,'" Henderson, if I understand him correctly, refers to a kind of poetry which has more to do with what poets make of it when they say it, than with its written form and structure; as though these lines on a page were nothing more than a chart which people could use to improvise over it, to expand its reach and power. As Baraka and Neal, Henderson was trying to distance himself from an approach of poetry which merely analyzed what was written. They analyzed elements of Blackness and the Black Experience in this new poetry, internally and externally, understanding them as indicators of a sophisticated technique and culture, and not just as slang words or as a dialect; by doing that, they also discussed how relevant such ancestry was for their present lives. After all, what Malcolm X was talking about in the last years of his life, especially after his departure from the Nation of Islam, was not very different from what Patrice Lumumba was talking about, or what Kwame Nkrumah was talking about – a Black united struggle in diverse fronts, around the world. They envisioned poetry as something way more prevailing and useful than words on a page, almost as though it were a living organism, constantly changing itself, adapting itself, and transforming itself, and also capable of provoking the same kind of reactions in those who experienced it.

Poetry could be a resource used to unite people, and create sparks of action and resistance.

This understanding of poetry has a lot to do with Neal's premise that Black people should understand art as a 'living reality.' He writes about this idea in his essay which concludes "Black Fire," which I have also discussed before. He thought that there should be a wider conception of art as whole, Black people should understand it as something which has a communal or social function; this was to be the solid foundation, almost a necessity, for a new Black aesthetics and art. Neal understands this approach as a kind of affirmation, or positioning, for it implies two things: a return to the oral, aural, and bodily cultures and traditions of the Mother continent through art, and the assumption that art had the potential to liberate peoples and their collective psyches. In the essay, he discusses a lot of the web-like connections between life and art as whole in the Black Experience. He writes:

> Therefore, what we are asking for is a new synthesis; a new sense of literature as a *living* reality. But first, we must liberate ourselves, destroy the double-consciousness. We must integrate with *ourselves*, understand that we have within us a great vision, revolutionary and spiritual in nature, understand that the West is dying, and offers little promise of rebirth (8485).

Double-consciousness would be eliminated through art, art would teach blacks to see themselves not as the Other, but as "I," a "me" in "we," art would teach them to accept themselves, and to be proud of their African ancestry. Art would be a powerful aid in integrating a collective black struggle by connecting minds to what Neal called 'the great vision,' by developing a whole different culture, a Black culture. Overall, Neal was desirous of a new kind of art, one which would be collective, kinetic, and synesthetic; an art which spoke to blacks and, in turn, was created

by blacks. He spoke of an art which involved the body as a whole, not just the eyes and mind; an art which involved all senses. By ‘the West is dying’ he means that the thought system, which understands art in terms of objects of art, or thinks about it as a cultural artifact, is rapidly becoming extinct within black communities. He claims that black people should think of art, approach it, and use it, in a totally different way. Art was a powerful tool in the struggle for self-liberation, self-placement, and self-definition of social agents within collectivities; it was a necessary weapon for the black struggle for enfranchisement. For both Henderson and Neal there was also no separation between poetry and life; art was indeed a ‘living reality.’ Henderson’s understandings of what kind of poetry was being done during the 60s and early 70s also points to a kind of poetics, or collective/group orientation, which was hands on and participatory, and had much to do with the struggle of individuals within collectivities, and very little to do with the printed word.

As many other thinkers, scholars, and intellectuals of his time, Henderson was asking questions like: What would define a black poetry? Are there certain styles, themes, structures, or characteristics of poetry which are identifiably black? Which ones and why? Do black poets have any kind of responsibilities as communicators? What makes this new Black poetry something significant and relevant in sociocultural terms? Some of his ideas of possible answers to such questions pointed to a similar theoretical horizon which Amiri Baraka pointed towards in his introduction of “Black Fire,” which has also been discussed previously. Baraka writes that what they wanted to create

through the Black Arts Movement, of which "Black Fire" was an off-shoot, was:

> [A]n art that was 1) Black by form & content, as Black as Billie Holiday or Duke Ellington. 2) An art that was mass oriented, that could move easily in and be claimed by the Black Community as part of a Cultural Revolution. 3) We wanted an art that was Revolutionary. As revolutionary as Malcolm X (264).

Similarly, Henderson sets out to discuss a sort of poetry which is, "identifiably Black, in terms of structure, theme, or other characteristics" (7). Henderson also argues that the kind of poetry which he analyzes in his book had manifold connections to vernacular speech, folklore and mythology, Black church, Black nationalism, and the revolutionary soul and spirit of people like Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, Martin Delaney, Monroe Trotter, Marcus Garvey, Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, and, especially, Malcolm X, for, as he reminds us, "it must be noted that the single most popular hero of contemporary Black poetry is Malcolm X, not Martin Luther King, Jr." (25). Both Baraka and Henderson gave a lot of attention to the last two questions asked above, for their answers referred to contexts exterior to the printed page. To answer these questions they would have to discuss poetry as an important tool in the composition of social life. Both authors argue that these new poets were extremely conscious of the power of their words and of the responsibilities they had as communicators, and because they had such attitude and posture their art was as explosive as gun powder. Therefore, in general terms what they were attempting to do was to analyze these different elements and structures of the poem, which distinguished it, which painted it black, as what words or phrases or intonations or expressions gave it nuances, shades, and light contrasts;

but they were also discussing these elements and structures of the poem in relation to the specific sociocultural contexts they were bubbling up, as East Coast has its own rhythms and raps, West Coast has its own beats and speech, and in between there is a continuous flow which stretches all the way to the Mother continent.

In his study, Henderson somehow found a thread which sewed across all these different literary styles and forms. The way he saw it, what his brothers and sisters were creating was something which envisioned a much wider spectrum and ran much deeper than just poetry on a page. These black poets were committed to revisiting and reinterpreting their collective histories, they were extremely proud of their African ancestry, and were more than ready to name and define things in their own terms. Henderson managed to grasp certain underlying patterns and characteristics of this new poetry, he understood that for these emerging poets black vernacular speech and black popular and folk music were extremely significant elements of their cultures. His study is extremely significant because it was an elaborate and wide-ranging academic approach of a kind of poetry which then received almost no attention; especially if in terms of receiving positive academic criticism. Henderson was an academic who argued that one of the most fundamental things about the poem was not related to how much the author had managed to condense and dilute into its lines, but instead how much signification and processes of change and transformation the poem could generate every time it was read out loud. He did an academic discussion of why the written form of the poem was but a form of fuel for something much wider and powerful. Instead of removing the poem from the very place it was fostered, the real world,

in order to analyze its styles, characteristics, and forms, he removed it from the page, and discussed its larger contexts and correspondences. Overall, he suggests this new Black poetry had a social function, as it not only connected African-Americans to their pasts and oral traditions, but also enabled them to rethink their present status as well as conjure up new futures. These new rhythms and lines were blending the vocalic richness of oral African traditions and mythology to the fiery and bawdy street culture of the United States, thus creating a new conception and understanding of language, what Henderson also calls "Soul Talk" (33). At its best, this new poetry 'says' things: "[I]n a way which takes language down to the deepest common level of our experience while hinting still at things to come" (33). For Henderson, this new Black poetry was more related to a performing art rather than a literary form, and it had a concrete social function. He tried to figure out what happens to poetry once it becomes an integral part of living reality, as it becomes a communicational tool not only in interpersonal terms, but also cross-cultural and cross-generational terms. He dug up the deeper connections between this new poetry and Blackness. This is why, amidst his study, while he tries to understand the poetry of the 60s and early 70s, he sometimes ends up talking about the Black Experience as a whole in the United States.

> But though the great theme of Black poetry, and, indeed, of Black life in the United States is Liberation there are important complementary patterns, some of which take us outside the dimension of history into the universal realm of the mythical. In the oral tradition, the dogged determination of the work songs, the tough-minded power of the blues, the inventive energy of jazz, and the transcendent vision of God in the spirituals and the sermons, all energize the idea of Liberation, which is itself liberated from the temporal, the societal, and the

> political – not with the narcotic obsession to remain above the world of struggle and change and death, but with full realization of a return to that world both strengthened and renewed (21).

For Henderson, the poet is a social agent, someone who develops through poetry specific functions within his/her surrounding environments; poetry is a powerful catalyst, a craft which could be used to remember or reimagine. This is why this new Black poetry was an excellent thermometer of a lot of the turmoil and collective demands of the time, and why it bred itself within diverse social groups and cultures, and eventually spread like wild fire through dried grass.

Like Baraka, one of his main arguments was that this new poetry was mass orientated, in the sense that there was a considerable amount of artists who wanted their poetry to be understood and assimilated by regular people of their communities, or almost any brother or sister. As I have mentioned in the theoretical section of this study, Henderson argues that these artists were doing that by creating a kind of poetry which was completely intertwined with Black music and speech, core elements of Black culture, and its collective psyche. He saw that more and more poets were bringing poetry into people's lives by performing their poetry, rapping it, boasting it, toasting it, or signifying it. According to him, these Black poets were bringing poetry to the community, or what contemporary artists might call spreading the word, passing the knowledge, or dropping the *info*, by conducting all kinds of experiments with it, as though they were transforming it into something each time more usable and potent. Some of his names for these experiments were extremely hip and cool: For example, there are 'jazzy rhythmic effects' which a poet can use, a practice in which the

"effects are lost on the printed page; thus the ear is still the best judge" (35). The poet could also be an adept of 'virtuoso free-rhyming,' which:

> [S]eems to be related to the impulse to lard speech and conversation with proverbs and aphoristic sayings, both sacred and secular, but there is also a pronounced emphasis upon wordplay either as an indication of hipness or seemingly an end in itself (37).

He or she could also use 'virtuoso naming and enumerating,' a technique which "overwhelms the listener, who assumes that the speaker really must know what he is talking about" (34), because of the vast amount of information compressed in just a few names and lines; for instance, when the poet makes multiple references and still manages to make it out sound connected, it all still rhymes. Henderson also argues that there was a lot of 'worrying the line' going on, what he calls 'a verbalized social dissonance,' or:

> [T]he folk expression for the device of altering the pitch of a note in a given passage or for other kinds of ornamentation often associated with melismatic singing in the Black tradition. A verbal parallel exists in which a word or phrase is broken up to allow for affective or didactic comment" (41).

As an example of worrying the line he cites a song called, "Black Woman," by folk singer Rich Amerson:

> Say, I feel superstitious, Mamma
> 'Bout my hoggin' bread, Lord help my hungry time,
> I feel superstitious, Baby, I feel superstitious,
> I say 'stitious, Black Woman!
> Ah-hmmm, ah you hear me cryin'
> About I done got hungry, oh Lordy!
> Oh, Mamma, I feel superstitious
> About my hog Lord God it's my bread (21-28) (Henderson, 41).

Henderson also saw that more and more poets were seeking to merge poetry with other arts and literary genres, to project it through

new mass mediums, in other words, they wanted to expand its reach, relevance, and impact.

> Thus it is not surprising that some of the poets are also dramatists and musicians and artists. […] At any rate, the younger poet will usually rap or declaim or sing, but if he wants to create a Black character for one purpose or another, he usually turns to drama or to the short story, as in the case of Sonia Sanchez, Carolyn Rodgers, and S. E. Anderson. […] More recently, the poets have been experimenting with more effective ways of reaching a mass audience, and the result has been the recording of LP albums which are played on the air, the use of church as a forum, as in the case of Nikki Giovanni, and TV appearances, like those by the Last Poets" (26).

According to him, these new black poets were responsible for the invention of different syntaxes and grammars, as they adapted English to their individual and collective needs and demands. Many of these poets came up with concepts and words in order to say things their way, with their personal touch behind it; as indicative as a Coltrane or Miles solo, or as cool and bouncy as the first lines of Neal's poem in homage of Langston Hughes, "Don't say goodbye to the pork-pie hat," which reads: "Don't say goodbye to the pork-pie hat that rolled along on padded shoulders/ that swang be-hop phrases/ in Minton's jelly-roll dreams" (Henderson, 290). I like to think of this new poetry as something which was being delivered to countless communities throughout the country, almost like an aid-program. There is a moment in his introductory text to "Black Fire" where Baraka writes that during the heydays of BAM they used to rent trucks and fill them with actors, or musicians, or artists, or poets, and send them to a specific location to take that art to those people. I think that image, of a truck full of poets, ready to disembark in some corner wherever, and all they have is

perhaps a book, a notebook, and their bodies, that image is extremely symbolic of this new Black poetry which Henderson discusses.

Overall, it is important to underscore that many of Henderson's argument proved to be absolutely correct. He was keen on showing how these poets' actions and aspirations were helping to infuse poetry into people's lives each time more; after all, poetry was, in different ways and manners, shaping and forming new collective consciousness. It was no wonder that, for example, many influential activists and thinkers of the time, as Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Angela Davis, and Sonia Sanchez, used poetry to strengthen their political work. He also noticed that Black poetry was once again becoming an intensifier and form of fuel for diverse cultural movements, as the Black Arts Movement, Civil Rights movement, Black nationalism, and Black Power. With regards to future whereabouts of this new Black poetry, Henderson was also perspicacious in looking outwardly into different realms, as the LP record, radio, the street corner, the church, and even TV. Like Neal, Baraka, and many other influential thinkers of the time, Henderson also noticed that poetry was much more diffuse and widespread than the limited scope of the printed page suggested. Concerning what was 'new' about this emerging Black poetry, Henderson writes:

> What is new […] is the widespread sophistication regarding means as well as ends. […] What is new is the serious search for effective public vehicles. What is new is the radicalization of the Roots, the Black rediscovery of the revolutionary potential in Blackness itself. The various writers reflect aspects of the process in different stages of transformation (183).

By this massive rediscovery of the 'revolutionary potential in Blackness itself,' he is referring to a poetics which assumed the kind of rhetoric espoused by Malcolm X; he is referring to lines which vibrate in similar

frequencies as those of Carolyn Rodgers' "The Last M.F.," which starts like this: "They say, / That i should not use the word / muthafucka anymo / in my poetry or in any speech i give" (1-4) (Cited in Henderson, 346); or Conrad Kent River's "Watts," which reads: "Must I shoot the / white man dead / to free the nigger / in his head?" (1-4) (Cited in Henderson 256). Henderson recognized that this poetic terrain was but the surface of a nationwide collective cultural fiber, which reached back generations, but he was also perspicacious enough to see that this new wave of artists had a different kind of politics/poetics altogether than previous artists had had with regards to the use and makings of poetry.

> The present movement is different from the Harlem Renaissance in the extent of its attempt to speak directly to Black people about themselves in order to move them toward self-knowledge and collective freedom. It is therefore not "protest" art but essentially an art of liberating vision (16).

Concerning the kind of poetry which was being done at the time he concluded his study, and what sort of poets were out there, this is what he writes:

> [W]hat joins them together is the startling awareness that Black people are poems, that all Black people are Africans, and that the ultimate poem is the literal transfiguration of Africa and her peoples – socially, politically, morally, and spiritually. That great potential lies in the dynamics of the Black Experience, and the poet who dramatized this fact for the present generation is Imanu Baraka (LeRoi Jones). In him the poet and the politic man, the seeker after wisdom and the prophet are one (186).

However romanticized and farfetched some assertions might be, like 'Black people are poems,' I think his passionate and receptive approach of these young revolutionary poets who were emerging all over the

country only broadens his discussion on Black poetry. I do not think he exaggerates when he writes that the 'ultimate poem is the literal transfiguration of Africa and her peoples,' on the contrary, it reaffirms his argument that poetry has a social function, that poetry is a catalyzer. Perhaps he might exaggerate the significance of Baraka's work, that much is open for discussion, nevertheless, this understanding of the poet as political man, the seeker after wisdom, and the prophet, proved to be extremely accurate for many poets of the time and many poets today; from Scott-Heron to Chuck D.

5.2 Mascon poetics: The art of awareness and liberation

> This brings us to a curious and very importance aspect of Black speech in this country. Certain words and constructions 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. […] I call such words "mascon" words, borrowing from (of all places!) the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. NASA invented the acronym to mean a "massive concentration" of matter below the lunar surface after it was observed that the gravitational pull of the satellite was stronger in some places than others. I use it to mean a massive concentration of Black experiential energy which powerfully affects the meaning of Black speech, Black song, and Black poetry – if one, indeed, has to make such distinctions (Henderson, 44).

Even though Scott-Heron was not included in Henderson's anthology, many of his songs have correspondences with the kind of poetry Henderson discusses. What Scott-Heron achieved through his poetry, a powerful fusion between Black music and speech, as well as meaningful and prevailing connections with people, was exactly what Henderson, Baraka, Neal, and many others, were writing and talking

about in terms of new possibilities for Black poetry. His voice has an unmistakable drive to it, loaded with intensity and defying timbres; we can easily distinguish certain revolutionary aspects of Blackness in it – he sings like Fred Hampton talks, for instance in "Whitey on the moon," or "Brother." Like Baraka, Scott-Heron also embodied the political man, for instance in songs like "H2Ogate Blues," "Pardon our analysis," and "B-movie." Furthermore, there are plenty of correspondences between Neal's idea that literature should be experienced as a 'living reality,' and Scott-Heron's poetry, which definitely seeped out of the printed page and onto the streets and into people's mouths; this is part of its immediacy. Scott-Heron was part of a collective movement of artists who wanted to combine poetry with cultural criticism, to transform the poem into a political act. There is an essay Neal wrote in 1969, where he discusses how art can function as a kind of weapon in the collective struggle for Black liberation, which points to a conception of art which is extremely pertinent when we make a critical assessment of Scott-Heron's poetry. There is a passage where he writes that when Black artists talk about liberation through art:

> They are not speaking of an art that screams and masturbates before white audiences. That is the path of Negro literature and civil rights literature. No, they are not speaking about that kind of thing, even though that is what some Negro writers of the past have done. Instead, they are speaking of an art that addresses itself directly to Black people; an art that speaks to us in terms of our feelings and ideas about the world; an art that validates the positive aspects of our life style. Dig: An art that opens us up to the beauty and ugliness within us; that makes us understand our condition and each other in a more profound manner; that unites us, exposing us to our painful weaknesses and strengths; and finally, an art that posits for us the Vision of a Liberated future (Neal 1969).

In short, some of Neal's key ideas from this passage are extremely pertinent to discuss Scott-Heron's poetry: It is done by a man who deliberately proclaims his Blackness, as well as his intention of addressing black people; done by a black man to black people; above all, there is nothing apologetic about his work, and there is something about the way he sings, the way he phrases things, the kind of words he uses, which suggests that he speaks to black people in terms of their feelings and ideas about the world. Above all, it is as though he says to black people that there is the possibility of a 'Liberated future.'

This is especially true for his songs of the 70s. Throughout the decade it seems as if he reached each time deeper into the Black psyche, the African database of themes, styles, techniques, and ideas, only to spurt out more songs about the struggle for individual, collective, and spiritual Liberation of African-Americans. Henderson's adaptation of NASA's concept 'mascon,' to discuss poetry in terms of the usage of words or ideas which contain a lot of Black experiential energy, is also quite insightful to discuss this 70s phase of Scott-Heron's songs. During this period, Scott-Heron used these heavily charged words in a very creative and personalized manner. This is the case with some of his well-known songs, like: "The revolution will not be televised," "Whitey on the moon," and "Brother," all of which use heavily loaded terms in a very distinctive way; as I have already discussed elsewhere in this study. There are, nonetheless, some lesser-known songs from the 70s which also show how masterfully he could use these mascon words. This is case with "No knock," a song which talks about a suspicious and deadly 'practice' many law officers have been perpetrating against African-Americans: The no-knock warrant, which gives law officers legal

permission to enter private property without prior consent of the residents. The brutal assassination of Fred Hampton, as Scott-Heron points out, was a result of such lawful 'practice;' and his story is but one of many. What he sings in the original version of the track is in the appendix section of this study.

He begins the song with a spoken introduction, in which he lets the listener know what and who the upcoming song is about. He briefly explains what a 'No Knock' warrant means, why the law was created, and who is it supposed to protect. In less than forty seconds he dismantles this police practice to its core: A legal authorization for an illegal action – breaking into people's houses. From the start, it was a law aimed at specific neighborhoods, which targeted a specific ethnic group; after all, nobody was hearing about No Knock raids happening in Manhattan's Upper East Side. As this introduction unravels, even though Scott-Heron is merely explaining things, and not exactly singing the song, there is already a flow and rhythm to his speech, part of his 'virtuoso free-rhyming.' He starts off by going all the way to China, and North and South Vietnam, yet somehow finds a way to link these diverse contexts to his everyday reality back in the United States. He says the word 'knock' three times in this introduction, each time in a different context, each time calling our attentions to underlying inconsistencies concerning the warrant. The song starts with a pounding and syncopated beat which abruptly seizes the listener. Scott-Heron's voice sounds more like another instrument than someone singing a melody; as though it were in a contrapuntal relationship with Brian Jackson's flute we hear, creating outbursts of what Henderson called 'jazzy rhythmic effects.' This is most evident in the part which seems to

be the chorus of the song, at least it is the only stanza he repeats, where he says: “No knockin', head rockin', inter-shockin' / Shootin', cussin', killin', cryin', lyin', and bein' white” (10-11). In this part, his voice sounds like violent shrieks from a trumpet or tenor saxophone.

Already in the first two lines he positions himself in opposition to one of the people who spearheaded No Knock law, Mr. Law and Order, John Mitchell, by affirming that all the rhetoric behind Mitchell’s justification for it was nothing but what many of his brothers and sisters called ‘jive talk.’ He then explains that ‘the man’ says that the law was legislated to stop a bad person from doing bad things. The way ‘the man’ sees it, the law protects the people who live in those hell holes from themselves. During the chorus part it is as though he describes a sequence of scenes taking place, from the first jolt of rage in a raid, to the dead body on the ground, by using only a word for each moment. He ends it by using an extremely awkward conjugation, ‘being white,’ within the sequence of verbs he has just said. Even though it is a different kind of action altogether when compared to all other verbs he uses, ‘being white’ seems to sum up everything he is talking about, as though No Knock law is still another legal means of asserting White Supremacy and punishing black people. He cites actual cases of No Knock raids which resulted in brutal assassinations, and then immediately asks if that means that these operations are for his protection. This, of course, raises some questions: What does protection mean? Who is protecting whom, and from what? Afterwards, like when the Black Panthers said they were policing the police through their ‘pig patrol,’ he asks a question which still today remains unanswered – ‘who will protect me from you?’ In the end of the song he reverses things a

little bit by saying that if the no knocker were wise, he would tell his officers not to knock on his brothers or sisters houses. Finally, he addresses the listener by alerting us that we might be the next people who will have their doors knocked down by a police raid. This ending, like that of "Enough," is one which directly addresses the listener, putting us inside his reality. In that sense, with "No Knock" Scott-Heron proposes a revolutionary kind of literature, intent on the collective liberation of Black people, not only by making them become aware of certain problems and situations which were happening all over the country, but also by calling for retaliation. This is exactly what Neal means when he calls for a sense of literature as a living reality, as Scott-Heron does just that, he brings this science-fiction-like scenario into the lives of many African-Americans, who can certainly identify with what he is singing about, and also tells them that perhaps the only way in which things will start to change is if they fight back, individually and collectively.

"No-Knock" is heavily charged with what Henderson calls Black experiential energy, especially with regards to its use of demotic speech, a common technique of Black poetry of resistance. In it, Scott-Heron uses everyday words and expressions to discuss the day-to-day living conditions of African-Americans, but the way he uses these words and expressions gives them an inordinate charge, or a heavy emotional and psychological weight. He creates devastating and terrifying imageries around an expression which seemed to be haunting many of his brothers and sisters, no-knock. It could be as trivial an expression as any other, yet Scott-Heron puts it in so many different contexts, that it becomes this extremely charged expression. After listening to the song,

weird and startling images keep flashing through my mind; he says things which cause instant reactions, like "and jammed a shotgun against his skull," or "bullet holes all over the place." One of the most disturbing passages of the song is when he says 'cussing.' I think of police officers breaking into someone's house, armed to the teeth and ready to kill, and screaming things like 'nigger,' and 'the big M. F.' The question he asks, 'who's gonna protect me from you?,' in such dreadful and barren context, reads like a warning sign above the entrance of some hell hole; like 'leave all your hopes here.'

It is as if Henderson was listening to a song like this when he was developing his idea for a method of discussing this new Black poetry. Scott-Heron does a perfect mix of Black speech and Black music in this song. He 'talks' in the first part of the song, in the introduction, yet it really does not sound like he is merely talking, there is a flow to his rap. Also, there seems to be a continuum between this first part, which is spoken, and the second one, which he sings accompanied by instruments; breaking boundaries between speech and song. He creates a series of contexts which function as a constant background for his explanation of what No Knock means for white people, and what No Knock means for African-Americans; for the former, a law to curtail crime and monitor crime-ridden slums, for the latter, an authorization for police officers to break into their houses and kill them. This embedded eeriness of the song is what gives it such a powerful charge. The song is only two minutes and twelve seconds long, but it covers a vast terrain, from the all-encompassing political power of Nixon-Mitchell, and how their sinister alliance is directly linked with police officers breaking into people's houses with extreme brutality, to the very

specific and immediate context of Fred Hampton's death, and how such death is similar to and directly related with countless other dead black bodies on the floor. It is a good example of Scott-Heron's mascon poetics because it not only shows his ability of mixing Black speech and music in his poetry, which gives it a collective reach, but it also reveals how he managed to use some heavily charged words in a very personal and sophisticated manner. Most importantly, through his music and poetry he helped to create different levels of awareness and states of consciousness in people's minds, and these state of minds could generate more force in the struggle for Black liberation; after all, the first revolution happens in the mind.

Another song which illustrates Scott-Heron's mascon poetics, however in a completely different manner, is "H2O Gate Blues." It sounds more like a short-story, and lasts for a little bit more than eight minutes long. As "No Knock," it also has an introductory part, yet in this introduction he is accompanied by a bass, a piano, and drum from the start. The title of the song is a word play; a coded message. Instead of calling it "Watergate Blues," certainly a buzz word at that time, he chooses to refer to it in a different way. This is still another Black technique of grappling with the English Language, or resistance tool, that of referring to something by using an unusual, sometimes invented term, or talking about something, but in a cryptic or coded manner; one of the results of having historically been denied permission to even learn the language, having had to fool the white man into thinking that they did not know the language or could not talk. The title encodes what the song discusses because instead of talking about the Watergate scandal in the same manner as the media was talking about it, he adopts a different

perspective; as though trying to discuss many things which had already been happening for quite some time, and not only talking about the illegal activities surrounding solely the Watergate scandal. For him, it was a recurring event, a never-ending cycle. It ran much deeper than just a handful of names: If you pulled out one of these names, you would eventually end up dragging out an ominous galaxy of covert operations, trillions of dollars, endless lists of missing people, dead people, and people under illegal surveillance, and other unimaginable things reaching out all the way to the ends of the world. That was how far the Watergate scandal reached for him, that was how far the impact of American politics went, the final frontier, the last outpost. The song's lyric is in the appendix section of this research.

As with "No Knock," already in the introduction of "H2O Gate Blues" there is a flow to his words, a bluesy atmosphere. He starts the song by saying that since it was going to be a blues number, then he might as well explain from where his blues is coming from. He talks about specific kinds of blues which most Americans can easily recognize, and then says that there were other kinds of blues which had more of an international fame; suggesting that the blues was not only a Black thing, but something of the world. We can hear a lot of voices in the background, constantly interacting with what he is saying. He starts the song by simulating a telephone call. His screeching voice imitates the dialing of a number, and then suddenly stops – someone picks up. A mechanic/metallic voice answers, but instead of saying 'the number you dialed is inoperative,' it says 'the government you have elected is inoperative.' (33) This is a good example of how he managed to use humor as a device of resistance, how he transforms something as

common as the telephone operator's voice into a fiery critique of the government. This part is also a good example of the jazzy rhythmic effects Scott-Heron did with his voice. The precision with which he simulates the dialing of a number makes his voice sound like a drum roll. As he continues something rather unusual happens: He makes a mistake, and says that he wants to do it again; which really gives the listener the impression of a live recording, of something as volatile and unpredictable as real life. Afterwards, in just five lines he sets the tone for everything he will talk about. He creates a metaphor by saying that the world is on the edge of its seat, as if saying that what the American silver-screen is showing is making the whole globe become each time more nervous and anxious. He is categorical in saying that defeat is imminent, and goes even further in saying that most people have already seen the plot which builds up for this defeat, yet they claim to not see it.

He then takes the listener to the other side of the world, by talking about Vietnam. Yet, in the first comment he makes about it he says that all the explosions and attempts of killing Vietcong soldiers "could not stop people determined to be free." (48) This empathetic remark concerning the will of the Vietcong soldier rings back to Ali saying he could not fight in the war, and to Dr. King accepting the Nobel Peace Prize and talking about his disapproval of the war, but it also seems to align the struggle for liberation of African-Americans with that of the Vietcong. He also links the Vietnam War to the manifold interests of giant corporations with ramifications all over the world; the economics of war, the understanding of war almost as an independent biome – ecological warfare. He mentions the secret plans the government had, but which eventually leaked out to the general public,

of bombing dykes in order to crush the Asian will. All this trickery, secrecy, and con-artistry conducted by the government only reinforced his argument that America was the 'international Jekyll and Hyde;' all the clandestine operations conducted by different levels and agencies of the government only reaffirmed that America was the land of a thousand disguises. It all just went to show that America would rather sneak up on other countries, than having honest and multilateral relationships with them; yet that certainly was not surprising. Afterwards, he says that all this plundering which was happening in the Asian countryside was being done in the name of Fu Manchu, the master criminal.

He continues by bringing the song back home to the blues, and starts enumerating the problems which were crippling the vast majority of the country, but also benefiting a very small fraction of the population. He mentions the secret wheat bargain between some of America's biggest grain producers and the Soviets; an extremely unusual deal, as Russia was the nuclear nemesis of the US. He remembers a series of deaths which shook the country by asking if there were any hidden reasons or causes behind them, as if asking 'when J. Edgar Hoover goes, what goes with him?' Then he says that the king (Richard) was proud of Patrick Gray, Director of the FBI at the time. The Shakespearean connotations here, which are also recurrent throughout the song, make the statement a lot more intriguing and mysterious, as though suggesting that all the main actions happening probably have more reasons motivating them than most people claim to know about. In this case, it was only after some time that the general public found out that Patrick Gray had provided an indispensable service for King Richard when he destroyed incriminating documents.

Scott-Heron ends the stanza by comparing Watergate to a cesspool, and saying that one of the noblest sentiments of the nation was drowning in such disgusting place. He then makes an outrageous comparison between Nixon's government and Hitler's government, and says that people needed to react against everything that was happening immediately if they did not want another fascist regime running amok all over the nation as well as the world. When he states that Watergate was a cesspool, and that Nixon's politics was similar to Hitler's, Scott-Heron uses what Henderson calls "compressed" (61) messages in order to discuss the sociopolitical and cultural atmospheres of the country at the time. He also says that if it has been proven that the election was sabotaged, and that the man who won did not actually win, then the right thing to do would be to have another election. After he says that, the background voices uproar. He then lists various other illegal and covert operations the government conducted within the country as well as all over the world, only to say that it all proved that what had happened in the Watergate scandal was but the tip of a gigantic form of power; it was nothing new concerning the kind of politics the government had been adopting for quite some time. Finally, as if to point out that he agrees with the people who fear many things they see and hear about, he says that the 'thing that seems to justify all of our fears is that all of this went down in the last five years.'

He continues by creating a profusion of references which, according to him, have a common thread: 'They are the image of justice from the new leaders of America' (116). He cites name after name, and covers basically the whole country by doing that, as well as various levels of government; and he does all that with his characteristic witty

and humorous remarks, as when he says: “Frank Rizzo, the high school graduate Mayor of Philadelphia, whose ignorance is surpassed only by those who voted for him.” (118) He compresses so much information in so few lines, that we assume that he knows a lot more about all this than most of us; as though it were a technique he has developed and perfected, which enabled him to understand the government and its operations and manners. For instance, when he says: “McCord has blown, Mitchell has blown, no tap on my telephone / Halderman, Ehrlichman, Mitchell and Dean / it follows a pattern if you dig what I mean” (133-138), he makes all these weird sounding names, and seemingly non-related situations, sound so intrinsic to each other, that it is scary; as to understand how and why they are all related means to understand how unscrupulous the government can get. This technique Scott-Heron developed, of connecting many seemingly unconnected references in very few lines, is a good example of what Henderson calls ‘virtuoso naming and enumerating’ (37).

Scott-Heron concludes the song in a very somber manner, and again using the Shakespearean parallel. When he says: “And what are we left with now? / Bumper stickers that say Free the Watergate 500” (139-140), we get the feeling that nothing has changed, the whole scandal is now just a saying, a random utterance. To make it worse, he makes a parallel with spy movies ‘with a cast of thousands,’ as though saying that it would be almost impossible to fully understand what was happening with the country. Then he claims that some people swear they have seen King Richard, as if suggesting that his plausible denial of guilt, for being too far up the power hierarchy, was not plausible at all. Again, the Shakespearean connotations give it all a kind of tragic air,

and we get the feeling that people involved with politics and power are all 'prone to mischief.' There is a whole theatrics going on in this ending, between Scott-Heron and the voices in the background; it sounds like a hero confronting the choral in a Greek tragedy. He keeps affirming that people swear they have seen King Richard, while the choral replies by asking 'who?,' as if they were too stunned to believe him. It is a very cathartic moment, and he ends it by saying 'beneath that cesspool;' it is like a trance-induced vision, a reflex he saw on the surface of that foul water – King Richard lumbering around the back corridors of the castle, like a rabid hyena, consulting his closest advisors, and secretly planning another operation. He ends the song with an indignant tone, as though implying that it would be four more years of everything he has been talking about, which leads us back to the beginning of the song again; in a never-ending loop.

Overall, "H2O Gate Blues" is also a good example of Scott-Heron's mascon poetics. However, it is completely different from "No Knock" in that instead of referring to a problem which black people were being forced to face, it traces parallels between past and present, for example making use of the Shakespearean tragedy to talk about the illegal operations the government had been conducting all over the world and within the country. If in "No Knock" he makes us question certain inconsistencies of the No Knock law by creating around it multiple conflicts, in "H2O" he talks about the Watergate scandal as if it were but the shadows of something much bigger and ominous. Both songs are a good example of Scott-Heron's ability to connect Black speech with Black music. They also show how he managed to talk to African-Americans in a way which, as Henderson claimed, took

language down to the deepest common level of the Black Experience. They illustrate some ideas Henderson discusses in his book, as hyperbolic imagery, (61) for instance the Shakespearean images created around the Watergate scandal, or jazzy rhythmic effects, when he makes the sound of a phone dialing. Both songs are also a good example of his ability of discussing complex things in a way which could be understood by most people. Overall, songs such as these illustrate how Scott-Heron used his art as a means of liberating people's minds, how he used his poetry and music to germinate in people's minds different states of consciousness and awareness.

5.3 A poetics of alienation: America, the ultimate B-movie, and beyond

> Come with us back to those inglorious days when heroes weren't zeros. Before fair was square. When the cavalry came straight-away and all-American men were like Hemingway, to the days of the wondrous "B" movie ("B Movie").

Scott-Heron's music trailed completely different sound paths after his album "It's Your World" (1976). His characteristic bluesy notes, the lingering jazziness, and all those percussive flavors which had colored and spiced his songs for so long, slowly began to give way to a new electronic sound, way more vexed and fragmented, and tinged by dabs of strange robotic sounds; as the use TONTO synthesizer on "Corners" (1980). From "Bridges" (1977) onwards, Scott-Heron incorporates technology into his music each time more, exploring with each new album different sounds, rhythms, and effects; he assumes technology as an indispensible additive to his music. As I have mentioned in another section of this study, "Bridges" marks not only the

beginning of a different kind of sound, but also a different kind of focus and self-positioning in his lyrics. There is a new orientation to his music, he no longer seems to have an active involvement with what he sings about, a ‘look over your shoulder’ kind of stance, he is more distanced from things; it is as though the more his music became embedded with technology the more detached his lyrics became. Which is not to say, however, that he was no longer concerned with what was going on, or had no interest whatsoever in political and social issues; on the contrary, he seemed to distance himself from his surroundings, yet only to give us a bird’s-eye view of things, the greater picture. His lyrics, during this latter phase of his career, seemed to be more related to themes like alienation and being displaced, more so than to Black radicalism and hands on kinds of activism, themes which frequently appeared in his initial work. It was as though his songs began to gradually incorporate elements of science fiction, as if he were suggesting that America was transforming itself into a ‘b-movie’ with each passing day.

“Bridges” is his first attempt at this new language, and it was trial and error from that point on, until his full maturity with “I’m New Here” (2010). The title, “Bridges,” represents an outward angle, as though suggesting that there were bridges reaching out of the album and into real life; curiously, it has quite dissimilar connotations to all his previous titles, “Small Talk at 125th and Lenox,” “Pieces of a Man,” “Free Will,” “Winter in America,” “The First Minute of a New Day,” “From South Africa to South Carolina,” and “It’s Your World,” all of which seem to address very specific issues, or to be related to determined contexts. While ‘Bridges’ points outwardly, as though

saying that there are connections with things happening outside this closed environment, all these other titles, with the possible exception of "It's Your World," are like an indication of what is inside the albums, as though pointing inwardly. "Bridges," nonetheless, perhaps offers more room for the imagination to glide freely, than the possessive spatial/temporal determiner 'your' of "It's Your World." It is likely that the highest point of Scott-Heron's experimentations with technology and elements of science fiction happened with "1980," whose very cover makes it look like Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson, who collaborated with Scott-Heron from "Pieces of a Man" to "1980," are inside a highly technological spaceship, when, in fact, they are inside a recording studio. Their names appear in pink letters. They are framed by a fluorescent green, and pictured beside TONTO multitimbre analog synthesizers, at the time, the latest thing in advanced technology in musical terms. They are dressed like outer space workingmen with brightly colored jumpsuits; Heron wears cowboy boots.

In it, there is even a track called “Alien (Hold on to your dreams),” which is about Mexicans who try to cross the border into the US. The kind of hostile reality and forced displacement he refers to in this song, which many immigrants, legal and illegal alike, and not only Mexicans, have had to withstand in the US, reads like an extract from a science fiction novel:

> You're diving underwater when you hear the helicopters
> Knowing it's all been less than worthless if you run into patrols
> Hiding in the shadows, so scared you want to scream

> But you dare not make a sound if you want to hold on to your dreams (3-6).

His next album, “Real Eyes” (1980), in comparison with “1980,” is way more conservative and polished in musical terms. Nonetheless, this is not to say that “Real Eyes” plays it safe in any way, or leaves us in want of something more in terms of form and content, quite the contrary, it has some very powerful and conscientious songs, as “You can’t depend on the train from Washington,” or “Waiting for the axe to fall,” both of which I have already discussed in another section of this study, but also some very creative and unexpected sound arrangements, as in songs like, “A legend in his own mind,” as well as his cover of Richie Havens’ devastating song, “The Klan,” which is completely different from the original music. As the title of the album suggests it is as though Scott-Heron will discuss things ‘as they really are.’ The cosmic funk soundings from “1980,” of songs like “Corners,” and “Shut ‘Em Down,” returns to planet earth in “Real Eyes,” with songs like “Not Needed,” or “Waiting for the axe to fall.” “Real Eyes” is a different kind of sound altogether, in that it is cleaner and less daring than “1980.” However, with “Real Eyes” Scott-Heron continues to integrate technology to his music, and the same kind of science fiction imagery he had constructed in “1980,” with songs like “Alien” or “1980,” which refers to the present, 1980, as if it were the future, and begins with a strange robotic voice saying: “Request permission to enter earth’s atmosphere.” That feeling and orientation is still there in “Real Eyes,” only less exaggerated; for instance, in the song “Not Needed,” which is a rant against corporate downsizing, or in “The train from Washington,” which I have already discussed. If anything, “Real Eyes” sounds like a continuation of what he began with “1980.”

Things did do a 180 degrees turn in his next album, “Reflections” (1981). Again the title points outwardly, suggesting some kind of correspondence with what surrounds the album, but this time so too does the cover, which I have previously shown and discussed. On it, for instance, we do not see Scott-Heron’s eyes, only what is reflected on the lenses of his glasses; in other words, when we look at his eyes, we see what he sees. The last song of “Reflections,” “B Movie,” is yet another one of Scott-Heron’s long raps, or tour de force, but this time attacking the sociopolitical scenario of what would become the Reagan-era. It follows the same short-story style of “H2O Gate Blues,” “Pardon Our Analysis (We Beg Your Pardon),” and “Bicentennial Blues,” but it is by far his song which has most resemblances with science fiction narratives. Scott-Heron begins “B Movie” with his irate voice saying: “Well, the first thing I want to say is: Mandate my ass!” Immediately after he says that, the bass and drums set the pace with their thumping groove; as though abruptly grabbing us for the twelve minute ride of the song. Such an sudden beginning can cause some mental confusion, in the sense that we are told to question a presidential mandate, but when he begins to tell us the ‘whys and how comes’ of his argument, as much as it sounds like he is talking about something unreal, or too farfetched, it also has a distant yet distinguishable trace of reality to it, which makes it all the more scarier and disturbing. Something about it gives us the feeling that we are witnessing the slow erection of an enormous structure, with excluding and suppressive walls. Line after line, layer after layer, we are drawn to the epicenter of this vast and intricate system. The lyrics are in the appendix section of this research.

After he thrusts us into the song, his voice returns, looming over us as a massive presence, and he begins his description of this film setting. As he tells us of the final percentages of the election, there is an overall ghastly tone to it – "not even 26% of the American people." Even though he sarcastic remark tarnishes Reagan's election, when he continues it is as though he is indifferent to what he just said: "But, oh yeah, I remember." Then he traces the 'Raygun' genealogy in just six lines, from "Hollyweird," to when he says "We're all actors in this I suppose." Ever since the days when many people were living in absolute paranoia in Hollywood, as a result of the red scare, and McCarthyism, and Hollyweird stood tall as the president of the Screen Actors Guild, while he tried to purge the studios of their communists. Then he compares Reagan to General Franco, which is the same as saying that Reagan's mandate as governor of California was drenched in blood as well as a fascist reign. If that was not enough, he still claims that when we act like 26% of the registered voters actually gives Reagan a mandate, it is as though we are casting ourselves as supporting actors in a b-movie; we are complicit.

He then turns his attention to the United States as a whole and tries to explain how someone with Reagan's past could get elected to be the president of the nation. He begins this explanation with a rather simple yet savvy and far-reaching analogy, stating that America has changed from a producer to a consumer, and that when the producer names the tune, basically what the United States did for a long time, the consumer has got to dance. In other words, now the US was no longer a producer, it had to dance to the tune that the countries which controlled natural resources and minerals named; or what Arabs were now

'playing.' Such were the rules of the game, to the extent that: "The Arabs used to be in the 3rd world. They have bought the 2nd world, and put a firm down payment on the 1st one." Then he affirms that the nation is going through an identity crisis, as a result of not quite figuring out this new world order, in other words, the US does not know if it wants to be what it claims it is, diplomats, or if it wants to assume what it actually does, nuclear nightmare diplomacy. For him, the biggest reason for this confusion was that the country wanted nostalgia, for it refused to face now or tomorrow, so, each time more, it faced backwards, even if it meant going back only a week; whatever gets the nation as far as possible from now. As a result of this, the country wanted to resurrect old cinema heroes, people who always came to save America at the last moment. In the documentary "Black Wax," there is a moment where Scott-Heron performs "B Movie," and when it comes to this part of the song, he says something really funny and ironic, and which is not included in the original lyric; he sings: "Somebody always came to save America at the last minute. Bottom of the ninth, two outs, two strikes, nobody on base, down by ten, don't worry, somebody will come to save America." The parallel between what at the time was the national sport, and the national spirit, followed by the description of something utterly impossible as though it were something ordinary and easily doable is quite suggestive and reveals a lot about the national ethos and foreign policy of the time. However, when the nation looked back to one of its all-American men, John Wayne, in search of answers and force, and in need of salvation and redemption, he was no longer around to save the day one last time; which meant that people would have to be satisfied with 'plan b.'

He then invites the listener to join him in a journey; it is also at this point in the song when we finally get to hear the full band playing. To begin the journey, as if we had just embarked on a bus tour across the film-set of the odd and senseless b-movie we are participating in, he starts to talk about the cast. In one line he sums up what most actions of the man who had the third longest term as a Secretary of Defense, and who managed to beef-up Reagan's defense budget to astronomical proportions on the claim that the Soviets were doing just the same thing, were all about: "The producer underwritten by all the millionaires necessary will be Casper 'The Defensive' Weinberger." The next cast member he talks about is Alexander 'Attila' Haig, Reagan's Secretary of State. He references the shambolic and ridiculous scene which ensued after Reagan's assassination attempt, in March 30, 1981, in which Haig marched into the White House Press Room and announced to inquisitive reporters and the world that: "I, Al Haig, am in control here at the White House." What he says next reads like a dagger cutting through all the intrigue and network of lies which was and had been slowly corroding the nation: "The ultimate realization of the inmates taking over at the asylum." Then he claims that the screenwriter will be Reagan's adversary for the presidential nomination of the Republican Party, and also Vice-President, George 'Papa Doc' (the nickname of Haiti's murderous dictator, François Duvalier) Bush. The music of this film, he says in his characteristic sarcastic tone, will be provided by the very military Village People, singing "Macho Man." He goes on to say that this theme song will be played while we watch America's death squadron go on yet another crusade to help spread the American spirit across the globe. Then he states that in such a film there were plenty of

clichés, and all of them inevitably led us back to old Hollywood memories of the old West, to the days where sheriffs with 'itchy trigger fingers' blew away criminals from the face of the earth. Afterwards, as to remind us of Reagan's past, he claims that Ron is "Bogart tough, Cagney tough, and Hollywood tough," but also, and perhaps more importantly, "cheap steak tough, and Bonzo (the name of the monkey which starred in one of Reagan's biggest Hollywood successes) substantial;" Raygun was "the ultimate in synthetic selling: A Madison Avenue masterpiece – a miracle – a cotton-candy politician." In other words, Reagan was almost a corporate invention, or a drug for the needs of the market.

As he continues, he begins to decipher what lies behind the 'magic' production of this b-movie. He states that if you place your order in America, its leaders will duplicate, but the bigger they become they more people they will have tricked and deceived. Yet, all this was no more than the result of a mental condition which had crippled the nation, selective amnesia. Such mental condition had also provided the atmosphere for the emergence of Raygun: The very man who had once 'called for a blood bath on college campuses,' but afterwards turned into 'Mr. Do-Right.' It worked so well that he became the president of the nation; and, giving credit where credit is due, three years before the movie "Terminator" (1984) came out, starring/displaying Arnold 'future governor of California' Schwarzenegger, Reagan was already showing us all his Terminator-like strategies of governance and control, (General Franco) which only a supreme actor-politician (in this order) as himself could come up with. As Scott-Heron says, in this biggest sham of all, the presidential election, Hollyweird certainly got the whole nation

acting under his control. If that was not enough, he sees Reagan for what he truly stands for: A Conservative transfigured into movie star, transfigured into politician, transfigured into president. The way Scott-Heron saw it, under Reagan's auspices all these 'perceptions of freedom' were to be contained and subdued, by whichever means necessary, and if resistance were encountered, as it has always been encountered, all necessary force should be used. After all, the last thing America wanted or needed was a whole bunch of people demanding their freedoms.

As the song continues, Scott-Heron states that the country wanted to go back to a time when "movies were black and white, and so was everything else;" the good old days when there was no such thing as free press, and Jim Crow was common practice. Then comes the song's most scathing lines, in which he unmasks Reagan by saying that even the 'man of 1000 faces,' Lon Chaney, famous for having portrayed evil and sinister characters on the silver screen, was no match for Hollyweird; that Doug Henning, the illusionist and escape artist (and also future politician), was in charge of Reagan's makeup team; that the time-eluding hair-coloring Grecian Formula was also ready to go and cover up anything; and that Crazy Glue was there as back up, just to make sure that everything stuck together. Transportation for all this was to be provided by David "Chase Manhattan Corporation" Rockefeller, whose political influence had global proportions. If that was not enough, he continues by saying: "So much for the good news," and carries on by comparing issues like human rights and unemployment to stocks in the stock market; sadly, their value is, according to him, at an all-time low, while racism and war items are incredibly hot. However, he says that

even though things seemed to be getting each time more surreal and bizarre, people did not need to panic, for, pretty soon, the director, Mr. Terminator, Ronny, would step in and shout: “Cut!” This is when the sound of the song changes drastically. Scott-Heron starts to repeat: “This ain’t really your life, ain’t really, ain’t nothing but a movie,” until it becomes an electronic sample. After a full bar of this sample, a new voice swoops in, singing the exact same thing, and adding yet another layer to it. We hear these electronic samples of his voice, which seems to double his presence at every new bar, for almost four full minutes; as a result, the song ends in a terrifying manner, with what seems to be a whole army of Scott-Heron clones telling us that: “It ain’t really our lives, it’s nothing but a movie.” Even though the song begins with Scott-Heron rapping over only the bass and drums, and is then incremented by horns, a guitar, and piano, his traditional kind of sound, when it ends, it sounds like we are listening to electronic music, as we only hear these samples of his voice mashed together.

“B Movie” is in a whole different category in comparison to Scott-Heron’s other songs. The way it mixes acoustic/live music with electronic music, as well as its lyrics, makes it sound like an *Afrofuturist* tale. It is pure PhonoFiction, in that even though it describes things and people as though it were all part of some b-movie setting, we cannot help but be awakened by it, knowing that most of it has actually happened. The song proposes a rather unusual poetics of alienation, in that being an alien in the kind of environment he describes acquires a whole different weight and signification. Alienation goes beyond material alienation, or political and social alienation, it is also related to not being human. The US he describes in the song was a place utterly

out of reach, not only for him, but also for all those who did not fit the all-American mold. The ways he describes things in “B Movie,” it is as though blacks, women, gays, and all other ‘perceptions of freedom gone wild,’ (a very ‘Scott-Heronish’ definition for these terms) had no place in that reality; they were not to be admitted there under any circumstances. He creates such a nefarious and tightly controlled environment throughout the song, that it seems that humans had become something else entirely, being human had to do with which lineage you belonged to, which neighborhood, the color of your skin, where you studied, where you worked, what you did. To top it off, hearing several Scott-Herons practically screaming inside our brains *ad infinitum*, “ain’t really your life, ain’t really nothing but a movie,” is as powerful and unnerving as hearing him say: “Look over your shoulder, motherfucker, I am coming.” Sadly, the more I listen to this song, the more I think it refers to things which are still happening all around us today. Aberrations are still haunting us at every corner, we are still bombing, shooting, torturing, and killing each other, and the biggest culprits are still roaming around unpunished; drinking martinis in San Clemente, and not sipping brown water in San Quentin, to paraphrase Scott-Heron. “B Movie” is exactly what the political world of the US would be like if we had reached a state of ‘total recall,’ as Eshun calls it, or: A multi-layered superstructure of incongruous joints and fixators, stretching to the ends of the earth, and downright surreal to the point of having to resort to special-effects like chemical warfare, robotic warfare, or financial warfare, every now and then to keep the world safe for capitalism. In that sense, reaching a moment in time in which we recall

everything can be good, but it can also reveal us what we might not want to see.

To close yet another section of this study I propose to analyze one last song, “Your Soul and Mine,” in the light of certain *Afrofuturist* ideas. It is from Scott-Heron’s last album, “I’m New Here” (2010). As the title of the album suggests, even after so many years, he was still attempting to transform his music into something else; expand even more its grammar and lexicon. It is the work of a beat and aged man, yet it still has all the jagged force, and unpredictability of earlier albums. “I’m New Here” presents us a fully matured artist, a man who has evolved in spiritual and musical terms to the point of becoming completely self-conscious of his work and style, and qualities and limitations. The songs are tightly packed and electronically processed, all with clockwork precision; yet, at the same time, they still have something truncated and unfinished about them, as though their frightening echo remains in our minds. “Your Soul and Mine” is a remake of “The Vulture,” from his first album. The lyrics are exactly the same. They are also in the appendix section of this research. The difference is: “The vulture” sounds like a gospel hymn, and “Your Soul and Mine,” a George Russell mix of Baraka reading poetry. Like the other songs of “I’m New Here,” “Your Soul and Mine” unfolds like a labyrinth of reverberations, with its multitimbre diversity of colliding sounds which help compose it. The kind of atmosphere depicted in the song sounds like the beginning of a science-fiction novel: An unsparing and mythic-like vulture stands in the ruins of some valley of death, whoever sees it coming knows that there is no escaping its wrath. The

ghetto becomes this post-apocalyptic place, a sea of souls, a desert of despair, where mothers weep over their dead babies bodies.

In the light of *Afrofuturism*, it is quite significant that “Your Soul and Mine,” is a reinterpretation of one his first songs; coincidently, and even more significantly, “The Vulture” was also the title of his first novel. Not only does it suggest that he has come full-circle with his work, but also that he is rereading his own work in the light of more contemporary questions and issues. In other words, he is reclaiming an older sound by doing this reinterpretation, an older narrative, but also distorting it through these new and weird technologies. Moreover, the song’s appropriation of electronic sounds gives it not only a contemporary twist, but also a futuristic overtone; it becomes a completely different song. At the same time it causes in us a sense of strangeness and suspicion, a mix between a feeling of déjà vu and the sensation of being tricked or tested, it also adds a whole new flavor and spice to it. “Your Soul and Mine” presents us a gap, but also a bridge. A gap because it functions as a complete rupture in relation to the original song; or a discontinuum, as Eshun puts it. A bridge because it stretches back to 1970, and connects it to 2010 by modifying its form in the light of new technologies. By doing such manifold reinterpretations of his own work, Scott-Heron is backward-looking yet forward-thinking. “Your Soul and mine” not only makes us completely aware of the historical and political underpinnings of structural segregation and racism, but it also makes us realize that the post-apocalyptic scenario described in it is in fact any ghetto street, and the only thing that has changed since 1970 was the calendar.

Both "B Movie" and "Your Soul and Mine" are songs which, in different manners, reclaim some chapters of Black History. "B Movie" offers a different view of the kind of national mentality which had been growing all over the country, for quite some time, and which eventually allowed for Reagan to change the face of politics for good, and, in so doing, it tells a different version of the story behind this new kind of politics and nationhood which Reagan represented. "Your Soul and Mine" presents us with a very contemporary setting, but when it links the vulture to the mythic boatman which carries souls to the underground, it is hard not to imagine the vulture standing over piles and piles of century-old dead black bodies. Both songs also present valid and insightful reinterpretations of present-day issues, which almost force us to question certain ideologies and power structures so embedded within our societies that we have grown accustomed to them. In the case of "B Movie," through it Scott-Heron tries to understand what lies behind all the trickery and machination of Reaganomics/Reaganpolitics. In the case of "Your Soul and Mine," we are left in utter dismay by the post-war-like scenario he creates while describing a typical ghetto street. To make it worse, because he connects this devastated area, so familiar to most of us today, to the past, as well as the future, we get the idea that change and improvement probably will never happen unless we act immediately. Moreover, both songs also present us to alternative futures. The kind of setting he describes in "B Movie" is so brutal and hostile, and yet so familiar and part of our lives, that we are instantly awakened to the 'hows and whys' behind this superstructure. The kind of setting he describes in "Your Soul and Mine" is also quite intimidating, but at the same time extremely

common, almost familiar; therefore, the more we listen to this song, the more we see ourselves in it, but, consequently, the more we want to change the reality it describes.

5.4 Pieces of a man: Gil Scott-Heron, his poetry and music

Words had quite an appeal to Scott-Heron. He seemed to be not only fascinated by them, but also quite driven to master them, and turn them into a powerful tool in his own personal struggles and objectives. The first chapter of his memoir, *The Last Holiday*, begins like this: “Words have been important to me for as long as I can remember. Their sound, their construction, their origins” (7). He always seemed to know exactly which word to use. Many words can be used to describe the man, as he was many things all at once, not only positive and uplifting things, as an influential poet and activist, but also negative things, as an addict. He was controversial and subversive, but also extremely conscious of many worldwide struggles for dignity and equality. His biggest concerns, however, always seemed to be grounded back home, in the US. He wrote a lot about the problems which black people and immigrants faced within the US, and also about the problems which many workers were going through. In an interview he gave to Jamie Byng, for *The Guardian*, there is a moment where he says: “If someone comes to you and asks for help, and you can help them, you’re supposed to help them. You have been put in the position somehow to be able to help this person” (Byng, 2011). Byng comments on this passage by saying that Scott-Heron was always helping those around him, that he:

> Lived by this creed throughout a magnificent musical career, he helped people again and again, with his willingness and ability to articulate deep truths, through

> his eloquent attacks on injustices and by his enormous compassion for people's pain. (Idem)

Another theme Scott-Heron wrote a lot about was politics. He discussed it in terms of interpersonal relationships and also in terms of ideologies and power relationships. His most political songs have a special resonance with revolutionary blacks. In them, his rhetoric and views of social problems, for instance, are very similar to those of black nationalists of his time. It was in these political songs that he developed certain poetic devices of resistance into dangerous weapons, as irony, for instance when he says: “Ironic that the father of this country should be a slave owner,” (“Bicentennial Blues”); humor, as the moments I have mentioned earlier when the crowd bursts with laughter; the use of demotic speech, as naming one of the first songs he wrote “Whitey on the moon;” sarcasm, like saying that the music of the b-movie which Reagan will direct shall be provided by the very ‘appropriate and masculine’ band Village People. As I have previously discussed, Scott-Heron exemplifies quite well what a poet should or could be according to people like Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, or Stephen Henderson. No wonder, still today he is considered to be one of the godfathers of rap, even though he said he was not to be blamed for it. Like few other black poets, he managed to connect black speech to black music, he managed to hear and understand what people in the streets were talking about, he managed to speak like them, to speak the same language, the language of combat, of fighting back and standing tall. The poet and political man are one in him. In some of his poems words are like bullets, in others, like a warm and empathetic heart. This is what Gwendolyn Brooks wrote about him: “Chance taker / Emotion voyager / Street-strutter / Contemporary spirit / Untamed proud poet / Rough Healer / He is His”

(1-8) (Cited in Byng, 2011). Like all other activists of his time, he too was taking his chances; like those who understood many of the emotions black people felt, he too said something about them. His contemporary spirit strutted down many streets completely untamed, as he healed those around him as well as himself through his poetry and music.

He was a musician, but also, and above all, a bluesician, as he defined himself. He knew a lot about race relations in the US, the history behind such problematic issue, and also its present day status, or the kind of day-to-day problems which are race-related. He wrote a lot about black history, he knew a lot about the history of black music, and he was a magnificent exponent of black culture. It says a lot that his Wikipedia page defines his genre as "soul, jazz poetry, jazz, blues, jazz-funk, proto-rap,"[31] as not only does such definition cover many different musical styles and orientations, which shows that he was interested in exploring many kinds of rhythms and beats, but it also shows he was trailing different paths in poetical terms. I would certainly call part of his work electronic, as I have argued before, and I think it is important to mention that. Firstly, he began with voice and percussion, mostly that is all we hear in "Small Talk." However, he ended with basically voice and technology; "I'm New Here" is an electronic music album. This says a lot of his creative evolution in musical terms, how there seemed to be no barriers for his music, but I also think it says a lot about him as a person, how he was willing to embrace this new tool, this new language, this new way of making music. In a sense, it was a new world-view because it involved approaching things through an entirely

[31] *Scott-Heron, Gil*. Available at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gil_Scott-Heron> Wikipedia. Accessed in 29/08/2015.

different gaze, as different as Afrika Bambaataa and Eldridge Cleaver. To say he is a jazz poet binds him to Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka, or even Charles Mingus, all of whom used their art as a means of resistance; to say he is a proto-rapper places him in the same league as The Last Poets or Watts Prophets, notorious for having used music to galvanize people into taking action.

His poetry certainly contains a lot of black experiential energy, and has a lot to do with the struggle for liberation of black people. His poetry is about resistance, about taking action, and being involved and proactive. He was a master of verbalized social dissonance, and of removing the poem from the printed page, using it as a musical score or improvising over it. In another article he wrote for *The Guardian*, there is a moment in which Byng cannot fully grasp why is it that Scott-Heron still remains relatively unheard of, and asks: “Is he too political? Too uncompromising? Too angry? Too satirical? Too painful? Too playful? Too alive? Too black? Too human?” (Byng, 2010) Concerning ‘the establishment’ and many spheres of power in the US, the answer to all these questions is “yes.” His poetry was also identifiably black, in the sense of being done by someone who proclaims his blackness, and who addresses black people. Many of his poems are about the Black Experience in the US, and as much as he recognizes past struggles, giving voice to them, he also calls for a renewal of forces, in that he seems to be constantly trying to incite the youth. His poetry was also about living reality, in that it dealt with present-day issues African-Americans faced in the US. Much like the new black poetry which Henderson saw bubbling up within the country, or the new kind of art altogether which Baraka saw coming from young black artists, Scott-

Heron's poetry was revolutionary, committed, and energized the idea of freedom.

Concerning *Afrofuturism*, the way he assimilated technology, and reinterpreted his work and other people's work through such assimilation is very significant. It shows that he was willing to reevaluate his own work, in the light of more contemporary issues, as well as resituate past narratives in present-day contexts. He also managed to transform what he saw all around him into a dystopian science fiction-like scenario, and in so doing created counter-narratives which pre-programed a preferred future, one in which people are fully conscious of everything; for instance, with "B-movie." In terms of *PhonoFiction*, fifteen albums amount to a lot of material, plenty of primary sources. In that sense, his music and poetry help to outline a counter-history of the US. For instance, he wrote a lot about the struggle for freedom and equality of African-Americans, but he also wrote about different kinds of struggles for recognition and rights, as the Native American struggle, with "Who'll pay reparations on my soul," or the Chicano and Latino struggle, as in "Alien." Moreover, each time I listen to *Winter in America* from beginning to end I come out of the experience with a different understanding of the US as a whole, the people, the history, the culture, and politics, especially because of songs like "Peace go with you, Brother (As Salaam-Alaikum)," "Rivers of my fathers," "Back home," "Song for Bobby Smith," and "H2Ogate Blues." His music and poetry produced a lot of counter-narratives, and he certainly used technology in a way which renewed his work, but also empowered it even more.

These are but a few things which can be said about his life and work. These are but the pieces of the man, some of the fragments he has left behind for us to piece together. These are but a few of his sound explorations, but they already reveal a talented musician, who was willing to search for new rhythms and styles. His music is a reflex of his personal politics: hands on and participatory. The more we understand and discuss his work, the more we understand about the Black Experience within the US; in that he was certainly responsible for maintaining Black culture alive in people's minds, for expanding it into new spheres, and transforming and renewing it. Above all, it must be underscored that he repeatedly manifested his support for various minority struggles from all around the world, and his political positioning was beyond bipartisan, he was from the party of the common man and woman, as he said. For me, his music and poetry are like a gush of energy and hope.

6. CONCLUSION

> How we see things and how we relate to it becomes very important, like, as it was in terms of history so it is in terms of right now. When I go to see the movies I be careful with who I be identifying with, for example when I went to see Jaws, I was for jaws. [The crowd laughs hysterically, and someone screams "I wanted to see how you'd win!"] Well, Jaws was the home team, some bitch was in the water, which is where he's supposed to be. […] You going to the beach, he going to the supermarket. [Laughter and screams.] (Gil Scott-Heron "A Talk: Bluesology/Black History/Jaws/The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" 1998).

This is an excerpt from a song Gil Scott-Heron recorded live, at The Wax Museum, in 1982, called, "A Talk: Bluesology/Black History/Jaws/The revolution will not be televised." It is a bonus track for the cd reissue (1998) of his 1975 album, "The first minute of a new day." This improvised pot-pourri version he does of some of his most famous songs illustrates rather well his style, talent, and force; it is a perfect example of what his work stands for: Poetry as a catalyst of change, a weapon of resistance. It is ten minutes and forty-one seconds long, and all we hear is him rapping, and the crowd exploding with laughter and screams; he is not accompanied by a single instrument, and still it feels like the beat never stops, as a continuous rhythm. Because this song is a live recording we can hear a lot of what the crowd says, and sometimes all we can hear is clapping, cheering, hollering, and laughter. This cathartic atmosphere of the audience the song captures shows just how powerful his work was, and how much people identified with it.

This part of the song, where he references the movie "Jaws" (1975), lasts for only two minutes, and it is certainly not one of the best-

known songs of his catalogue.[32] However, it shows us how he was also a talented story-teller; how he managed to devise a very peculiar and personalized style of saying things, a very characteristic rhythm. The way he builds the narrative is incredible, there is the first shock: Jaws was the home team, in that it was his territory that was being invaded by someone, and not the other way around. Afterwards, he talks about people going into the shark's territory, and complaining about the shark trying to kill them. It is important to keep in mind that before "Jaws" he sings "Black History," (which I have previously discussed), and one of its lines reads:

> First, white folks discovered Africa, and they claimed it fair and square.
> Cecil Rhodes couldn't have been robbing nobody because he said there was nobody there.
> White folks brought all the civilization, since there wasn't none around.
> They said "how could these folks be civilized when you never see nobody writing nothing down?" (31-34)

Then he ends the "Jaws" song by saying that all this just proves that you cannot have black people in horror movies such as "Jaws." This, of course, tears the house down with screaming and laughter. In other words, according to him, the reason why blacks were not starring in horror movies was that they were not stupid, they knew better than to do things like go swimming where Jaws was known to be.

There are two other significant bits in this pot-pourri. Firstly, in the "Bluesology" part of the song, which is an improvisation he does, there is a moment where he says:

> I found out that a lot of poets had worked on different phases of the blues back during the Harlem Renaissance.

[32] The rest of the song is in the appendix section of this research.

> Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Sterling Brown, Jean Toomer, these people were blues poets, and they polished this art form to the degree that it became scientific in its approach.
> And the more research I did, the more I found that there was a 200 years legacy of poetry that had been fashioned along the ideas that correlated with the blues that went back from [sic] 1789, that chronicled our life and our life experiences here in this country, and the more I found out about our own history the more I was disappointed about how little we had been informed of our history (9-11).

The part where he says that this art form 'became scientific in its approach,' and also the part where he says that this 200 years legacy of poetry 'chronicled our life and our life experiences,' are quite significant for the overall and specific contexts of this research, as they involve the idea that music-poetry was a historical narrative, and also a black vernacular technology. The other quite significant bit in this pot-pourri is in the beginning of "The revolution will not be televised." He goes through the first stanza of his emblematic song in the same manner as he sang it in the original version:

> You will not be able to stay home, brother.
> You will not be able to plug in, turn on and cop out.
> You will not be able to lose yourself on skag and skip out for beer during commercials.
> Because the revolution will not be televised (1-4).

However, when he continues he goes to an entirely different direction:

> You see, a lot of times people see battles and skirmishes on tv and they say: "Aha! The revolution is being televised!"
> No! The results of the revolution are being televised.
> The first revolution is when you change your mind about how you look at things, and see that there might be another way to look at it that you had not been shown.
> What you see later on is the result of that, but the revolution, that change that takes place will not be televised (5-8).

His poetry certainly provoked a lot of sparks for that first revolutionary change to occur in people's minds. This is part of another important point this study raises, that Scott-Heron's songs reached people in their audio-social spaces. Like John Coltrane, Scott-Heron also transformed music into an extension of life, something as important as walking and talking. Every time I hear this song, the whole pot-pourri, the image which comes to my mind is Scott-Heron's poetry surrounded by people, as though it were impossible to distinguish where it ends, and where the contours of people begin. His poetics was completely entwined with his politics; Larry Neal's affirmation, that "the artist and the political activist are one" (592), says a lot about his life and work.

A very important theoretical reference for this research was Anna Everett's ideas concerning African-American music. Everett points out how important music was for African-Americans, in the context of the New World, because it was one of the few ways they had of maintaining their history, culture, habits, and rituals alive and in use. Following her ideas, I tried to discuss African-American music and poetry as a transnational paralinguistic communicational tool. I also believe that in many circumstances African-American music and poetry has a social function, it is a cohesive element, an ethos of Black culture. It is a transnational communicational tool in that it binds together different kinds of people, from all walks of life, and from all over the world, with a common African heritage; in that sense, music and poetry become a means of maintaining and reaffirming cultures, and also a tool African-Americans have used to survive in the New World. Furthermore, I also argue that it is a paralinguistic communicative system in that some of the most important features and elements of this

language are non-lexical, they are related to orality and bodily expression. Therefore, this research understands African-American music and poetry as a transnational paralinguistic communicational tool because many of these songs and poems cross over time and space limits, they are still with us, still affecting us; and also because this body of knowledge is first and foremost related to the spoken word, to oral traditions.

Another very important point of my overall argument is that African-American music and poetry has a lot of parallels and similarities with movement; both individual and collective movement. I have adapted Amiri Baraka's assumption that African-American music has a kinetic philosophy orienting it (Jones, 235). Such idea has a lot to do with individual movement, but also with collective movements, mass movements, and cultural movements. African-American music is related to individual movement in that the moves and grooves of an artist, his or her whole body, how he or she walks and talks, all these elements determine his or her style and techniques; for example, Ma Rainey's singing style, her performative qualities and aspects were intrinsically related to her silhouette. This idea goes back to the African dictum which reads: "If you can walk, you can dance, if you can talk you can sing." Music being related to individual movement also goes back to the idea that music is an extension of the musician, of his or her life. Additionally, movement is also part of the collective consciousness of African-Americans, part of their history; from the Middle Passage to the Great Migrations, from the rural South to the urban North, from Harlem to Watts. Therefore, movement is a fundamental characteristic not only of African-American music, but also of the Black Experience.

Two other theoretical references which helped my critical discussion of Scott-Heron's work were: Kodwo Eshun's idea of PhonoFicition (1998), and Rayvon Fouché's (2006) idea of redeployment, reconception, and recreation of technology. According to Eshun, PhonoFiction (PF) is a crossbred combination of sleeve-notes from albums, photographs and drawings seen in them, lyrics from songs, sound patterns and instrumentations in songs with no lyrics, samples which crisscross time and space, and much more. It is the sum of all parts of a record or song, the stories and possibilities such totality pours out. I adapted Eshun's idea of PF so that I could discuss Scott-Heron's songs through a broader contextual perspective, and also bring about new interpretations for his work in general. In that sense, I did not merely analyze his lyrics, I also discussed his album covers, his performances, and the video and visual resources I could find about him. The idea being: There is plenty of information to be found in his lyrics, but there is also a lot of material to be found in these other resources, within these different sources.

Rayvon Fouché's idea of redeployment, reconception, and recreation of technology was also important for my discussion of Scott-Heron's work. I believe that one of the biggest changes Scott-Heron brought about through his work was exactly the redeployment, reconception, and recreation of the record album. Fouché defines redeployment as: "[T]he process by which the material and symbolic power of technology is reinterpreted but maintains its traditional use and physical form" (642). Scott-Heron was part of a group of artists which was thinking beyond the limitations of the 'traditional' function of the record album, which was to sell music, but also thinking about what

happens to poetry when it goes beyond the printed page, this "single possible form of a poem" (30), as Henderson puts it, and serves as a musical score, amongst other things. These artists combined different elements of black speech and black music in their albums. They managed to reinterpret the material and symbolic power of the album, and extend its perceived capabilities without altering it physically. They interpreted it as a tool which could be used in the collective struggle of African-Americans, and not only as a cultural product, or material artifact. They were giving the album a highly political charge, as talking openly about their support of Black Nationalism, or praising actual revolutionaries. As a result of these transformations, these artists also reconceptualized the album. Fouché defines reconception as "the active redefinition of a technology that transgresses that technology's designed function and dominant meaning" (642). Scott-Heron's albums transgressed the designed function and dominant meaning of music albums because he interpreted them as a tool of resistance; his music was about getting involved, about being a black revolutionary.

As more and more artists began to explore these different possibilities of making music, they managed to create a wholly different material artifact. The music album becomes a cohesive element of Black culture; a new black vernacular technology. It generates an invisible social fabric which binds together groups and cultures. As the album is recreated music becomes PhonoFiction. Fouché defines recreation as "the redesign and production of a new material artifact after an existing form or function has been rejected" (642). An example of this new material artifact, in my opinion, is "Small Talk at 125th and Lenox." The very cover is quite impactful; there is a lot of information in it.

Nowadays, this original pressing of the vinyl is even worth a lot of money, it is like a trophy or relic. Much like "Black Fire" (1968) provides some indispensible material for a critical analysis of African-American poetry of the 60s and 70s, so too does "Small Talk."

Lastly, the ideas posited by Stephen Henderson in his study of African-American poetry entitled, "*Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black speech and black music as poetic references*," were also extremely helpful in my critical analysis of Scott-Heron's work. Henderson's pioneering study discusses the relevance of black vernacular speech in the poetry of the time, as well as the correspondences between black music and poetry of the time, the intense dialogical relationship between both. These ideas are extremely pertinent concerning Scott-Heron's work, in that I believe that one of the core elements of his body of work, something which really made his poetry revolutionary, was that it managed to talk to the common person, he used words and expressions which most Black Americans could identify with. Furthermore, Henderson's ideas are important for the critical discussions this research does because they talk about poetry in terms of something which provokes changes and transformations, in individuals as well as collectivities, and also as something which must reach the masses, the people as a whole, in other words, black poetry should, ideally, address all black people, as well as be true to the black cause. Such ideas are relevant for this dissertation because I believe that Scott-Heron's poetry did provoke changes within individuals, and also within many collectivities, his poetry was personal and collective, and it was definitely true to the black struggle in that it gave voice to many marginalized narratives and memories.

I have tried to understand the manners in which Scott-Heron specifically, as well as many other artists, used music and poetry to generate changes and transformations. I wanted to see just how interrelated poetry and music were with our lives, to understand their political, social, cultural, and psychological implications. As Larry Neal, I also wanted to remove poetry from the printed page, and take it to the streets and outdoors; I also believe that that is where it is most effective and powerful. I adapted Anna Everett's ideas in order to discuss Scott-Heron's work as a powerful communicative tool, capable of reaching people from diverse social classes and cultural backgrounds. I reinterpreted Baraka's ideas, about Negro music being a valid chronicle of African-American history, and tried to find historical counter-narratives within Scott-Heron's work. Following Eshun's ideas, I discussed Scott-Heron's work in terms of PF. By adapting Fouché's ideas I tried to discuss the relevance of Scott-Heron's work not only in poetic terms, but also in terms of how his creativity, style, and techniques were responsible for the invention of a new black vernacular technology. Lastly, I used Henderson's ideas and findings concerning African-American poetry to discuss the scope and reach of Scott-Heron's work, as well as the ways in which he managed to make his poetry reach the common black man and woman, how he managed to spark in their minds the idea of revolution.

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APPENDIX

No-Knock

We wanna' do a poem for one of our unfavorite people, who is now the head of the Nixon campaign, he was formally the attorney-general named John Mitchell.
Nixon's campaign seems to be out, getting off on a rather hip foot, after his trip to China in the name of peace, while they were killing people right across the street, so to speak, in north and south Vietnam.
But no knock, the law in particular, was allegedly legislated for black people, rather than for their destruction.
It means simply that authorities, and members of the police force no longer have to knock on your door before entering, they can now knock your door down.
It's no knock.
You explained it to me John, I must admit.
But just for the record you were talkin' shit.
Long raps about no knock being legislated.
For the people you've always hated.
In this hell hole you, we, call home.
"No knock!"
The man will say,
"To keep that man from beating his wife."
"No knock!"
The man will say,
"To keep people from hurting themselves."
No knockin', head-rockin', inter-shockin'
Shootin', cussin', killin', cryin', lyin', and bein' white.
No knock!
No knocked on my brother Fred Hampton
Bullet holes all over the place.
No knocked on my brother Michael Harris
and jammed a shotgun against his skull.
For my protection?
Who's gonna protect me from you?
The likes of you?
The nerve of you!
To talk that shit face-to-face
your tomato face deadpan.
Your deadpan deadening another freedom plan!

No knockin', head rockin', inter-shockin'
Shootin', cussin', killin', cryin', lyin', and bein' white.
But if you're wise, no knocker
You'll tell your no-knockin' lackeys
Ha! No knock on my brother's head.
No knock on my sister's head
No knock on my brother's head
No knock on my sister's head.
And double lock your door
Because soon someone may be no-knockin'
Ha, ha!
For you.
To be slipped into John Mitchell’s suggestion box.

H2OGate Blues

Don’t want to be involved in this one, huh?
This is gonna be a blues number.
But first I want do a little bit of background on the Blues
And say what it is.
Like, there are 6 cardinal colors
And colors have always come to signify more than that particular shade.
Like: ‘RED-NECK’ or ‘GOT-THE-BLUES.’
That's where you apply colors to something else, you know.
To come up with what it is you’re trying to say.
So there are 6 cardinal colors – yellow, red, orange, green, blue, and purple.
And there are 3,000 shades.
And if you take these 3,000 and divide them by 6, you come up with 500.
Meaning that there are at least 500 shades of the blues.
For example, there is the ‘I ain't got me no money,’ blues.
There is the ‘I ain't got me no woman,’ blues.
There is the ‘I ain't got me no money and I ain't got me no woman’ blues, which is the double blues.
And for years it was thought that Black people was the only ones who could get the blues.
So the Blues hadn't come into no international type of fame, had a corner on the market.
But lately we had the Frank Rizzo with the lie detector blues.
We had the United States government talking about the energy crisis blues.
And we gonna dedicate this next poem here to Spearhead X.
The ex-second in command in terms of this country, he got the blues. [laughter]
And the poem is called the “H2O G-A-T-E Blues.”
And if H2O is still water and G-A-T-E is still gate
What we gettin ready to deal on is
The “Watergate Blues”[applause]
Rated X!
Let me see if I can dial this number.
Click!
Whirr ... Click!
“I'm sorry, the government you have elected is inoperative.

Click!
Inoperative!”
Just how blind will America be?
The world is on the edge of its seat
Defeat on the horizon, very surprising that we all could see the plot and still could not.
Let me do that part again.
Just how blind will America be?
Ain't no tellin'.
The world is on the edge of its seat.
Defeat on the horizon, very surprising that we all could see the plot and claimed that we could not.
Just how blind, America?
Just how blind, Americans?
Just as Vietnam exploded in the rice snap, crackle, and pop could not stop people determined to be free.
Just how blind will America be?
Yes Sir!
The shock of a Vietnam defeat sent Republican donkeys scurrying down on Wall Street, and when the roll was called it was:
Phillips 66 and Pepsi-Cola plastics, Boeing Dow and Lockheed.
Ask them what we're fighting for and they never mention the economics of war.
Ecological Warfare! Above all else destroy the land!
If we can't break the Asian will
We'll bomb the dykes and starve the man!
America!
The international Jekyll and Hyde, the land of a thousand disguises, sneaks up on you but rarely surprises.
Plundering the Asian countryside in the name of Fu Man Chu.
Afraid of shoeless, undernourished Cambodians, while we strike big wheat bargains with Russia
Our nuclear enemy.
Just how blind, America?
Just how blind, Americans?
But tell me, who was around where Hale Boggs died?
And what was the cause of LBJ's untimely demise?
And whatever happened to J. Edgar Hoover?
The king is proud of Patrick Gray,
While America's faith is drowning beneath that cesspool-Watergate.
How long will the citizens sit and wait?

It's looking like Europe in '38 and did they move to stop Hitler before it was too late?
How long, America before the consequences of allowing the press to be intimidated,
Keeping the school systems segregated
Watching the price of everything soar,
And hearing complaints 'cause the rich want more?
It seems that MacBeth, and not his lady, went mad.
We've let him eliminate the whole middle-class.
The dollar's the only thing we can't inflate, while the poor go on without a new minimum wage.
What really happened to J Edgar Hoover?
The kind is proud of Patrick Gray, and there are those who say:
“America's faith is drowning beneath that cesspool-Watergate.”
How much more evidence do the citizens need, that the election was sabotaged by trickery and greed?
And, if this is so, and who we got didn't win, let's do the whole goddamn election over again!
The obvious key to the whole charade would be to run down all of the games they played:
Remember Dita Beard and ITT, the slaughter of Attica, the C.I.A. in Chile knowing nothing about Allende at this time in the past.
As I recollect, Augusta Georgia, the nomination of Supreme Court Jesters to head off the tapes, William Calley's Executive Interference in the image of John Wayne.
Kent State, Jackson State, Southern Louisiana, hundreds of unauthorized bombing raids, the chaining and gagging of Bobby Seale.
Somebody tell these Maryland Governors to be for real!
We recall all of these events just to prove,
The Waterbuggers in the Watergate wasn't no news!
The thing that seems to justify all of our fears is that all of this went down in the last five years.
But tell me, what really happened to J. Edgar Hoover?
The kind is proud of Patrick Gray, while America's faith is drowning beneath that cesspool-Watergate.
We leave America to ponder the image of its new leadership: Frank Rizzo, the high school graduate Mayor of Philadelphia, whose ignorance is surpassed only by those who voted for him.
Richard Daley, imperial Napoleonic Mayor of Chicago. who took over from Al Capone and Continues to implement the same tactics.

Lester Maddawg George Wallace, Strom Thurmond, Ronald Reagan - an almost endless list that won't be missed when at last America is purged.
And the silent White House with the James Brothers once in command.
Sauerkraut Mafia men deserting the sinking White House ship and their mindless, meglomaniac Ahab.
McCord has blown. Mitchell has blown, no tap on my telephone,
McCord has blown. Mitchell has blown, no tap on my telephone.
Haldeman, Erlichman, Mitchell and Dean
It follows a pattern if you dig what I mean.
Haldeman, Erlichman, Mitchell and Dean
It follows a pattern if you dig what I mean.
And what are we left with?
Bumper stickers that saying: Free the Watergate 500.
Spy movies of the same name with a cast of thousands, and that ominous phrase: that if Nixon knew, Agnew!
But Agnew knew enough to stay out of jail.
What really happened to J. Edgar Hoover?
The kind is proud of Patrick Gray, and there are those who swear they've seen King Richard.
Who? King Richard.
Who?
King Richard
Who?
King Richard
Who?
King Richard
Who?
King Richard King Richard King Richard King Richard
Beneath that cesspool-Watergate.
Four more years, four more years, four more years, four more years of THAT?

B-movie

Well, the first thing I want to say is: Mandate my ass!
Because it seems as though we've been convinced that 26% of the registered voters, not even 26% of the American people, but 26% of the registered voters form a mandate or a landslide. 21% voted for Skippy and 3, 4% voted for somebody else who might have been running.
But, oh yeah, I remember. In this year that we have now declared the year from Shogun to Raygun, I remember what I said about Reagan, I meant it.
Acted like an actor. Hollyweird.
Acted like a liberal.
Acted like General Franco when he acted like governor of California, then he acted like a Republican.
Then he acted like somebody was going to vote for him for president.
And now we act like 26% of the registered voters is actually a mandate.
We're all actors in this I suppose.
What has happened is that in the last 20 years, America has changed from a producer to a consumer.
And all consumers know that when the producer names the tune, the consumer has got to dance.
That's the way it is.
We used to be a producer - very inflexible at that, and now we are consumers and, finding it difficult to understand.
Natural resources and minerals will change your world.
The Arabs used to be in the 3rd World.
They have bought the 2nd World and put a firm down payment on the 1st one.
Controlling your resources we'll control your world.
This country has been surprised by the way the world looks now.
They don't know if they want to be Matt Dillon or Bob Dylan.
They don't know if they want to be diplomats or continue the same policy - of nuclear nightmare diplomacy.
John Foster Dulles ain't nothing but the name of an airport now.
The idea concerns the fact that this country wants nostalgia.
They want to go back as far as they can - even if it's only as far as last week.
Not to face now or tomorrow, but to face backwards.
And yesterday was the day of our cinema heroes riding to the rescue at the last possible moment.

The day of the man in the white hat or the man on the white horse - or the man who always came to save America at the last moment - someone always came to save America at the last moment - especially in "B" movies.
And when America found itself having a hard time facing the future, they looked for people like John Wayne.
But since John Wayne was no longer available, they settled for Ronald Reagan and it has placed us in a situation that we can only look at like a “B-movie.”
Come with us back to those inglorious days when heroes weren't zeros.
Before fair was square.
When the cavalry came straight away and all-American men were like Hemingway to the days of the wondrous “B-movie.”
The producer, underwritten by all the millionaires necessary, will be Casper ‘The Defensive’ Weinberger, no more animated choice is available.
The director will be Attila the Haig, running around frantically declaring himself in control and in charge.
The ultimate realization of the inmates taking over at the asylum.
The screenplay will be adapted from the book called “Voodoo Economics,” by George ‘Papa Doc’ Bush.
Music by the Village People, the very military “Macho Man.”
“Company!!!”
“Macho, macho man!”
“Two-three-four.”
“He likes to be..well, you get the point.”
“Hut! Your left! Your left! Your left, right, left, right, left, right…!”
A theme song for saber-rallying and selling wars door-to-door.
Remember, we're looking for the closest thing we can find to John Wayne.
Clichés abound like kangaroos, courtesy of some spaced out Marlin Perkins, a Reagan contemporary.
Clichés like, “itchy trigger finger,” and “tall in the saddle,” and “riding off or on into the sunset.”
Clichés like, “Get off of my planet by sundown!”
More so than clichés like, “he died with his boots on.”
Marine tough the man is.
Bogart tough the man is.
Cagney tough the man is.
Hollywood tough the man is.
Cheap steak tough.

And Bonzo's substantial.
The ultimate in synthetic selling: A Madison Avenue masterpiece, a miracle, a cotton-candy politician…Presto!
Macho! Macho, macho man!
Put your orders in America.
And quick as Kodak your leaders duplicate with the accent being on the dupes, cause all of a sudden we have fallen prey to selective amnesia, remembering what we want to remember and forgetting what we choose to forget.
All of a sudden, the man who called for a blood bath on our college campuses is supposed to be Dudley-God-damn-Do-Right?
You go give them liberals hell, Ronnie.
That was the mandate to the new Captain Bligh on the new ship of fools.
It was doubtlessly based on his chameleon performance of the past: as a Liberal Democrat.
As the head of the Studio Actors Guild, when other celluloid saviors were cringing in terror from McCarthy, Ron stood tall.
It goes all the way back from Hollywood to hillbilly.
From Liberal to libelous, from 'Bonzo' to Birch idol, born again.
Civil rights, women's rights, gay rights: …it's all wrong.
Call in the cavalry to disrupt this perception of freedom gone wild.
God damn it, first one wants freedom, then the whole damn world wants freedom.
Nostalgia, that's what we want…: the good ol' days, when we gave 'em hell.
When the buck stopped somewhere and you could still buy something with it.
To a time when movies were in black and white, and so was everything else.
Even if we go back to the campaign trail, before six-gun Ron shot off his face and developed hoof-in-mouth.
Before the free press went down before full-court press, and were reluctant to review the menu because they knew the only thing available was...Crowe.
Lon Chaney, our man of a thousand faces: no match for Lon.
Doug Henning does the make-up; special effects from Grecian Formula 16 and Crazy Glue; transportation furnished by the David Rockefeller of Remote Control Company.
Their slogan is, 'Why wait for 1984? You can panic now...and avoid the rush.'
So much for the good news.

As Wall Street goes, so goes the nation.
And here's a look at the closing numbers: racism's up, human rights are down, peace is shaky, war items are hot.
The House claims all ties.
Jobs are down, money is scarce, and common sense is at an all-time low on heavy trading.
Movies were looking better than ever, and now no one is looking, because we're starring in a 'B-movie.'
And we would rather had...John Wayne.
We would rather had...John Wayne.
You don't need to be in no hurry.
You ain't never really got to worry.
And you don't need to check on how you feel.
Just keep repeating that none of this is real.
And if you're sensing, that something's wrong,
Well just remember, that it won't be too long
Before the director cuts the scene. yea.
This ain't really your life,
Ain't really your life,
Ain't really ain't nothing but a movie.

Your Soul and Mine

Standing in the ruins
Of another Black man's life,
Or flying through the valley separating day and night.
“I am death,” cried the Vulture,
“For the people of the light.”
Charon brought his raft
From the sea that sails on souls,
And saw the scavenger departing, taking warm hearts to the cold.
He knew the ghetto was the haven for the meanest creature ever known.
In a wilderness of heartbreak and a desert of despair,
Evil's carrion of justice
Shrieks a cry of naked terror.
He's taking babies from their momas
And leaving grief beyond compare.
So if you see the Vulture coming,
Flying circles in your mind,
Remember there is no escaping
For he will follow close behind.
Only promised me a battle,
Battle for your soul and mine.

Jose Campos Torres

I had said I wasn't going to write no more poems like this.
I had confessed to myself all along, tracer of life, poetry trends
That awareness, consciousness, poems that screamed of pain and the origins of pain and death had blanketed my tablets.
And therefore, my friends, brothers, sisters, in-laws, outlaws, and besides -- they already knew
But brother Torres, common ancient bloodline brother Torres is dead.
I had said I wasn't going to write no more poems like this.
I had said I wasn't going to write no more words down about people kicking us when we're down.
About racist dogs that attack us and drive us down, drag us down and beat us down,
But the dogs are in the street.
The dogs are alive and the terror in our hearts has scarcely diminished.
It has scarcely brought us the comfort we suspected.
The recognition of our terror and the screaming release of that recognition
Has not removed the certainty of that knowledge -- how could it?
The dogs rabid foaming with the energy of their brutish ignorance
Stride the city streets like robot gunslingers
And spread death as night lamps flash crude reflections from gun butts and police shields.
I had said I wasn't going to write no more poems like this
But the battlefield has oozed away from the stilted debates of semantics
Beyond the questionable flexibility of primal screaming
The reality of our city, jungle streets and their Gestapos
Has become an attack on home, life, family and philosophy, total
It is beyond the question of the advantages of didactic niggerisms.
The motherfucking dogs are in the street.
In Houston maybe someone said Mexicans were the new niggers
In LA maybe someone said Chicanos were the new niggers
In Frisco maybe someone said Orientals were the new niggers
Maybe in Philadelphia and North Carolina they decided they didn't need no new niggers.
I had said I wasn't going to write no more poems like this
But dogs are in the street.
It's a turn around world where things are all too quickly turned around.
It was turned around so that right looked wrong
It was turned around so that up looked down

It was turned around so that those who marched in the streets with bibles and signs of peace became enemies of the state and risk to national security.
So that those who questioned the operations of those in authority on the principles of justice, liberty, and equality became the vanguard of a communist attack.
It became so you couldn't call a spade a motherfucking spade.
Brother Torres is dead, the Wilmington Ten are still incarcerated
Ed Davis, Ronald Regan, James Hunt, and Frank Rizzo are still alive
And the dogs are in the motherfucking street.
I had said I wasn't going to write no more poems like this
I made a mistake.

Jaws

How we see things and how we relate to it becomes very important, like, as it was in terms of history so it is in terms of right now.
When I go to see the movies I be careful with who I be identifying with, for example when I went to see Jaws, I was for jaws. [The crowd laughs hysterically, and someone screams “I wanted to see how you’d win!”]
Well, Jaws was the home team, some bitch was in the water, which is where he’s supposed to be.
You see, I’m saying, if Jaws was to come in here, I’d be with you in grabbing something to beat this son-of-a-bitch back.
But Jaws was in the water, this is where sharks are known to be, in the water.
You going to the beach, he going to the supermarket.[Laughter and screams.]
But see, something like that just shows you why you can’t hardly have no black people in no horror movies [laughter]; cause as soon as they found out that Jaws was in the water, black people would say “No, I’m not going in the water, Jaws is in the water!” [more laughter.]
That’s the whole thing about it, that like, Jaws couldn’t catch no black people cause we can hear the music.[He hums the theme song of “Jaws,” loud laughter once again]
Here comes that goddamn shark again with his band.