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Articles on Language, Literature, and Pedagogy
Creative Writing and Book Reviews
Association News and Reports

THE COLLEGE LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION



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CLA JOURNAL *Volume 64, No. 2*

OFFICIAL BI-ANNUAL PUBLICATION of THE COLLEGE LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION

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II. *CLAJ* Mission Statement

Established in 1957, *CLAJ* is a multilingual, international publication that fosters socially engaged, innovative, and groundbreaking scholarship in language, literature, linguistics, and pedagogy cultivated by the diverse international membership of CLA. *CLAJ* is the voice of a community of scholars, the first in establishing a forum for intellectual discourse among black scholars in language and literary studies. Articles treating the languages and literatures of all nations will be deemed worthy of careful consideration for publication. In keeping with its desire to develop the study of the languages and literatures of Africa and its global diaspora as an important area of scholarship, *CLAJ* is committed to offering critical perspectives and new developments in the analysis of language, literature, and cultural studies representative of the diverse scholarly interests of its members while privileging the African diaspora and transcultural black identities. *CLAJ* neither considers previously published material nor manuscripts submitted elsewhere.

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- *CLAJ* requires references in the form of footnotes.

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- an abstract of the essay that does not exceed 250 words formatted as a single-spaced page with the essay title and author's name.
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CLAJ currently considers unsolicited book reviews for publication and dispatches books to qualified members for solicited reviews.

If you would like to submit an unsolicited book review, suggest a book for review, or request to become a reviewer, please send an email to the *CLAJ* Book Review Editor, Dr. Tosha Sampson-Choma at tchoma@ksu.edu. If, after a week, you have not received an acknowledgment of your query or submission, please query again or write to the senior editor of the *CLAJ* at editor@clascholars.org. Please write "Book Review Query" or "Book Review Submission" in the subject line of the email as applicable.

The book review should

- include a brief summary of the book's central argument.
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- adhere to MLA style guidelines.
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- alternately, if the guest editor(s) plans an open call for papers (CFP), they should include a draft of the CFP and information regarding the circulation of the CFP.

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- develops and maintains timelines to ensure timely publication.
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- acts as a point of contact for reviewers and authors.
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- provides evidence to the *CLAJ* Editor that all contributors have paid memberships to CLA
- submits their own biographical sketch (100 words), full name and affiliation, telephone number, email address, and mailing address.

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THE COLLEGE LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION

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A PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION OF COLLEGE TEACHERS OF ENGLISH AND FOREIGN LANGUAGES

The College Language Association, founded in 1937 by a group of Black scholars and educators, is an organization of college teachers of English and foreign languages which serves the academic, scholarly and professional interests of its members and the collegiate communities they represent. Since 1957, the association has published the *CLA Journal*, a peer-reviewed biannual publication featuring scholarly research and reviews of books in the areas of language, literature, linguistics and pedagogy.

The College Language Association . . .

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Note from the Editor

In celebrating and chronicling the first fifty years of *CLAJ* publications, Dana A. Williams noted “the significant and unparalleled role the journal has played in publishing scholarship by and about people of color and our literatures and languages” (2). Williams’s introduction to issue 57.1 served as both a comprehensive historiography and as a re-grounding of the values upon which CLA was built. Her observation that “CLA has always been fully aware of present realities, all the while looking to the future” rings true for the organization’s journal even today (7). It is in that spirit that we offer this issue.

CLAJ remains ambitious in its endeavors as we chart a new path in the 21st century. In addition to scholarly essays, readers will now find papers engaged with the kind of critical and transformative pedagogical practices that have been at the heart of CLA’s work since its founding, and in honoring a tradition which began with the publication of the first issue of *CLAJ*, our pages will now also feature creative works across genre. This inclusive approach offers a fuller view of the cultural productions of our expanding membership, and it creates space for the innovative and imaginative works currently shaping our literary landscape.

Jacob Pagano’s “One Must Say Yes: Poetic Acts of Affirmation in Works by Baldwin, Fanon, and Ellison” examines Black speech acts and the ways in which they are represented in order to affirm the complexities of Black subjectivity even as the writers accomplish aims beyond the literary projects. The essay positions the writings (both fiction and non-fiction) of James Baldwin, Frantz Fanon, and Ralph Ellison as constructing communal affirmations and presenting language as a means for understanding community and one’s place in it. Pagano’s analysis of the seemingly basic affirmation of yes uncovers the innumerable possibilities of questioning extant understandings of canonical Black writing.

“Stories to Tell: Family and Reality in Hip-Hop Autobiographies” by John Paul Meyers examines the life writing of three very different hip-hop artists and firmly situates their work in the long tradition of African American autobiography. Exploring the thematic elements which emerge in these texts, Meyers offers us a look at the aesthetic and narrative intersections of these artists lived experiences and lyrical work, and he invites scholars and artists to consider the possibilities of what we can learn about the craft of hip hop by studying autobiographical writings.

In his essay, “Cause that’s the way the world turns’: John Edgar Wideman’s *Sent for You Yesterday* and the Mnemonic Jukebox, Jurgen E. Grandt asserts that “[r]ecorded music resonates within a suspension of time—or, more precisely, the spiral grooves of records revive a past event in the present, a repeatable action that riffs, however briefly, upon the (ostensibly) linear progression of history.” This point

brings us immediately into the environment of the novel as Grandt thoroughly articulates the ways in which Wideman's *Homewood* is not only infused with music, but in addition to the world of the text, the language of the novel itself employs the aesthetic of the music that touches the character's lives.

The pedagogical study presented in Nathaniel Norment Jr.'s "Some Results of Using Culture-referenced Prompts for Pre and Post-Test Writing Examinations at an HBCU" is both a reminder of CLA's roots and historical focus and a call for us to critically evaluate and enhance our pedagogy whether we are rooted at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) or plowing the earth at a Predominantly/Historically White Institution. As Monique L. Akassi asserts in the brief commentary which precedes this essay, "the need for more pedagogical attention in the *CLAJ* is more relevant now than ever."

doris davenport's brief reflection on *CLAJ*'s creative writing section reminds us that, in addition to being provisions for the exhilarating exercise of literary criticism, literary arts give us "meaning and inspiration" and help us move through a perpetually troubled world. The gathering of poems and creative non-fiction reflects an innerness and calls us to consider our connections to place and how we traverse paths charted by identity when "the funk of race, the stench of class" and even familial expectations threaten our lives. "Gary, Indiana: A Poem," "Augusta, Georgia," and "Monroe, Georgia" by Seretha Williams employ imagery and cultural references to move us along a historical continuum of places that echo the trauma of racial violence and the decay caused by capitalism. Sandra Y. Govan's "Dem Bones" is an aural experience pulling us close to the body, and her "Ms. Betty's Fro" is an assertion of beauty and resistance. "Testament" by Angelo Rich Robinson exemplifies the power of creative non-fiction as a bearing witness to our pain and courage in bold, liberatory ways.

Work Cited

Williams, Dana A. "Fifty Years of 'CLAJ', 1957-2007." *CLA Journal*, vol. 57, no. 1, 2013, pp. 2-8.

One Must Say Yes: Poetic Acts of Affirmation in Works by Baldwin, Fanon, and Ellison

Jacob Pagano

[O]ne must say Yes to life and embrace it wherever it is found....

—James Baldwin

In the above quotation from James Baldwin and Richard Avedon's photo-essay portfolio, *Nothing Personal* (first published in 1964), Baldwin, writing during a consequential moment in the fight for civil rights, offers a resounding imperative to his reader to say "yes" and embrace life. The basis Baldwin offers for why one must say "yes" is rooted in both memory and a kind of existentialism. Baldwin recalls a formative childhood experience in which his parents, amidst the terrors of racism, did not just bear life but affirmed it (60). Because he witnessed this affirmation, Baldwin maintains that he can affirm life too, and hence, the next generation, by witnessing him, can do the same. The "yes" in this passage is thus a speech act par excellence: It performs in its annunciation an act of affirmation, thereby making possible the survival of oneself and one's progeny.¹ It also calls to mind other resonant "yes" statements in works that similarly address the concern of how to live in and resist racist worlds: "Man is a yes that vibrates", Frantz Fanon writes in *Black Skin, White Masks* (2), while Ralph Ellison's protagonist, the invisible man unseen by anti-Black society, vows to "affirm, say yes" as a guiding principle (579). These "yes" statements, all offered by authors committed to the liberation of the Black experience, suggest that asserting "yes" constitutes an anti-racist strategy. But while these "yeses" clearly convey more than quotidian affirmation (e.g. "Yes, I hear you"), it is not clear what role they play within their authors' anti-racist projects. A question arises: What purpose do these "yeses" serve for three authors who, though writing distinct projects, are all committed to creating what Aaron Ngozi Oforlea calls a "space where they are free to define themselves or articulate their subjectivity in any way they choose" (2)?

Studies of Black subjectivity in Baldwin, Fanon, and Ellison respectively often focus on how Black speakers recover agency in opposition to anti-Black oppression and subjugation. Joseph F. Trimmer and Per Winther, writing in the *CLA Journal*, have both looked at this in *Invisible Man*; Oforlea has recently considered

¹ The term *speech act* refers to speech that performs what it says, e.g. "I promise" constitutes a promise (Austin 3)

empowered Black subjectivities in Baldwin's and Toni Morrison's fictional work. An area that has received far less attention, however, is the relationship between affirmative speech—literal “yes” utterances—and subjective empowerment, which Baldwin, Fanon, and Ellison all draw forth.² I argue that, for them, the articulation of “yes” in meaningful ways—whether as a way to self-affirm for a fictional character (Ellison), as a psychological commitment (Fanon), or to passionately commit to one's humanity and ancestry (Baldwin)—itself constitutes an anti-racist practice or strategy. The most obvious reason is that when Black speakers affirm themselves in their own complexity, they are resisting discourses that negate or restrictively define Black subjective existence, whether in hate speech, cultural racism, or structural discrimination.

I argue more specifically that these authors' interest in “yes” marks a strategy to militate against anti-Black racist discourse's distortion of the “yes” utterance. Langston Hughes sums up the historical legacy of “yes” as used in racist discourse when he writes of how a Black porter must “Say / Yes, sir! / To you all the time . . . All my Days / Climbing up a great big mountain / Of Yes, sirs!” (161). Hughes' verse perfectly distills a historical reality: the trope of Black speakers who must say “Yes, sir!” not from their own volition, but because of the racist social code. Baldwin, Fanon, and Ellison, as I show below, not only document this history but respond to it by emphatically affirming themselves and others through “yes” imperatives outside the framework of race, thus undermining it. All three authors frame affirmation as a generative practice for empowering Black subjectivity, and, in doing so, stand in conversation with movements such as Black Lives Matter today, which is fighting every minute for a world where “Black life is not systematically targeted for demise” (Black Lives Matter). While some White progressives have criticized Black Lives Matters' emphasis on language (e.g. the demand to say “Black lives matter”) as incidental to the supposedly more valid goal of seeking structural change, I suggest that Baldwin, Fanon, and Ellison would counter that acts of affirmation are not incidental to empowering Black subjectivity. Rather, they are productive of it, especially when empowering acts of “yes”-saying are claimed as key tool in an anti-racist strategy.

In the sections that follow, I first turn to Jacques Derrida's lecture on Joyce's *Ulysses*. A founder of deconstructionism, Derrida offers a schema for how “yes” works within speech act theory. Derrida maintains that “yes,” if pared down to its essential meaning, establishes presence: it lets another know you are listening. Using Derrida's theory as a lens, I ask how the normative operation of “yes” is

² Scholars who consider affirmation within racialized systems include Christopher Wise and Rudi Visker. Relatedly, critical race theorists, including Jasmine Lee, have considered affirmation as a question of identity formation.

problematized when “yes” is enlisted by racist discourse. For example, if “yes” signals at root “I hear you,” then how are we to make sense of the fact that in racist discourse, “Yes, sir!” rings with a different connotation, often suggesting that the Black speaker is not just “present,” but subserviently so, existing at the behest of another (often White) speaker? The bulk of this essay then turns to how all three featured authors directly respond to this problem through what I call a poetics of affirmation, whereby they use strategies of metaphor (“Man is a yes” for Fanon) or repetition (Baldwin repeatedly focuses on the interplay of “Yes, Lord,” and “Amen”), that re-ascribe to “yes” a performative value as a source of empowerment. In the section on Ellison, I consider the importance of the character Brother Tarp, who teaches the invisible man that saying “yes” to oneself is an anti-racist act that can become a kind of positive solipsism, a way to affirm and centralize one’s own subjectivity; in the section on Fanon, I consider how his exhortation to “man” to become a “yes” is a speech act of psychological empowerment that is central to his project of fostering Black subjectivity that is “actional,” its own source of agency; and in the section on Baldwin, I consider affirmations of posterity and community, specifically through Baldwin’s aspiration for more Americans to become “yes”-sayers, capable of affirming one another through quotidian interactions. Throughout, I draw on what Oforlea, in his recent study of Black male subjectivity, calls the process of crossing the “discursive divide,” or the movement from being “the object of a discourse to an empowered agent” (1). Oforlea’s frame is useful for thinking about how *yes* can serve such radically different purposes in different settings—at one time objectifying, and at another affirming oneself as an empowered agent.

My grouping of Baldwin, Fanon, and Ellison, as well as my decisions to address fiction and non-fiction together, warrant explanation. First, all three featured authors are concerned with acts of affirmation, specifically the “yes” utterance, and treat affirmation as an existential prerequisite, something that must be achieved in a rhetorical performance of “yes” in order to gain a fuller sense of agency. Additionally, they are all writing in a similar period: Ellison and Fanon published their works in the same year (1952), while Baldwin published *Nothing Personal* just over a decade later. While Fanon differs in his historical setting and psychological training from the others, he shares with Ellison and Baldwin an interest in Black existentialism, or the liberation of Black existence. The pairing thus draws forth an important similarity in their thinking with respect to affirmation as an existentialist act. At the same time, it also highlights important differences in how they argue we must respond to anti-Black worlds through using rhetoric, and what purposes acts of affirmation could serve in doing so. Each author emphasizes a different aspect of how Black subjectivity is oppressed (because in Baldwin’s *Nothing Personal*, racism creates barriers that preclude intimate connection; in Fanon, society’s negation of

Black existence creates a sense of internal division; in Ellison, the problem is not being seen or heard). In other words, at least in part, they in turn offer unique ways to use affirmation to reclaim Black subjectivity. Second, I choose to read acts of affirmation in both fiction and non-fiction because all three writers suggest that saying “yes” is both a literary act, or a form of a poetic performance, and, at the same time, something they actually want us to do in our embodied lives. Reading “yes” in Ellison’s fiction thus gives a sense of an individual character’s evolving relationship with “yes”-saying; reading “yes” in Fanon gives a sense of affirmation as it becomes a strategy of psychological empowerment; finally, reading “yes” in Baldwin finds “yes”-saying as an affirmative practice each of us can embrace in our interpersonal relations. In this way, “yes”-saying as an anti-racist practice stands at the nexus between fiction and non-fiction, both a poetic act *and* a praxis for a more anti-racist human relationality. Finally, I intentionally focus on Black male authors, not because female writers of color do not express similar concerns, but because they add another complexity: histories of racialized sexual violence that deprive speakers of affirmative consent. This is an urgent space to explore, but my hope here is to provide an overview of how acts of reclaiming “yes” help make speakers better able to affirm difference, recognize plurality, and embody antiracism. This framework could be used in the future to explore other spaces where speakers, confronting layers of oppression that divest them of affirmative speech, resoundingly reclaim it.

I. Hear-Say Yes in Joyce: Derrida’s Conceptualization of Yes

This section gives a brief overview of Derrida’s theory of “Yes,” which he unfolds through a close reading of Joyce’s *Ulysses*. By “theory,” I mean a series of descriptions of how something works that give way to a series of principles or schemas that, in turn, offer an interpretive lens for approaching similar situations. In other words, Derrida schematizes what actually happens within discourse when we hear or read “Yes,” and some things that might problematize it. As I will suggest in the section after this one, Derrida’s theory is useful but incomplete when mapped onto spaces where speakers are racialized by anti-Black discourse, i.e. harmfully interpellated on racist terms, and often forced to say “yes” against their better interests.

There are 359 occurrences of the word *yes* in *Ulysses*, and more than 80 in Molly Bloom’s monologue alone, in which she utters the famous concluding words, “and yes I said yes I will Yes.” Pencil in hand, Jacques Derrida traces these “yeses,” begins grouping them by their different uses—there is the “yes” as a response to someone on the telephone, “yes” as an impassioned affirmation, etc.—and considers whether there is anything they share. For the purposes of this essay,

Derrida makes at least two critical observations governing his conceptualization of “yes.” The first is the idea of *gramophone*, a portmanteau of *graph* (word) and *phone* (sound). As Derrida reads *Ulysses*, he begins to *hear* “yes” whenever he reads the word. Indeed, anyone reading *Ulysses* likely experiences this, especially because there are so many scenes, including one where Bloom is on the telephone, where “yes” jumps off the page as if a voice is uttering it: “Hello? *Evening Telegraph* here . . . Hello? . . . Yes . . . Yes . . . Yes” (272). For Derrida, the fact that “yes” is both graphic and phonic is key, because it speaks to a fundamental tension in *Ulysses*: the human voice can be contained and reproduced in the absence of an actual human presence. Indeed, throughout the novel, there are actual gramophones that offer the fulfillment of that very wish: They will record the human voice and recreate it, thereby preserving the sense of presence for eternity. Read through this lens, the final “Yes.” in *Ulysses* comes as a very interesting move on Joyce’s part. In a literal sense, Molly is affirming her marriage. But in another sense, the finality implicit in “Yes,” with its period and capitalization, suggests that Joyce himself is in effect storing his own voice in the text, saying “yes” to his own project. For Derrida and Joycean scholars, this creates an interpretive dilemma, for Joyce has seemingly written his project and affirmed it too, leaving little for the critic to say.

Derrida’s idea of “yes” as gramphony speaks to a universal human concern: we want to know we are being heard and listened to; this is why we are naturally anxious about the “yes” that is given in recording. This leads to Derrida’s second critical point: “Yes” is at the root of how we establish contact with each other, antecedent to all other language: “Yes indicates that there is an address to the other” (299). In Derrida’s theory, “yes” signifies “I-here,” and can take the form of a telephonic hello, or a “tap through a prison wall” (300). These kinds of gestures are what “yes” does: they make possible ensuing dialogue, and thus, Derrida says, “yes” signifies “hear-say.” Derrida plays on the common sense of *hearsay*: information heard by a witness and thus inadmissible in a court of law. He suggests that we experience reading “yes” in this fashion—that is, in an audial way, or “through the ear.” Playing on a French pun between *oui-dire*, or “yes-say,” and *ouï-dire*, or “hear-say,” he further argues that “yes” signifies both, “I heard you” and “I say ‘yes’ to you” (267). Hence the anxiety around the “yes” given falsely. Consider the all-too-relevant example of giving a lecture on Zoom. At the beginning you ask, “Can everyone hear me?” A chorus of “yeses” follow. But what if those “yeses” were merely recordings of voices? What if, halfway through the lecture, you realize everyone’s camera is off? Naturally, you will want to re-establish contact, re-establish the “yeses” and perhaps also a visual cue that your audience are listening, to ensure that each “yes” is not being given “in the absence of intentional presence on the part of the affirmer” (276).

II. Hear-Say Yes, Sir: Racist Interpellation's Effect on Yes

Derrida's conceptualization of "yes," as both gramophone and the initial mark establishing discourse, is generally taken to be universally applicable within deconstructionist philosophy. However, this conceptualization of "yes" is problematized when put in conversation with Fanon's conception of racist interpellation, and similar examples from Baldwin and Ellison. In other words, all three authors describe worlds in which the central tension around "yes" is not, as per Derrida, its potential to be gramophoned and given "without the presence of the affirmer," but rather the way in which it can be perverted in racist discourse as a tool for oppression—something the Black speaker *must* say or face violence, outrage, or further alienation. Below, I consider examples of "yes" within racist discourse in the context of Louis Althusser's and Fanon's theories of interpellation, and then I return to Derrida's theory with the help of Judith Butler's theory of hate speech, to consider how the racialization of "yes" turns its utterance into a verbal injury.

For Althusser, interpellation is the process by which subjects become recognizable to the dominant ideology, often through an act of being hailed, or called into being, on its terms. As Fanon demonstrates in *Black Skin, White Masks*, interpellation can also be a form of racialization. Fanon writes of how being jeered at as a "Negro" by a White child imposes and inscribes a hateful discourse. Oforlea writes, "Fanon's writings demonstrate the significance of interpellation as a domination of the racially marked subject through the white gaze, leading to a problematic sense of self . . . the black body enters into a symbolic order where it is . . . pathologized . . ." (10).

Within the space of racist interpellation, simple "yes" statements—statements that affirm, confirm, recognize—can become racialized, co-opted as a tool for racist oppression. This can happen in multiple ways, but the most obvious one is this: in racist societies, it has historically been expected of Black speakers to say "yes," or "yes, sir," in response to *whatever* the White speaker says. Fanon describes this phenomenon clearly in discussing portrayals of Black people in the media:

Willy-nilly, the Negro has to wear the livery that the white man has sewed for him. Look at children's picture magazines: Out of every Negro mouth comes the ritual "Yassuh, boss." It is even more remarkable in motion pictures. Most of the American films for which French dialogue is dubbed in offer the type-Negro: "Sho' good!" (22; emphasis added)

In this passage, "yassuh" apparently serves as a proxy for racist interpellation; the Black speakers, through saying "yassuh," seemingly consent to the demands placed before them and to the larger system that produced those demands. But in fact, they are doing nothing of the kind. As Fanon suggests, they are merely giving

a ritual response, “yassuh,” to a certain anti-Black interpellative atmosphere that requires it. This does not occur only in Fanon, but also in Ellison and Baldwin. In Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, as Trimmer and Winther have shown, saying “yes” is integral to the survival of the narrator, who *must* say it to the White academy and the White communist party. Likewise, Baldwin writes of a similar scene of the racialized “yes” when he describes how an “unsung army of black men and women . . . trudged down back lanes and entered back doors, saying ‘Yes, sir’ and ‘No, Ma’am’ in order to acquire a new roof for the schoolhouse” (“Letter”). To say “yes” requires they “put their pride in their pockets” and mechanize the utterance.

As these examples suggest, such instances of “yassuh” or “yes, sir” do *not* perform what Derrida tells us that “yes” does—recognition and affirmation. On the contrary, the “yassuh” is prescribed, the only possible response that can be given without inciting a racist reaction. Indeed, when the Invisible Man challenges and questions the system of his school (that is, when he does not merely say “yassuh” to the headmaster), he is expelled. Similarly, in Jim Crow, violence often resulted when a Black person did not act in the affirmative in response to White demands.³ And there are far too many examples, which writers such as Alexandra Natapoff have documented, where people of color are disproportionately required to confess crimes even when they did not commit them. They are also threatened with jail time in the absence of a confession. A confession can take many forms, but at root it involves the State asking someone to say “yes, sir,” or the like.⁴ Within a justice system that disproportionately implicates Black people, the coerced extraction of false confessions is a tactic routinely used by the State, especially in misdemeanor crimes. “Yes, sir” here perversely validates state control of Black bodies.

In *Excitable Speech*, Butler defines *hate speech* as speech that is backed with the threat of violence and that, in its very speaking, constitutes the “performance of the injury itself, where the injury is understood as social subordination”(18). Because hate speech, by definition, informs the victim that physical injury is never far off, the effect of hate speech is actually to destroy the normal rhythm and pulse of speech itself—that is, the expectation of a continued interplay of dialogue. Butler writes, “The threat of violence destroys the very possibility of expectation: it initiates a temporality in which one expects the destruction of expectation and, hence, cannot expect it at all” (9). For Butler, people subjected to hate speech cannot enjoy the luxury of *expecting* speech, because they always must be vigilant towards how the speech is seeking to harm them, or presaging actual physical violence. A “yes” given by a Black person within the confines of racist discourse is potentially painful and psychologically harmful to the speaker. The “yes” uttered

³ See Davis.

⁴ See Appleby.

in such circumstances thus paradoxically could make its utterer the victim of hate speech.

Indeed, the “yes” of racist discourse—a “yes” that is forced or otherwise expected because of a speaker’s race—could destroy the Black subjects’ sense of expectation like hate speech: because the response “yes” is all they can say and all that is available to them, saying “yes” thereby imposes a social subordination rooted in the reduction of one’s speaking potential. Consider Ellison’s narrator in *Invisible Man*, who tells us of the pain of saying “yes” repeatedly against one’s will in hegemonic White spaces:

Too often, in order to justify them, I had to take myself by the throat and choke myself until my eyes bulged and my tongue hung out. . . . Oh, yes, it made them happy and it made me sick. So I became ill of affirmation, of saying “yes” against the nay-saying of my stomach— not to mention my brain. (573)

The act of repeatedly saying “yes” induces in the narrator nausea and disgust because it deprives him of his subjectivity, the intuitions of his “stomach” and “brain.” The racist system does not only harm him but forces him to harm himself, to violently reproduce the acts of violence he is subjected to.

Similarly, in Fanon’s image of “Yassuh, boss,” the Black speaker feels reduced to a stereotype, rendered “the eternal victim of an essence” (22). The requisite “yes” thus reinforces a racist discourse that seeks to censor Black speakers and limit their speaking possibilities.

Attunement to the conditions in which racialized speakers often utter “yes” reveals affirmation as contested and potentially racialized too, especially because “yes” purports to be a consensual affirmative, even when uttered in situations that subvert speakers’ agency to affirm consensually at all. The ritualization of “yes, sir” constitutes a chronic internalization of hate speech, reproducing discriminatory and self-discriminatory tendencies that negate agency. In the section below, I turn to look at how Baldwin, Fanon, and Ellison militate against this discourse.

III. Affirming across the Discursive Divide

Among the many contributions to the study of African American literature which Oforlea offers in his recent book on the rhetoric of Black male subjectivity is the concept of the “discursive divide.” For Oforlea, the discursive divide is a useful paradigm for thinking about the division between how Black men in the works of Toni Morrison and James Baldwin are seen and described by society, on the one hand, and how they conceptualize, articulate, and view themselves, on the other. Oforlea writes:

On one side of the discursive divide are the dominant constructions about black men that emerged from Eurocentric descriptions of Africa as culturally underdeveloped. . . . These negative representations circulate through laws, stereotypes, and visual texts. . . . Across the discursive divide, African American men are free to realize not an essential self, but a complex self that is aware of both racialized discourses about black humanity and African American cultural discourses about survival, resiliency, and achievement (2)

For Oforlea, the process of crossing the divide is worth investigating, because it reveals the journey by which victims of racial oppression conceive of themselves on their own terms. Oforlea describes this as “subjectivity construction that envisions subjects moving beyond colonial or racialized discourses to a space where they are free to define themselves or articulate their subjectivity in any way they choose” (2), a space characterized by “self-definition, self-hood, and communal consciousness” (6). In contrast to the essentializing effects of racialization, to be free in such a way is to have a sense of agency that allows them to reimagine themselves and define their identity using various psychological, rhetorical, and performative strategies. In a chapter on Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, for example, Oforlea looks at Black male characters who use silence as a “strategy of strategic endurance,” a means to subvert the linguistic domination that seeks to control them (47).

As shown in the examples from Fanon and others above, a discursive divide stands at the site of affirmation. Indeed, when Black speakers are forced or expected to affirm on account of their race, “yes” is used to create yet another “negative representation” of them. That is, it seeks to render Black speakers as implicitly inarticulate and thus unworthy of agency. What would it mean to cross the discursive divide in affirmation and articulate a “yes” that works in the service of self-definition and communal consciousness?

In the following sections, I consider poetic acts of “yes”-saying by turning to specific ways in which Baldwin, Fanon, and Ellison rearticulate and reimagine the utterance. *Poetics* refers to “the activity in which a person brings something into being that did not exist before,” typically through the configuration or placement of words in ways that create novel meanings (Polkinghorne 115). In his *Poetics of Relation*, Édouard Glissant applies a theory of poetics to colonized worlds. For Glissant, the racialized speaker suffers from a fixed relationality with Whiteness. Racialized speakers, Glissant argues, are always placed in a bind, either bracketed as essentially different from, or forced to prove their similarity to, the White other. In resistance, Glissant offers the poetics of relation, or a relationality that enables new connections and forms of multiplicity. In contrast to binary systems, poetics uses accidents, surprising combinations of meanings, and rhythm, to create possibilities for the racialized speaker to relate to both self and Other. I frame affirmation itself

as a poetic praxis whereby poetic strategies—metaphor, *volta*, repetition, rhythm, and call-and-response—serve to reimagine “yes” as a sign of agency and resistance against racism and racist discourse.⁵

IV. Finding a Poetics of Affirmation in Ellison’s *Invisible Man*

Ellison’s protagonist in *Invisible Man* encounters throughout the novel what Mary Ellen Williams Walsh calls in the *CLA Journal* the “plight . . . of invisibility” experienced by Black Americans; he is not heard, seen, or acknowledged by the myriad White characters throughout the novel, giving him the sense that his subjectivity is immaterial (152). Several Black characters, including his school’s headmaster, ignore him, or worse, re-enact racist logics. By contrasting his protagonist’s complex psychological interior with the fact that he is viewed by the White world as one dimensional, Ellison reveals what Walsh calls “the spiritual failure in American society” (157). But Ellison’s novel is not just about failure. In his National Book Award acceptance speech, Ellison noted that a central part of his aim through the novel was “to return to the mood of personal moral responsibility for democracy” (160). The question thus arises: what does personal moral responsibility look like, and how can one reclaim it, when one is not heard, acknowledged, or seen?

As suggested in the passage quoted above, in which the invisible man tells us that saying “yes” to the White world is “asphyxiating” one of the primary threats the narrator faces in *Invisible Man* is his own alienation from language. He is clearly alienated from society, but alienation from language—the sense of being “asphyxiated” by one’s own words—truly frightens him. Speaking before the Communist Party using a script written and forced upon him by its White leader, he confronts his separation from language as a loss of identity: “I might have been anyone, might have been trying to speak in a foreign language” (264). This experience is not unique to *Invisible Man* but central to the way anti-Black violence has long sought to take expressive language away from Black speakers. John E. Drabinski, for example, argues that racist systems sever the relationality of oppressed subjects with a language that allows for historical memory or cultural identity (204). The colonizer, Drabinski maintains, has sought “to simultaneously maintain the link between language and home and de-link—in the production of alienation at the level of the psyche, of knowing and being—colonized subjects from language, and therefore from any sense of home” (216). This de-linking characterizes creole histories in which one language is forced upon speakers at the expense of their own. What *Invisible Man* makes uniquely apparent, however, is

⁵ *Volta*, meaning “turn” or “rotation” in Italian, refers to the rhetorical shift in poetry where a dramatic or notable change occurs in thought or emotion.

how this de-linking from home can take place through the racializing of “yes.” The Invisible Man says, “All they wanted of me was one belch of affirmation and I’d bellow it out loud. Yes! Yes! YES!” (394). With each “yes,” the narrator seems to distance himself from their utterance, till eventually he is offering a kind of commodity: the capitalized, exclamatory “YES!” one might find on an advertisement. To articulate “yes” in a way that responds to one’s interior psyche and affirms it in its complexity thus emerges as a necessary act in reclaiming a sense of home within language, a space for oneself. On a very simple level, to say “yes” for oneself is to say “I am here,” not in relation to a White other, but for and because of me.

Brother Tarp, an often-overlooked character in scholarship on *Invisible Man*, expresses the reclamation of a “yes” connected to home explicitly.⁶ Meeting our narrator in the Communist Party, Brother Tarp has recently escaped from a chain gang in the South to the North. Face-to-face with the narrator, he tells his story for the first time, beginning with the nature of his crime: “no.” “I said no to a man who wanted to take something from me; that’s what it cost me for saying no . . .” (387). By saying “no” to someone above him in social status (likely a White man), Tarp ruptures the racist contract of the Black speaker as the “yes”-sayer and pays a price of nineteen years. Not only does he illuminate the implicit violence that lies within the racialized “yes” by showing the consequences of saying “no”; he also seizes on speech’s subversive potential: “I said no. I said *hell*, no! And I kept saying no until I broke the chain and left” (387; emphasis in original). Saying “no” to the White man is formally negative, but it is *positive* from this Black speaker’s point of view. The value here is not merely linguistic. Indeed, it marks what Oforlea calls the crossing of the discursive divide, in that in saying “no,” Tarp literally moves out of the physical space in which he is discursively required to say “yes.”

Immediately after Tarp recalls casting aside the racialized “yes” associated with compliance, and uttering his “no,” he recounts in his story a very different kind of “yes”: one linked to his own agency and affirmative of his own potential to journey back home. Tarp tells the story of his escape:

They let me get close to the dogs once in a while, that’s how [I was able to escape]. I made friends with them dogs and I waited. Down there you really learn how to wait. I waited nineteen years and then one morning when the river was flooding I left. They thought I was one of them who got drowned when the levee broke, but I done broke the chain and gone. I was standing in the mud holding a long-handled shovel and I asked myself, Tarp, can you make it? And *inside me I said yes; all that water and mud and rain said yes, and I took off.* (388; emphasis added)

⁶ Notable studies that consider Brother Tarp’s role in the novel have been written by Winther (“Imagery of Imprisonment”) and Thomas A. Vogler.

When Tarp asks himself “Can you make it?” and responds “yes,” he is not only doing the answering but also the questioning. Through these utterances, he exits a discursive space where he is responding to the demands of a White other and creates one in which he is the provider of the questions that will free him to answer. This marks a kind of poetic solipsism, whereby one creates a sense of enjambment with oneself, a call (“Can you make it?”) and response (“yes”) constitutive of personal agency. Echoing other narratives of people escaping slavery to the North, Brother Tarp’s narrative is governed by a radical engagement with his natural surroundings, a discovery of amicability with “them dogs.” The sense of reciprocity he cultivated with his environment is mapped onto an affirmative linguistic construct, whereby his question of whether he can “make it” finds a double affirmative response, “yeses” germinating from psyche and environment, in counterpoint, resonating with his question.

Such affirmatives posit poetics. The “yes” from the “water and mud and rain” is an ecological personification, and the passage as a whole has a building rhythm, whereby waiting gives way to the rush of the levee that builds towards a “yes,” which resembles the *volta*, or rhetorical turn, of a sonnet. Notably, the turn in Tarp’s monologue resembles a “dolphin turn,” which is what Peter Sacks calls a “transformative veering from one course to another, a way of being drawn off track to an unexpected destination” (3). In this case, the “veering” is an act of resistance: the affirmative “yes” directs Tarp away from the literal “track” of the chain gang, sending both his voice and embodied self towards an “unexpected destination” in the North.

Ultimately, the novel’s narrator learns from Tarp two key lessons on how affirmation can become anti-racist: First, he discovers the necessity of saying “no.” Relatedly, he learns that true subjective agency does not involve committing oneself to an affirmative or negative stance, but rather possessing an indeterminate relationship with how one uses affirmative speech. The narrator says in the epilogue, “I condemn and I affirm, say no and say yes, say yes and say no. I denounce and I defend and I hate and I love” (579-80). The narrator ties humanity to the generation of expectancy, the fact that he *could* hate or love, say “yes” or “no.” Indeed, if omnipresent hate speech ruptures expectancy, and if “yessing” the White world serves to “asphyxiate,” he counters those facts by reimagining himself as the generator of expectancy. The narrator’s concluding question posits an epistemology generated by Black speakers themselves. He asks, “Who knows, but that on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” (581) On the one hand, the text has answered, demanding the “readers’ identification,” according to Walsh (158). On the other, the question invites the novel’s readers to respond, to give “yeses” that affirm, or “noes” that further distance themselves from the narrator. The poetic

sensibility arises in a performative inversion of authorship, whereby we are asked to hear the narrator's voice as formative of *ours*. In other words, Ellison demands a radical affirmation of Black authorship and invites the readers' commitment to worlds in which Black speakers, from the invisible man to Brother Tarp, can author their own existence.

V. Fanon's Poetics of Affirmation: The Principle of Iterability

Fanon's poetics of affirmation differs from Ellison's in that it focuses less on productive ruptures at a personal level and more on how affirmatives mediate the process of subject formation within society, what Fanon calls "the social constellation, the cultural whole" ("Racism and Culture" 36). In her introduction to *CLA Journal's* special edition, "Decolonizing the University: A Battle for the African Mind," Kendra R. Parker considers how two of Fanon's ideas are central to decolonization: recognizing Black people as the agents of their own experiences and repeatedly questioning legacies of the colonial situation (164). Indeed, Fanon often analyzes the crisis of anti-Black racialization in psychological terms, suggesting that it led to an identity fixed in a dialectical relationship with Whiteness, and in turn to an "antinomy" of existence (2). For Fanon, resisting such a system requires the creation of an alternative productive dialectic. Fanon's position carries an existentialist tenor: It does not posit a series of essential truths for humanity, but claims humans must become, through their behavior, the creators of their governing principles themselves. In this way, the racialized speaker becomes productive of a more universal sense of life, not forced outside it.

Fanon's work has been widely considered as a project of psychological empowerment. A relatively understudied area is the role which affirmation plays in this empowerment.⁷ Fanon contrasts the sense of negation menacing colonized subjects with an affirmative relationality that empowers:

Man is a *yes* that vibrates to cosmic harmonies. Uprooted, pursued, baffled, doomed to watch the dissolution of the truths that he has worked out for himself one after another, he has to give up projecting onto the world an antinomy that coexists with him. (2)

In an anti-Black world, Fanon maintains that Black subjectivity contends with a horrific paradox: the dominant discourse purports to affirm universal life and principles, while repeatedly disregarding Black life. Black subjectivity

⁷ Works that do consider affirmation in Fanon's project include Sebastian Kaempf's "Violence and Victory," and Cynthia Nielsen's "Frantz Fanon and the Négritude Movement." Neither, however, focuses on affirmation as a practice that navigates the tensions and oppressive turns of racist discourse.

thus experiences an antinomy: the self as human but also repeatedly denied that humanity. Fanon is essentially telling readers that such an antinomy will always exist so long as one thinks within a paradigm that is itself racist. In contrast, in the poetic vision of man as a “yes that vibrates to cosmic harmonies,” Fanon is charting a different kind of subjectivity, defined by harmony and synchronicity. In this vision, one is not restricted by (often racist) social conventions or racist interpellations, but free to envision oneself dynamically. Indeed, vibration itself is by definition dynamic. In having a vibratory existence—an existence, in contemporary vernacular, that *vibes*—one is not constrained in one’s sense of self, but open to becoming, through one’s interactions with “cosmic harmonies” which point to a space antecedent to racism. Indeed, if man is “a yes that vibrates,” man has the potential to exist in synergy with cosmic rhythms, which by definition do know and cannot know racism. Within Fanon’s broader antiracist project to imagine worlds in which racialized speakers are *actional*, capable of effecting change, his “yes” gestures to what such an actional stance looks and sounds like within discourse: a generative affirmative motion that propels its utterer into a transcendent sense of self, beyond the confines of the existing racialized space.

In the other key “yes” passage in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon emphasizes the productive role affirmation plays in militating against the tendency to become inured to existing racial structures. The project’s “true value,” Ziauddin Sardar writes in his foreword, “is as a clarion call against complacency” (xix). While Sardar emphasizes those facets of society producing racialization towards which Fanon hopes we do not become complacent, one area to which Sardar devotes less attention is the actual praxis Fanon claims can underpin and uphold antiracist action. Continuing to frame “yes” not just as something one says, but rather something one *is*, Fanon centralizes an affirmative principle within this antiracist work:

The self takes its place by opposing itself . . . Yes and no. I said in my introduction that man is a yes. I will never stop reiterating that. Yes to life. Yes to love. Yes to generosity. But man is also a no. No to scorn of man. No to degradation of man. No to exploitation of man. No to the butchery of what is most human in man: freedom. (173)

In his assertion that he will never stop reiterating that “man is a yes,” Fanon emphasizes the iterability of speech. Although all speech is iterable, or repeatable beyond its context, “yes” is uniquely so. As Derrida outlines, “yes” is contingent on its ability to be repeated, the fact that with each spoken or written “yes,” one promises to remember what that affirmation contained. In this passage, Fanon uses iterability to fashion a mode of antiracist resistance, suggesting that the repetition of affirmation is integral to helping the psyche feel more connected with itself and

become a site of production, rather than negation. Indeed, in a literal sense, Fanon has stopped repeating “yes”: it is his text that will continue to signify it. But his hope here is that the reader will become the agent of iteration to carry forward the motion of affirmation and negation, the assertion of “yes to life” and “no to exploitation.”

The sense of an oral tradition arises in the repetition of “yes,” an anaphora that Fanon implicitly summons readers to use so as to become repeaters of his message. The iterability of affirmation must be passed on because it offers a mode of agency-enforcing subject formation whereby selves actually articulate themselves within language, naming what they oppose and affirm. The repetition of “yes” is a poetic distillation of Fanon’s hope that Black speakers will become what Bhahba calls “incalculable object[s]” (xxxiv). “Yes” thus marks the first note, the incipient motivating utterance, from which a vibratory existence—one that is dynamic, latent, connected with a space beyond racist societies—could unfold.

In discussing Fanon and Ellison’s interest in affirmation, I have suggested that their poeticizing of “yes” serves to foreground a more affirmative relationship with the self, language, and the broader sociocultural space. Both Ellison and Fanon stop short, however, of envisioning how their “yes” imperatives might be fulfilled within a quotidian encounter, in the socialized space of the community, or on the city block—a subject to which Baldwin turns a decade later. If “yes” can help mediate the relationship between psyche and language, how might reclamation of connectedness manifest itself in quotidian encounters, or become a productive praxis to militate against the tendency in racialized spaces to deny the totality and complexity of another person?

VI. Imagining Yes as an Encounter

By 1963, the civil rights movement had created some legal recourse and representation for Black communities, but it had notably failed to substantively shift White America’s racist “attitudes and behavior towards their black counterparts” (Farred 286). In fact, it revealed how entrenched those attitudes were. It was against this backdrop that Baldwin penned *The Fire Next Time*, a pivot in his thinking that Africana scholar Grant Farred claims “anticipates, through the black anger at America that Baldwin gives voice to, a new—less conciliatory—mode of black opposition to the status quo” (286). Farred argues for the centrality of love to Baldwin’s vision: “Love must itself do the work that love requires and for which the law is, because of America’s racist history, unwilling to assume responsibility” (287). Farred also evokes Derrida’s concept of asymmetrical love to highlight how Baldwin’s idea of love is founded on loving others *because* of their hatred, a “responsibility that must be taken up precisely because that Other is so unwilling

to evince or countenance love” (289). While the centrality of love to Baldwin is irrefutable, his less studied essay from a year later, *Nothing Personal*, finds him turning towards a space anterior to love and outlining a precondition for love: reimagining the conditions through which we relate to others and affirm them in relation to ourselves. If a politics of love is Baldwin’s *telos*, I amplify here the affirmative relationality Baldwin finds indispensable to that vision.

Nothing Personal is a collaboration with Baldwin’s high school classmate and portrait photographer Richard Avedon, who took dozens of black-and-white portraits of diverse swaths of American society, which he then shared with Baldwin. Baldwin, in response, penned a sermonic essay, each section of which corresponds to one of the facets of society that Avedon documents. The depicted subjects include celebrities and showbiz stars, whom Baldwin scrutinizes as representing a dangerous “myth” of America, an addiction to the “irreality” of “simplicity and youth;” politicians and activists, who represent two sides of a struggle for and against Black freedom; patients in a mental asylum, whom Baldwin sees not as pathological but as the unfortunate consequence of a society that fails to provide necessary emotional support systems; and families on Santa Monica Beach, who offer Baldwin an opportunity to think about posterity and our intergenerational commitment (58). The consonance between text and image invites readers to approach America’s existential crisis as one implicated in both how we speak and how we see others.

Both Avedon and Baldwin are concerned with a problem of relationality, the ways in which we mediate encounters with others. For Avedon, portrait photography has become over-staged, creating idealizing representations. In response, he creates portraiture that captures the instantaneous exchange between himself and his subjects, or what he calls “the thing that happens between us” (Aletti). In his essay, Baldwin takes a similar approach, framing urgent social questions, not in terms of policy, but within the disarray of our relationality. Baldwin writes, “Our failure to trust one another deeply enough to be able to talk to one another has become so great . . .” (55). In contrast, there is hope when “New York is cheerfully immobilized by snow—cheerfully, because the snow gives people an excuse to talk to each other” (51). Talking to one another will not overcome alienation, but it might evoke a desire to understand each other. Baldwin’s assertions on the importance of “talking,” echoing his claim, in “Stranger in the Village,” that we must encounter each other’s “human reality . . . weight and complexity,” suggests dialogue can rupture intractable barriers (127).

Focused on affect and interpersonal encounters, *Nothing Personal* emphasizes a politics of relationality, inviting one to realize that how one relates to other people is constitutive of the communities one inhabits and the power relations

within them. Baldwin's "yes" imperative emerges in this context. Baldwin asserts that affirmation of others is existentially urgent because it makes life possible for subsequent generations, and potentially less discriminatory for them too. Hence, his "yeses" differ from Ellison's and Fanon's—which are about a relationship with the self or one's psychology—by emphasizing dialogue and communication, the "yeses" we say to one another. After describing, in a parable of Black suffering, "all that terror and . . . helplessness" systemic racism has created, Baldwin offers his imperative as a source of humanistic hope (59):

It is a mighty heritage, it is the human heritage, and it is all there is to trust. And I learned this through descending, as it were, into the eyes of my father and my mother. I wondered, when I was little, how they bore it—for I knew that they had much to bear. It had not yet occurred to me that I also would have much to bear; but they knew it, and the unimaginable rigors of their journey helped them to prepare me for mine. This is why one must say Yes to life and embrace it wherever it is found—and it is found in terrible places; nevertheless, there it is; and if the father can say, *Yes, Lord*, the child can learn that most difficult of words, *Amen*. (60)

Baldwin descends from the heights of "human heritage . . . into the eyes of [his] father and [his] mother," and then moves from an "embrace" of life to the formative utterances of faith, "*Yes, Lord*" and "*Amen*."⁸ The power of the affirmative utterance is governed by this relationship between the abstract, on the one hand, and the vocalized and tactile, on the other. In the former sense, "yes" has an archival quality: its utterances participate within "the human heritage." Affirmation thus foregrounds the very possibility of a sense of relation not reduced to the present moment, a sense which is often unimaginably painful, but transcendent of the present, rooted in a history of ritualizing the "Yes to Life" others have said before and will say in the future. At the same time, the affirmatives act with instantaneous efficacy, as speech acts *par excellence*; they don't merely say but perform, allowing the listener to become a witness of an almost sacred act that will shape their own relationship with life. Indeed, in both of the passages' "yeses," the speaker engenders acknowledgment, whether a recognition of life ("nevertheless, there it is") or confirmatory affirmation in the child's *Amen* (expressing agreement). Baldwin thus posits an ethical sensibility tied to how we issue affirmatives within discourse, and how their ability to generate a response constitutes the human heritage we compose.

⁸ *Amen*, i.e. "so be it," generally marks affirmation of a prayer. Baldwin uses it here in this sense. In other works, such as *Just above My Head* and his poem "Amen," *Amen* marks a character's epiphanic recognition that a prayer or promise constitutes an existential truth in their life.

Nothing Personal ultimately offers an antiracist ethics governed by living affirmatively. For Baldwin, this begins with an affirmative utterance that signals to others the kind of openness and recognition with which we will approach them. In this sense, affirmation produces recognition of life outside racialized structures and, in so doing, both erodes them and helps produce a “human heritage” worthy of the name. In a scene just after his “Yes to Life,” Baldwin asserts the importance of rooting this ethics in quotidian acts. “I’ve sometimes watched strangers here, here for a day or a week or a month, or newly transplanted, watched a boy and a girl . . . yes, there was something recognizable, something to which the soul responded, something to make one smile, even to make one weep with exultation” (52). Here, “yes” emerges as a *volta*, a rhetorical turn prompted by a surprising intimation of life. Indeed, if the scene in which “One must say Yes” marks the kind of genesis of what affirmation might look like, here Baldwin shows how “yes”-saying might become an anti-racist act in practice: the recognition of life in places where we have been conditioned not to expect it. For Baldwin, the moral responsibility for all of us is to make possible worlds in which life, and most importantly, every child’s life, is seen, heard, affirmed, and said “yes” to.

VII. The Ongoing Work of Yes

By way of a coda, I want to consider how affirmatives in literary texts might inform a practice of affirmation beyond them, in the communities we inhabit, and as part of urgent contemporary movements, including Black Lives Matter, as it seeks to build spaces, and ultimately an entire world, able to affirm Black existence. In *Evidence of Things Not Seen*, Baldwin writes of the need to “Excavate the meaning of the word *community* . . . our endless connection with, and responsibility for, each other” (122). For Baldwin, community is not a stable entity, but rather must be “excavated,” implying the work of the recovery, rediscovery, and use of heritage. Throughout this essay, I have suggested that “yes” occupies a formative role in the featured authors’ works because each of them firmly believes that the way in which one interacts with even the most basic language will dictate in part how one conceives of oneself in relation to others. In that perspective, if “yes” is reduced to the logic of a racialized “yes, sir,” a speaker is negated and reduced. But in contrast, when a speaker gives or witnesses an affirmation outside the linguistic system of racism and in opposition to it, there is the potential for their consciousness to feel reanimated, or for them to discern a new sense of connectivity in their relation to others.

This fact has key implications for anti-racist activism because it asks that anyone committed to the creation of more equitable worlds pay close attention to their own affirmative speech, and ask themselves “To whom and how am I saying

‘yes’? What kinds of community relations does my ‘yes’ portend?” As Baldwin maintains at the close of a 1972 essay for *Playboy*, in which he discusses the subject of the play he is writing—a Black boy growing up in Harlem—we all owe a responsibility to those in our communities who have been left behind or told “no” so repeatedly they lose hope. “That . . . boy is my subject and my responsibility. And yours,” Baldwin writes, speaking, not just to his moment, but ours, one of rising mass incarceration and horrifically frequent, unjustifiable police shootings (713). To live responsibly within a world that routinely undermines the ability of so many to affirm and become the authors of their own affirmation, one must always be cognizant of who needs to hear a “yes” and alert to whose voice is calling out to be recognized as life, and embraced, wherever they are found. For while the perilous consequences of not saying “yes” are all too certain, the possibility of “yes” is unbounded.

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Stories to Tell: Family and Reality in Hip-Hop Autobiographies

John Paul Meyers

“Hip hop remains a genre largely valued for its seemingly autobiographical nature.” – Tricia Rose (136)

Autobiography has been a crucial genre of writing for African American culture at least since the publication of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* in 1789: one of the first books chronicling North American slavery from the point of view of a former slave and a book whose publication date is heavy with symbolism. Equiano's autobiography was published the same year that George Washington was inaugurated as the first president of the United States under the newly-ratified Constitution, a document which notoriously counted Black people as only three-fifths of a person for the sake of allotting representatives in Congress. One of the Black American autobiographical tradition's earliest defining moments, therefore, coincides with the beginning of the modern United States itself, at a time when the government officially recognizes Black people as something less than fully human. Over the centuries since the publication of Equiano's text, arguably the best-selling and most influential works by Black American writers have been autobiographies, as V.P. Franklin affirmed when he claimed autobiography as “the most important literary genre in the African-American intellectual tradition” in his 1995 study of these texts (11). In the academy, the study of autobiographies has itself come to prominence over the past few decades, as scholars have been increasingly interested in the construction of self through textual and other signifying practices, a development that is related to the rise of new disciplines since the 1960s, as Ricia Anne Chansky explains: “The field of auto/biography studies developed within the space that women's studies, and then area studies (such as African American studies, Latino/a studies, and Asian studies) carved out in the academy for analyzing identity construction” (xx).

Franklin's study of Black autobiographies was published at the tail end of hip-hop's so-called “golden age” usually thought to comprise the years between about 1987 and 1994.¹ In part due to the legacy of aesthetic achievements and political

¹ The question of when exactly the “golden age” or “golden era” of hip-hop was, what artists and musical techniques are located within it, and how this time period differs from other epochs in hip-hop history is certainly up for debate among critics, scholars, listeners, and musicians. Nevertheless, “golden age” and “golden era” are widely used shorthands in a variety of hip-hop discourse to refer to music from the late 1980s and early 1990s. See Duinker and Martin, Kajikawa, and Williams.

consciousness of that golden age, hip-hop is now viewed increasingly with respect and hip-hop musicians as important public figures and, even, public intellectuals—as evidenced by the creation of archives at elite institutions like Harvard and Cornell for the study of hip-hop, the newly-released 9-CD *Smithsonian Anthology of Hip-Hop and Rap*, and the Universal Hip-Hop Museum, to be constructed in the genre’s mythical birthplace in the Bronx. Yet, at a time when much popular press hip-hop discourse is short, motivated most strongly by the desire to promote recording sales or concert tickets, and more concerned with celebrity gossip than in-depth discussion of musical and social issues, autobiographies by hip-hop musicians present a rare chance for musicians to engage in extended explanations of their upbringings, lives, and careers. In this paper, I first discuss how hip-hop autobiographies fit into the Black autobiographical tradition and hip-hop media landscape. I then provide an analysis of two important themes in these texts: the influence of family on musical development and the relationship of hip-hop to lived reality. These themes are analyzed in three contrasting autobiographies by hip-hop musicians: *Ice* by Ice-T and Douglas Century, *Decoded* by Jay-Z, and *Mo’ Meta Blues* by Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson and Ben Greenman.² Contrary to some other celebrity autobiographies, all three of these texts move far beyond mere chronology or hagiography in the discussion of their subjects’ lives. Lyrical reality has been a frequently debated source of controversy within and outside hip-hop, and *Ice* and *Decoded* give a chance for two of hip-hop’s most celebrated and controversial rappers to offer their own extended, and conflicted, takes on this issue. Family, on the other hand, is an issue that has received significantly less attention in hip-hop discourse, and my analysis of all three of these autobiographies shows that family is a crucial influence in the development of hip-hop musicians.³

These two themes—family and reality—also overlap with key concerns in African American Studies and auto/biography studies. In the world of popular media, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. is probably the figure most associated with the examination of Black family lineage and history, and especially with how an understanding of family history can contribute to an individual’s sense of self. An engagement with family history, Gates argues, can make a crucial difference for

² The hip-hop journalist dream hampton is thanked in the concluding “Acknowledgements” section of *Decoded*, but not listed on the book’s cover or title page. Subsequent media coverage, however, has made it clear that she played an important role in actually crafting the autobiographical sections of *Decoded*. (*Decoded* alternates standard first person autobiographical passages with lyrics to Jay-Z songs. These lyrics are then marked with superscript numbers, corresponding to footnotes on the facing page written in the first person, presumably by Jay-Z himself—or at least composed in collaboration between Jay-Z and hampton.)

³ Jennifer Lynn Stoeber’s study of the record collection of Afrika Bambaataa’s mother is a compelling and too-rare example of scholarship on the importance of families—especially mothers—on the shape of hip-hop culture.

feelings of self-efficacy and empowerment: “For many African Americans, not knowing our own history—not knowing our individual histories, the narratives of our own ancestors who triumphed, by surviving and propagating against tremendous odds—continues to serve as a profound limitation on what we can achieve, on the history each of us can make” (237). Indeed, hip-hop autobiographies show musicians reflecting on and affirming family influence while discussing their later creative musical achievements. Debates over lyrical reality in hip-hop also parallel discussions about truth, lying, and artifice that are a persistent feature of studies of auto/biographies and other kinds of life writing.⁴ This paper, then, has two main goals. First, I want to introduce hip-hop autobiographies as a set of texts that have largely been ignored by scholars and critics and demonstrate how these texts can be an important source for scholars seeking to better understand hip-hop culture. Second, given hip-hop’s influential role in African American culture, I demonstrate how an analysis of these texts, in which some of its practitioners explain their lives and art through a recognized and influential literary genre, can be crucial for our understanding of enduring themes in African American culture writ large.

Key Issues in the Study of Black Autobiographies and Hip-Hop

Before analyzing family and reality within these hip-hop autobiographies, a discussion of some of the key issues characterizing the production and reception of the Black autobiographical tradition and hip-hop will help us situate these texts. While there are certainly many issues that I hope scholars will examine in future studies of hip-hop autobiographies, I highlight four that are of particular concern for our analysis and understanding of the intersecting cultural fields of hip-hop and autobiographical literature: conceptions of agency and humanity, the idea of rap music and autobiography as containing first-person accounts of real events, contested authorship, and performativity in literary and musical discourse. These themes are not always rigorously distinct, and in the discussion that follows, we will see how aspects of hip-hop and Black autobiographies can engage with several of these themes at the same time. My aim here is to put hip-hop autobiographies in the context of earlier Black autobiographies, whose tradition they now join, and also examine how they function within the larger hip-hop media ecosystem that includes songs, music videos, album covers, interviews, and social media.

Slave narratives rightfully occupy a prominent place in the history of African American autobiography, and such texts performed at least two important functions. First, they testified to the horrors of slavery for a presumed White readership. Second, writing one’s autobiography claimed oneself as the author

⁴ See Adams for a discussion

of one's life—in a literal and figurative sense—not as an extension of the master's will. In the milieus in which these texts originated, writing itself testified to one's humanity, to being educable, to being capable of rational thought, and to having the power to produce a creation—the autobiographical text—owned by oneself. Discussing the first century of Black autobiographical writing in the United States, William L. Andrews argues, “autobiographers demonstrate through a variety of rhetorical means that they regard the *writing* of autobiography as in some ways uniquely self-liberating, the final climactic act in the drama of their lifelong quest for freedom” (xi, emphasis in original). The writing of an autobiography is therefore a performative act that is closely connected with its author's claim for agency and humanity. The power that seems to accrue to the writer of an autobiography is perhaps one of the reasons that slave narratives often featured elaborate testimony from White “authorities” testifying that the Black person in question himself or herself in fact wrote the autobiography. These paratextual elements make up what John Sekora has called the “white envelope” for the “black message” of the autobiographical narrative itself, which served to convince skeptical readers of the reality and truthfulness of the horrific events recounted therein—vouched for by a “respectable” White person—but also that a “mere” ex-slave could actually write, could actually reason, and was therefore deserving of respect as a human.

The notion of the human and its closely related philosophical concept, humanism, are both fiercely contested ground in Black culture and cultural studies. During the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, the rights and privileges associated with humanity and humanism were, of course, routinely denied to Black subjects throughout the diaspora. In the mid-20th century, Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon were among those anticolonial writers who argued against the inherent ethnocentrism of European humanism. Continuing in this vein, Sylvia Wynter argues for the “re-enchantment of humanism,” a movement to “reimagine the human in the terms of a new history whose narrative will enable us to co-identify ourselves each with the other” (198). In his provocative book *Posthuman Rap*, Justin Adams Burton critiques the limited vision of humanist ideology displayed in the reception of Pulitzer Prize-winning rapper Kendrick Lamar: an artist who fits, or is made to fit, a familiar individualistic, prophetic-heroic, and male type of humanist subjectivity. Burton instead points to what many contemporary scholars would probably view as an unlikely source—trap music—as expressing other, less-restrictive, more liberatory, posthuman modes of subjectivity. Alexander Weheliye posits the posthuman as a place for Black subjectivity, for people who were never allowed to be fully, uncomplicatedly human. Still, while posthuman subjectivities may be claimed by the late 20th century R&B/funk artists he analyzes, Weheliye recognizes that being recognized as fully human, as a liberal subject with individual rights was (and remains) an important goal for many Black writers:

Afro-diasporic thinking has not evinced the same sort of distrust and/or outright rejection of “man” in its universalist, post-Enlightenment guise as Western antihumanist or posthumanist philosophies ... Clearly this emphasis on “humanity” results from the histories of slavery and colonialism and the racial, gender, and sexual violence ensuing from these forces ... Since black subjects were deemed the radical obverse of enlightened and rational “man,” various black discourses have sought to appropriate this category (26).

As we have already seen in our discussion of Equiano, autobiographies and the question of Black humanity seem to be inextricably linked. The proliferation of autobiographies by Black authors—including *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Up From Slavery* by Booker T. Washington, and a later text like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*—should be seen in this light: as a way to “appropriate,” to lay claim to the identity of “enlightened and rational ‘man.’”⁵ The enduring popularity of these texts among readers suggests that there is a desire for this kind of cultural work to be done.

Written autobiography, however, is not the only artistic form in which Black Americans have laid a claim to humanity, individual subjectivity, and presenting a fuller version of reality than was available from other sources. The rapper Chuck D of Public Enemy famously declared that rap music was “Black America’s CNN,” and this metaphor has been oft-cited over the past several decades. Hip-hop music does report on important aspects of Black America, especially aspects that are ignored or slanted by conventional media; this part of the metaphor is accurate. However, there is a key difference between most hip-hop music and mainstream media coverage: rather than pronounce on events from a critical distance or “objective” viewpoint, hip-hop has functioned as a forum for Black artists to tell their own life stories in musical form. First-person accounts are significantly more prominent in hip-hop than in conventional news media. In this sense, hip-hop songs are presented and received as (at least) “seemingly” autobiographical, as Tricia Rose noted in this essay’s epigraph.

More than just telling about their writers’ lives, hip-hop songs also share with the Black written autobiographical tradition a central goal: the skillful use of language as a way of claiming identity and agency. We can see this through hip-hop’s emphasis on performative language, with many hip-hop lyrics using both self-referential (autobiographical) and performative language. J.L. Austin defines a performative statement as one in which “the issuing of the utterance is the

⁵ The gender implications of this are certainly not lost on Weheliye or to the current author. While notions of “man” and “humanity” are often purportedly non-gendered and universal, they also serve to instantiate male norms and recognize women (and gender non-conforming people) as “human” only as they assimilate to these norms.

performing of an action” (6).⁶ In the context of hip-hop, that means that musicians using performative language frequently rap about how good they are at rapping, so a particularly witty or well-delivered line becomes the evidence of their claim. The rapper Jay-Z explains this phenomenon in his book *Decoded*:

When we take the most familiar subject in the history of rap—why I’m dope—and frame it within the sixteen-bar structure of a rap verse, synced to the specific rhythm and feel of the track, more than anything it’s a test of creativity and wit. It’s like a metaphor for itself; if you can say how dope you are in a completely original, clever, powerful way, the rhyme itself becomes proof of the boast’s truth (26).

By emphasizing the first person in such a large percentage of hip-hop’s lyrics, rappers constantly assert a claim to selfhood, to being a subject who thinks, feels, observes, and records, and someone whose experiences cannot be denied. These have also been central goals of much African American autobiographical writing for over two centuries. This emphasis on first-person accounts and an assertion of selfhood goes together with hip-hop’s strong taboo against stealing rhymes from another MC—that is, performing lyrics written by another rapper as if they were one’s own, since to do so is tantamount to stealing someone’s identity. Recycling grooves from old funk and soul records is a standard part of hip-hop practice, but the rhymes rapped over these grooves—with a few notable exceptions—typically need to have been authored by the rapper who performs them. Similarly, exactly what aspects of a published work are the product of the subject of the autobiography or the work of a “ghostwriter” is an issue that has been controversial in a host of autobiographies. Books with contested authorship include some of the most celebrated and widely read African American autobiographies of the 20th century, including Billie Holiday’s *Lady Sings the Blues*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X as Told to Alex Haley*, *Miles: The Autobiography* by Miles Davis with Quincy Troupe, and Barack Obama’s *Dreams from My Father*. Obviously, uncertainty about who exactly the author of an autobiography is has a direct relationship to ideas about how much the book can claim to be a “true” or “realistic” depiction of its subject’s life and the ontological status of the self that is constructed through such a narrative.

Several writers have argued that *Lady Sings the Blues*, Billie Holiday’s memoir published “with William Dufty,” gets many basic biographical facts wrong and presents a grossly-distorted version of Holiday’s actual lived life. Other scholars, however, have argued that the book begins to make more sense if one interprets it in the light of the violence Holiday suffered at the hands of various men and her

⁶ See below for a Derridean critique of Austin’s notion that any unique, isolated utterance can actually be performative. For a discussion of performativity as applied to the rapper Rakim, see Morris.

struggles with alcoholism, drug addiction, and the criminal justice system. Robert O'Meally writes that the "book is best considered a dream book, a collection of Holiday's wishes and lies ... it must be interpreted, like other dream and wish books" (21). Farah Jasmine Griffin concurs, writing: "In many ways, this is not the life story of Eleanora Fagan [Holiday's birth name], or maybe not even the story of Billie Holiday, but it is the story of Lady Day," the character that Holiday seems to perform throughout her life, in her autobiography itself and in the renditions of heartbreaking love songs that helped to define her career (50). That is, Lady Day is the imagined self that Fagan/Holiday crafts through both her "autobiographical" vocal performances and the more conventional autobiography *Lady Sings the Blues*, a self that is then recognized and interpreted by listeners and readers of these texts.

The jazz scholar Ken Prouty has summarized the controversies over the authorship claims of *Miles: The Autobiography*, credited as Miles Davis with Quincy Troupe. Perhaps most notably, portions of the 1989 work appear to be directly plagiarized from Jack Chambers's earlier biography of Davis, *Milestones*. While *Miles: The Autobiography* is a lively and entertaining book, with detailed discussion of the numerous key figures of jazz and popular music with whom Davis worked over the course of his nearly fifty-year career, the plagiarism allegations that Prouty details suggest that readers should treat it as a particularly interesting source, but not necessarily a definitive one providing an unfiltered look at Davis's life and ideas. Among conspiracy theorists, there were even allegations that Barack Obama's first autobiography, *Dreams from My Father*, was in fact written by Bill Ayers, a White man and former member of the Weathermen group. This disputed authorship would also suggest that Obama's autobiography was not telling "the truth" about his own life, and the self constructed in *Dreams from My Father* was, in fact, fraudulent.

Even this brief survey of authorship controversies surrounding Black autobiographies suggests that this is a persistent issue in this tradition. Questions over authorship and authenticity may be common in these texts because the stakes for the subjects of Black autobiographies are high, since, historically, writing an autobiography has been one of the few chances that Black writers have to prove their humanity and their worth to suspicious reading publics. Perhaps surprisingly, these controversies over multiple or disputed authorship have *not* been an important factor in the reception of hip-hop autobiography. The idea of telling one's own "true" story by oneself—with literacy and writing being a testimony to one's humanity—is not nearly as important in contemporary culture as it was during the era of slave narratives. After reading dozens of hip-hop autobiographies, I can report that nearly all of them are written with the acknowledged assistance

of a professional writer. These are not so much “ghostwriters,” as their assistance is usually credited either on the book’s front cover or in the formal acknowledgements section of the book. Yet this multiple authorship has caused little consternation among the readers of hip-hop autobiographies.

In some sense, hip-hop musicians have been telling their own stories through lyrics since the mid-1970s beginnings of the genre. In addition to lyrics, hip-hop musicians are now key participants in a wide media landscape—including, perhaps most importantly, social media outlets like Twitter and Instagram—giving them access to multiple means of communication unavailable to earlier musicians like Davis and Holiday, to say nothing of the 18th- and 19th-century authors of important Black autobiographies like Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, and Olaudah Equiano. Following recent trends in auto/biography studies, we can think of a wide range of activities hip-hop musicians engage in as different kinds of “life writing,” a term which draws attention to the commonalities between published autobiographies, lyrics performed in the first-person ostensibly describing one’s own life, social media posts, and interviews (Smith and Watson). Published autobiographies and hip-hop lyrics, therefore, can be viewed less as singular performative utterances whose authenticity is crucial than as part of a diverse range of expressive practices and cultural context. Complicating Austin’s theory of performative language, Jacques Derrida argues that unique performative utterances as single events do not exist. Instead, they are only possible within the context of language, law, and custom. That is, a rapper using lyrics to declare himself or herself the greatest rapper alive—as I quoted Jay-Z describing earlier in this essay—is only meaningful within the larger context of hip-hop culture in which such boasts are frequently encountered, recognized, and interpreted by listeners. In more abstract language, Derrida asks: “Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a ‘coded’ or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as *conforming* with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a ‘citation?’” (18). In this view, hip-hop lyrics alone are not sufficient to “perform” the task of claiming subjectivity. Instead, that gesture is only able to be interpreted as meaningful in the context of the larger web of signification in which lyrics and hip-hop are embedded. This web, of course, includes autobiographical texts written by hip-hop artists, and since these autobiographies have received considerably less analysis than song lyrics, interviews, and social media posts, it is to a focused discussion of some of these texts—*Ice*, *Decoded*, and *Mo’ Meta Blues*—that I now turn.

Themes: Reality

Much of the discussion in the hip-hop world over the question of reality has been on the effect of hip-hop's lyrical depictions of violence, drug-dealing, misogyny, and sex on Black youth and on White views of African American culture. Tricia Rose discusses this extensively while chronicling debates over hip-hop in her book *The Hip Hop Wars*. For Rose, single mothers, dead-end jobs, the reality of addiction, and the banality of poverty are underemphasized in hip-hop lyrics; guns, drugs, and sex—while surely existing in the largely poor, Black urban environments that hip-hop music chronicles—are over-emphasized. Both Jay-Z and Ice-T—the autobiographical subjects of *Decoded* and *Ice*, respectively—have been criticized for their depictions of these topics in their lyrics. As perhaps can be expected, both artists mostly sidestep the question of the effects of describing this “real” world in hip-hop lyrics. However, in one memorable passage in *Decoded*, Jay-Z seems to largely agree with Rose and call for a fuller representation of reality in hip-hop.

To tell the story of the kid with the gun without telling the story of why he has it is to tell a kind of lie ... To talk about killing niggas dead without talking about waking up in the middle of the night from a dream about the friend you watched die, or not getting to sleep in the first place because you're so paranoid from the work you're doing, is a lie so deep it's criminal (17).

Rose also points to a seeming requirement or “mark of authenticity” for rappers: “The notion of keeping it real is about both representing a particular black ghetto street life and being truthful about one's relationship to that life. So, rappers not only have to tell compelling stories about being in the life but also *have to convince listeners that they know that life personally and intimately*” [emphasis added] (136). This performance happens not only in their lyrics, but in the other methods of communication they have access to. Many authors of hip-hop autobiographies attempt to show their “personal and intimate” experience of “a particular black ghetto street life,” but perhaps none more so than Ice-T. He subtitles his autobiography *Ice*, “A Memoir of Gangster Life and Rebellion—from South Central to Hollywood.” He fully admits to having participated in what he calls the “transient hustling life,” including burglary and pimping, and the first third of the book details these activities.

Ice-T even uses lyrics to his own songs as epigraphs to chapters, which suggests an explicit connection between his creative output—the songs—and the activities that he engaged in in his “real life” as reported in the book. At many times in the text of *Ice*, Ice-T stresses the connection between his life as a hustler and thief and

his burgeoning rap career in the mid-1980s. He wants his rap lyrics to accurately reflect his lifestyle, although he admits a certain amount of finesse is required to make sure that he does not give away information that could lead to him or one of his friends being arrested. An “Author’s Note” before Part I of the book reads: “People have to learn how to tell stories without implicating those who may not want their stories told. Some names and situation have been changed to protect those involved.” The epigraph to Part II of the book is a lyric from his song “That’s How I’m Livin’”: “I speak on this with hesitation / even though we’re past the statute of limitations” (47). Once he begins living a double life, as both a thief and an up-and-coming rapper performing at clubs in Los Angeles (and later on records), he is very conscious of the relationship between these two activities:

Hip-hop wasn’t paying me, but it was an entertaining sideline to my criminal life. It’s like I had a split-screen on my daytime and nighttime exploits. And in the lyrics, I was talking all about the game—but always in a certain, very deliberate way. I’d been warned by other hustlers, the boys in my crew ... “Don’t worry,” I told them. “I know how to do this.” That was a skill in itself, being able to rap about the reality of crime without getting too specific (72).

Still, he is very clear that what he is rapping is an accurate reflection of reality. Describing his breakout hit “Six in the Mornin’”: “I didn’t call it ‘gangsta’ or ‘hardcore.’ To me it was just the life I was living. If anyone asked me at the time, I called it ‘reality rap’” (91). Ice-T’s emphasis on the true-to-life character of his lyrics fits a widespread media development during this time period: the late 1980s was a time when the idea of “reality” was particularly important in a variety of media outlets, as scholars such as Eric Harvey have pointed out. Listeners and viewers in the United States were able to consume new, constructed versions of “reality”—especially a reality that was typically unknown to middle-class audiences—through the “gangsta” or “reality rap” of hip-hop songs, but also through the genres of daytime TV talk shows and primetime depictions of crime on *America’s Most Wanted* (premiered 1988) and *Cops* (premiered 1989). The Hollywood film *Colors* (1988) was harshly criticized by some rappers and activists for presenting a view of gang life primarily through the eyes of its White police protagonists, but it similarly promised viewers a glimpse of street “reality,” fittingly, the title track on its soundtrack was performed by Ice-T.

When his artistic output expands into the visual realm of album covers and music videos Ice-T similarly invokes reality and explains how some of the standard elements of rap videos—guns, cash, and beautiful women—were actually a part of his lived experience. Read in the context of *Ice*, this was clearly a way of bragging

to readers about the violence and danger he had faced as a “hustler,” as well as demonstrating the pleasurable rewards that were apparently the fruits of his labor. However, it also functions as a way of gaining credibility for himself as a rapper who can accurately describe the harsh lifestyle that is often depicted in rap lyrics, even by those who did not have his same life experiences:

I was very much about not having anything fake. ... Maybe I was naïve about this shit, but I didn't know you could lie. I didn't know you could fake. I really didn't believe it was okay—especially with rap. ... To me, coming from that hustler's lifestyle, it was like: Why would you have a model? How fake is that? Why would you have girls in your video that you don't even know? That's fake, brother. Everybody in my videos was my friend. When we shot the “High Rollers” video, I said, “The gats in the promo shots ain't props.” And they damn sure weren't. We used real money—wasn't no fake cash. It was real. Because I was rapping about real shit (102-103).

In his autobiography, Ice-T gives credit to Schooly D and his track “PSK” for inspiring his style and subject matter as a rapper in the 1980s, arguing that this “realistic” narration was not typical of other hip-hop at the time.

You have to remember that in early hip-hop, telling the truth about your criminal life was not in vogue. When I came out [the early 1980s], dudes were still saying, “Oh, I learned to sing in church.” You didn't come out and say, “Yo I'm an ex-thief” or, “I'm a hustler from the streets of South Central.” That didn't sell records. *Now* it does. *Now* everyone claims to have been a shot caller, bank-robber, gunslinger, murderer. [emphasis in original.] But that's really my blueprint. It would have been a waste of time for me to pretend to be someone I'm not. So I chose to use it like Iceberg Slim did: as a source for my material (145).

Jay-Z is similarly struck by the power of music-making in general and hip-hop in particular to reflect reality. Hearing Run-DMC's recordings as an adolescent in the mid-1980s, he seems to form a vision for what hip-hop as an art form and musical genre was going to do. “It was going to boast and compete and exaggerate. But it was also going to care enough to get the details right about our aspirations and our crumb-snatching struggles, our specific, small realities (*chicken and collard greens*) and our living-color dreamscapes (*big long Caddy*). It was going to be real” (10).⁷ Yet, Jay-Z also recognizes the changes and possibilities that recording opens for MCs and their relationships with the world around them:

⁷ The lyrics italicized in the quotation are italicized within *Decoded* itself. They are from the 1983 Run-DMC song “Sucker MCs.”

I connected with an older kid who had a reputation as the best rapper in Marcy—Jaz was his name—and we started practicing our rhymes into a heavy-ass tape recorder with a makeshift mic attached. The first time I heard our voices playing back on tape, I realized that a recording captures you, but plays back a distortion—a different voice from the one you hear in your own head, even though I could recognize myself instantly. I saw it as an opening, a way to re-create myself and reimagine my world (5).

That is to say, there is a relationship between Jay-Z's self, which he "could recognize instantly," and the sound that comes off the tape. But the "distortion," the distancing effect, the mediation of technology makes certain that this is not a one-to-one relationship. This tension between "capturing" and "distorting," between "real" self and "constructed"-but-recognizable story is a characteristic of hip-hop that Jay-Z learned early in his exposure to the art form, but a characteristic that continues, in his view, to bedevil listeners and critics, just as it also bedevils readers of autobiographies. To illustrate this tension, Jay-Z invokes hip-hop's most celebrated pair of opposites: Chuck D and Flavor Flav from the group Public Enemy: Chuck D tells harsh truths about the social and political realities of American life, while Flavor Flav seems more interested in jokes and stories than in taking anything seriously.

The art of rap is deceptive. It seems so straightforward and personal and real that people read it completely literally, as raw testimony or autobiography. So many people can't see that every great rapper is not just a documentarian, but a trickster—that every great rapper has a little bit of Chuck and a little bit of Flav in them—but that's not our problem, it's their failure: the failure, or unwillingness, to treat rap like art, instead of acting like it's just a bunch of niggas reading out of their diaries. Art elevates and refines and transforms experience. And sometimes it just fucks with you for the fun of it (55-56).

When defending themselves against charges of homophobia, misogyny, and engaging in violence, hip-hop artists also claim that rap lyrics are a put-on, a set of conventions, a character they inhabit and perform expertly. According to Jay-Z, failure to understand this led to confusion over how to interpret the rivalry between Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G.

When Big got into it with Tupac, some hip-hop journalists were like, *Hey isn't this the same nigga who said c4 at your door? Why hasn't he planted a bomb in Pac's house yet?* Which is just the kind of dumb shit that rap always gets subjected to. Not to say there wasn't real beef there, lethal beef, maybe, but *Entertainment Weekly* isn't outraged that Matt Damon isn't really assassinating rogue CIA agents between movies. It

goes to show that even when he was narrating a fantasy with all the crazy, blood-rushing violence of a Tarantino flick packed into three minutes, Big was real enough that some people thought he was just describing a day in his life (249).⁸

Despite the hardline realist stance he sometimes takes in his autobiography, Ice-T, similar to Jay-Z, also has a more complicated relationship to the question of recorded reality in hip-hop. He wants to depict conditions on the ground—what people actually think and do, including himself—but he also wants the poetic license to not be taken literally, to suggest deeper truths without the exact accuracy of every one of his utterances being depended on as literal fact. For our purposes, what is particularly noteworthy is that Ice-T's ideas about poetic license and creative freedom seem to come directly from his exposure to a variety of musical genres in family contexts.

Family and Reality

Hip-hop artists' musical development does not take place in a vacuum. Though rappers are sometimes presented to the public as auto-didactical geniuses or as antisocial outcasts from society, hip-hop artists' formative musical experiences take place in an environment shaped intimately by their immediate and extended families. Parents, siblings, aunts, and uncles abound in hip-hop artists' autobiographical accounts of their early experiences with music. Both of Ice-T's parents died of heart attacks when he was young, leaving him an orphan at the age of 12. Ice-T then moved from a relatively stable middle-class lifestyle in Summit, New Jersey to live with his aunt and her family in Los Angeles, at a time when gang activity was intensifying. As described in *Ice*, it is in this environment of Los Angeles in the 1970s, as an adolescent, that family influences will be important for him, especially on the question of musical taste:

My introduction to rock started when I was living in my aunt's house back in the mid-seventies. My first cousin, Earl had already graduated from Dorsey High, but he was hanging around, thinking he was Jimi Hendrix. He was one of the few rocked-out black guys I'd met; he wore a scarf around his head and only listened to KMET and KLOS in L.A.—the two rock stations ... So right at the age when my musical taste was forming, thanks to Cousin Earl, I was saturated with the bigger, heavier

⁸ "C4 to your door" is a lyric from the Notorious B.I.G.'s track "Warning" from his *Ready to Die* album. The reference to Matt Damon is based on Damon's portrayal of the character Jason Bourne in a franchise of action movies. This juxtaposition by Jay-Z seems to suggest that Notorious B.I.G. (and other rappers) are sometimes portraying characters that are closely based on reality, if not explicitly chronicling events of their own lives.

stuff: Edgar Winter, Led Zeppelin, and Black Sabbath were my favorites. It was kind of cool to know about that shit. Not too many black kids my age knew about the great rock guitarists (128-129).

This interest in rock music is crucial for several reasons. First, as Ice-T explains, he was one of the hip-hop artists in the mid-1980s to integrate rock influence, rock samples, and timbres associated with rock into hip-hop. In *Ice*, he writes: “If you go back and check my early recordings, I always had a rock influence in my rap records. On my first album, *Rhyme Pays*, for the title song I used the hook from Black Sabbath’s ‘War Pigs’” (130). But perhaps most notoriously, it was Ice-T’s affinity for rock music that led him to form the heavy metal band Body Count as a side project in the late 1980s, once his rap career had become successful. And it is with Body Count, particularly its song “Cop Killer,” that the question of relationship of performed lyrics to reality becomes most vexed for Ice-T. As he explains in *Ice*, “I was actually listening to . . . the Talking Heads, and had their song ‘Psycho Killer’ on my mind and one day I just said, ‘Fuck it, I’ll make a song called ‘Cop Killer.’” I wanted to blend the sound of speed metal with a topic that was real to Body Count’s lives”—that is to say, their lives as Black men living in Southern California in the late 1980s, subject to the authority of the notorious Daryl Gates, chief of the LAPD (142). A paragraph later, he relates how he explained that song to the media once controversy broke out: “I told a group of reporters: ‘I’m singing in the first person as a character who is fed up with police brutality. I ain’t never killed no cop. I felt like it a lot of times. But I never did it. If you believe that I’m a cop killer, you believe David Bowie is an astronaut’” (142).⁹

For our concerns about lyrical reality and family influence, this is a remarkable explanation. First, it contradicts his earlier claims in his autobiography that his recordings represent a realistic depiction of events from his own life. Ice-T is very explicit about this, recall his earlier disgust at the idea of having models, fake cash, or fake guns in his music videos, and his boast about being able to thread the needle of going into enough detail about criminal exploits to convince listeners that it actually happened, without giving away information that could potentially incriminate himself or one of his partners.

Second, Ice-T further draws on his knowledge of rock music to defend his portrayal of a character here, showing the long-lasting influence of his older cousin Earl. When he complains that reporters and activists take the lyrics of “Cop Killer” literally by comparing himself to David Bowie, he is referencing Bowie’s 1969

⁹ Ice-T could have also mentioned the double standard that seems to be applied to him and the lyrical inspiration for “Cop Killer”: David Byrne and the rest of the members of Talking Heads were never accused of literally being the “psycho killer” their 1977 song of the same name depicts.

breakout hit, “Space Oddity,” a song that was released when Ice-T was 11 years old, the year before he moved to Los Angeles to live with his aunt and hang out with his cousin Earl. “Space Oddity” was—and has remained—a staple of rock radio stations for years after its release and could very well have been one of the songs that Earl and a young Ice-T heard on KMET and KLOS. In this song, Bowie sings in the first person from the perspective of both “Major Tom,” who blasts off into space and orbits the Earth, and “Ground Control” who directs the mission from Earth. The reporters Ice-T is making his case to are, presumably, White, and by name-checking a prominent White rock star, Ice-T is showing both his knowledge of this music and asking for the same kind of poetic license to depict general, if not literal, truths that listeners, critics, and reporters routinely give to White artists—and to artists involved in artistic forms other than hip-hop.¹⁰

Sounds of the 1970s: Questlove and Jay-Z

Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson is not a rapper, so the question of what the relationship is between his lyrics, his actual life experiences, and his life experiences as filtered through the genre of autobiography is not an issue. However, similar to what we have already seen from Ice-T, Questlove’s exposure to music from his family forms a key influence on his later musical career and he devotes extensive space to this topic in *Mo’ Meta Blues*. It is clear that his parents and other family members were an important influence on his early music development, a development that began, according to *Mo’ Meta Blues*, even before Questlove celebrated his first birthday. He was born in 1971 in West Philadelphia to what he describes as “this funky, hip, post-civil rights, post revolutionary bohemian black couple. They listened to all the cool music and wore all the cool clothes and had all the cool attitudes” (43). The first narrative chapter of the book contains a section in which he describes, year by year, albums that were influential to him growing up. His first entry is *Music of My Mind*, the album by Stevie Wonder: “I know this record was played right around the time of my birth, and for years after that. I encountered it very early, at a point when I was still judging records not by how they sounded but by how they looked” (25). His second entry, for 1972, is the Sly and the Family Stone record, *There’s a Riot Goin’ On*. For this album, though, he qualifies and explains his relationship to it. “Though it came out in 1971, I remember hearing this record in 1972” (26). Though I do not want to discount the possibility that Questlove actually remembers those records being played from when he was only a few months old, it seems more likely that they were in heavy rotation around his family’s turntable for years to come, and he is retrospectively

¹⁰ This is similar to Jay-Z’s complaint that the media does not expect Matt Damon, in his daily life, to participate in the activities of the fictional character he portrays in the Jason Bourne films.

pointing to their influence before he actually could have been conscious of and remembered them.

In addition to his parents, who were gigging musicians—and therefore had a professional interest in keeping up with the “cool music” of 1970s Black America—there were several other record collectors around his family, including his aunt and his older sister. While it is not hard to imagine a precocious Questlove taking over the family stereo (especially since he would later supplement his performing as a drummer for The Roots with frequent DJ gigs), he also would have had to share turntable time with these other listeners. No doubt his record selection was influenced by what records other family members had chosen to purchase and play at home, especially since he documents the struggle that he had scraping together money to buy new records as a kid. Still, this limitation ended up being productive, as he describes his mother’s taste and record-purchasing habits shaping his own later creative work: “As it turns out, many of those records [jazz-funk records from the 1970s] would be used as break beats in the future, so in a way it was an early education for my career in hip-hop ... I loved the way that music was the center of our house” (16-17). Though his parents strictly limited his television time, they did allow him to watch Don Cornelius’s *Soul Train*, which would become another key influence on his musical development and more evidence of the centrality of Black popular music from the 1970s in his household.

Recorded and commodified music was not the only source of music in Questlove’s early life. His musical development was also highly influenced by the live performances he participated in as a member of a band led by his father, Lee Andrews. In the 1950s, Andrews had been a singer and leader of the doo-wop group The Hearts.¹¹ The Hearts enjoyed a return of success in the 1970s as part of packaged revival circuit shows, with several groups all performing short sets of their hits. Andrews then decided to get off the revival circuit and put together his own, multi-set performances with members of his family playing supporting roles. Questlove began performing on the drums in his father’s band when he was only seven years old. As described in *Mo’ Meta Blues*, playing multiple sets of different styles of Black popular music on the road, while listening deeply to an eclectic range of music on the television and the turntable at home was clearly important for Questlove’s later omnivorous musical taste and creativity.

While live performance was not a part of Jay-Z’s childhood, *Decoded* goes into even more detail about the power of listening to records with his family during his youth. While much of his recorded output has examined the contrast between his childhood poverty growing up in the Marcy Projects and his current luxurious

¹¹ Their composition “Long Lonely Nights” reached #45 on the Billboard chart and was later covered by several other artists, including Clyde McPhatter, Bobby Vinton, and The Dells.

lifestyle, his autobiography makes it clear that he had a musically-rich upbringing. He begins his discussion of the role that music played in his youth by informing readers: "When I was a kid, my parents had, like, a million records stacked to the ceiling in metal milk crates" (254). In one of the most revealing passages in *Decoded*, he spends a great deal of time describing these records and how they functioned in his life. He first spends at least a third of a page just naming the records that his parents had:

I remember "Walking in Rhythm," by the Blackbyrds, "Love's Theme," by the Love Unlimited Orchestra, "Dancing Machine," by the Jackson 5, "Tell Me Something Good," by Rufus, "The Hustle," by Van McCoy and the Soul City Symphony, "Slippery When Wet," by the Commodores, "Pick up the Pieces," by the Average White Band, "It Only Takes a Minute," by Tavares, "(TSOP) The Sound of Philadelphia," by MFSB (Mother Father Sister Brother), the *Superfly* soundtrack by Curtis Mayfield, James Brown, Billy Paul, Honeycomb, Candi Staton, Rose Royce, the Staple Singers, the Sylvers, the O'Jays, Blue Magic, Main Ingredient, the Emotions, Chic, Heatwave, A Taste of Honey, Slave, Evelyn 'Champagne' King, Con Funk Shun (254).

Considering this list, he summarizes: "If it was hot in the seventies, my parents had it" (254). Of course, just having access to a library of records does not guarantee a career in hip-hop. Therefore, it is important that Jay-Z here talks about the meaning those records had for them, the significance of how they worked in his family life, and what he would do with them as an adult. He continues:

My parents would blast those classics when we did our Saturday cleanup and when they came home from work. We'd be dancing in the living room, making our own *Soul Train* line . . . My mother would play "Enjoy Yourself," by the Jacksons, and I would dance and sing and spin around. I'd make my sisters my backup singers. I remember those early days as the time that shaped my musical vocabulary. I remember the music making me feel good, bringing my family together, and more importantly, being a common passion my parents shared. That music from my childhood still lives in my music. From my very first album, a lot of the tracks I rapped over were built on a foundation of classic seventies soul. On *Reasonable Doubt* [Jay-Z's debut album, released in 1996], we sampled the Ohio Players, the Stylistics, Isaac Hayes, and the Four Tops. . . . I feel like we—rappers, DJs, producers—were able to smuggle some of the magic of that dying civilization out in our music and use it to build a new world. We were kids without fathers, so we found our fathers on wax and on the streets and in history, and in a way, that was a gift: We got to pick and choose the ancestors who would inspire the world we were going to make for ourselves . . . Rap took the remnants of a dying society

and created something anew. Our fathers were gone, usually because they just bounced, but we took their old records and used them to build something fresh (254-255).

I quote these excerpts from *Decoded* at length because they are one the most detailed examples of a very prominent hip-hop musician describing his musical upbringing. Jay-Z was born in 1969, whereas DJ Kool Herc was born in 1955, Afrika Bambaataa was born in 1957, Grandmaster Flash was born in 1958. For these earlier figures, the soul and funk recordings they played at parties in the 1970s was, for them, recent popular music. For a chronologically later artist like Jay-Z, this is music that he remembers from his childhood and which remained an important part of his life, but he still has enough distance from it to refer to it as “classic seventies soul.” He is not the owner of this music—“If it was hot in the seventies, my parents had it,” he writes—not *I had it* or even *we had it*. Numerous hip-hop songs have discussed the general importance of families—usually to praise mothers and to castigate absentee fathers, but in their autobiographies, Ice-T, Jay-Z, and Questlove all present detailed, compelling description of how family influenced their development and later careers, not just as men, or as figures involved in hip-hop culture, but specifically as musicians.

Ice-T, Jay-Z and Questlove describe a musical adolescence in the 1970s and 1980s built primarily around radio, vinyl records, live performance, and communal television watching. For hip-hop scholars, we can take a lesson from these autobiographies to look for how other hip-hop musicians may have been influenced by similar media consumption practices in family contexts. Additionally, given that media formats and consumption have changed dramatically in the decades since the time of these artists’ youth, we can focus in on these changes in formative musical environments as one possible explanation for new musical developments in hip-hop among younger artists.

Conclusion

The unreliability of memory, the necessarily incomplete record of the past presented through personal narratives and written texts, not to mention commercial concerns about self-presentation all testify to the fact that autobiographies are not going to unlock all of the secrets of hip-hop culture for fans, listeners, critics, or skeptics. Yet, I hope to have shown here that an analysis of hip-hop autobiographies can illuminate both oft-discussed and overlooked aspects of the musical genre of hip-hop and African American culture more generally. Hip-hop autobiographies provide crucial information about the importance of family in the creation of hip-hop culture—especially when hip-hop artists are often portrayed in media discourse in individualistic terms as either lone creative geniuses or crimi-

nal threats to a cohesive social order. Autobiographies by hip-hop musicians also function as another important textual arena in which Black individuals construct and grapple with notions of reality and subjectivity. These are only two of countless areas of inquiry as of yet unexplored; the corpus of hip-hop autobiographies is ripe for further analysis from scholars.

The first wave of hip-hop autobiographies has duplicated many of the well-known biases of the genre, particularly in that it has largely been male, heteronormative subjects who have been given the opportunity to write their autobiographies and distribute them through major publishing houses. In focusing on the work of Questlove, Ice-T, and Jay-Z, this essay also duplicates that bias. However, as hip-hop culture itself is slowly expanding the range of identities it allows and celebrates, it seems likely that the years to come will see the publication of more autobiographical texts by rappers, producers, DJs, and others associated with hip-hop— particularly from individuals inhabiting a more diverse range of subject positions, such as Nicki Minaj, Cardi B, or Lil Nas X. If so, that would certainly be a salutatory development for African American studies and scholars of hip-hop culture: the meaning of which is so complicated, multi-faceted, and quickly changing that we need all the sources we can get, and from as many different perspectives as possible, to help us understand it.

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“Cause that’s the way the world turns”: John Edgar Wideman’s *Sent for You Yesterday* and the Mnemonic Jukebox

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In 1959, shortly before commencing a prison stint for violating the Mann Act by allegedly transporting a minor across state lines for illicit purposes, Chuck Berry released his hit single “Back in the USA” on the legendary Chess label.¹ Reportedly (and ironically) inspired by the plight of the Aborigines Berry had witnessed during a tour of Australia earlier that year, the song kicks off with his signature guitar lick and expresses his relief at being “jet-propelled back home, from overseas to the USA” (Collis 92, 94; Pegg 111). Now that his yearning for the skylines of New York, Los Angeles, Detroit, Chicago—and, of course, for Berry’s hometown of St. Louis—has been stilled, he is “[l]ooking hard for a drive-in, searching for a corner café, / Where hamburgers sizzle on an open grill night and day— / Yeah, the jukebox jumping with records like in the USA.” The rock ‘n’ roll tumbling out of the speakers of the jukebox signifies unmistakably that Berry is home, finally: “Yes, I’m so glad I’m living in the USA. / Anything you want, we got right here in the USA.”

In many ways, John Edgar Wideman’s *Sent for You Yesterday*, the final installment in the Homewood trilogy, describes a homecoming, too—or, rather, several different homecomings. Doot is the novel’s central, organizing narrative consciousness (Beaulieu 84–88; Bennion 145–46). Twenty-nine years of age, college-educated, and a new father, Doot has returned to the East End neighborhood of Pittsburgh that lends Wideman’s Homewood series its title. Meeting on a Friday night with his uncle Carl French and Carl’s on-again, off-again girlfriend, Lucy Tate, in the Velvet Slipper, a neighborhood bar and social institution, Doot is listening to their stories, hoping to reconnect with his past (42). As he listens to Carl and Lucy’s reminiscences about Homewood, the three of them are engulfed by the sounds emanating from the Velvet Slipper’s jukebox. The call and response within and between the various stories Doot processes in his mind is echoed, embellished, and even initiated by an antiphonal soundtrack, ranging from the big band jazz of Count Basie to the soul music of Smokey Robinson & The Miracles. As Doot, Carl, Lucy, and the others recollect, recreate, and reimagine urban Homewood

¹ Ironically, the Mann Act was written into law to countermand “white slavery,” as it was then known (Collis 85, 100–3; Pegg 119–21). In his autobiography, Berry himself referred to the court proceedings as “the Indian trial,” presided over by the blatantly racist Judge George H. Moore (204–5). A much less egregious form of interstate and even international trafficking resulted in the Beatles’ 1968 hit single “Back in the USSR,” which was in part a parody/homage to Berry’s song.

and its denizens, inspired by the music that they hear, they ultimately re-member from mnemonic fragments how Doot’s nickname and past are both intricately intertwined with recorded sound.

Recorded music resonates within a suspension of time—or, more precisely, the spiral grooves of records revive a past event in the present, a repeatable action that riffs, however briefly, upon the (ostensibly) linear progression of history. This dialectic is also intimately related to the storytelling of Wideman’s characters as well as the structure of the novel itself. When Lucy accuses Carl of “talking in circles,” his defiant reply is:

That’s right. Cause that’s the way the world turns. Circles and circles and circles inside circles. Don’t you understand nothing, woman? Doot don’t make me feel old. Don’t make me feel young neither, sitting there with children when I remember him in diapers. Point is I can see him back then just as plain as I see him now and it don’t make no difference. Just a circle going round and round so you getting closer while you getting further away and further while you’re getting closer. (118)

This seemingly paradoxical dynamic of Carl’s circular storytelling, simultaneously compressing and distending time and distance, delineates also the structure of the novel as a whole. Moreover, the narrative spins are analogous to the path of the needle in the groove of the record rotating inside the Velvet Slipper’s jukebox during this very conversation: the further away the needle gets from the edge of the record, the closer it moves to the center. But what resides at the center of the record that the needle inexorably approaches is, ultimately, silence—unless, that is, Cat the bartender puts another coin in the jukebox, pushes another combination of buttons, and plays another song: “The music sucking up people’s quarters could kick down a door. Loud enough to drown the noise of trains crossing Homewood Avenue. Like they fighting a war to see which instrument could kill all the others. And if your horn ain’t tooting loud enough you scream and holler or blow a police whistle in your microphone. Mize well snap your fingers and tap your toes. Try to ignore it and it’d tear your head off” (107). And so, Carl and Lucy exhort the bartender, “Put a quarter in the box, Cat. Yeah, Cat. Drop some change in that thing. Play something got that old-time swing to it” (103).

For Carl and Lucy to be able to recall and retell the meaning of Doot’s name, spurred on by “that old-time swing,” they must first also re-call the stories of many other Homewood residents, stories that oscillate between the legendary and the banal, the tragic and the funny, the despairing and the redemptive—blues stories. Among the stories recounted amidst the din of the Velvet Slipper’s jukebox are those of Brother Tate, the reticent albino who rechristened Doot, and of mysterious Albert Wilkes, the musical hero of Homewood. But that evening in 1970 when Doot

returns to the old neighborhood and the Velvet Slipper, he only remembers that it was Brother who gave him his nickname, who never spoke a single word in all the years Doot knew him, but who “would scat sing and imitate all the instruments in a band. When Brother was around you didn’t need a radio” (16). One day in the Frenchs’ kitchen, he was entertaining himself as was his wont, humming, scatting, finger-drumming “all the good songs you’d ever heard and make up plenty nobody ever heard before,” and when the youngest member of the household dropped in to see what was going on, “*Doot* was what he christened me, tickling a riff with his hard blunt fingers on my ribs. . . . So I’m linked to Brother Tate by stories, by his memories of a dead son, by my own memories of a silent, scat-singing albino man who was my uncle’s best friend” (16, 17). The exact significance of his rechristening eludes Doot, and that his why, almost three decades later, he has come to the Velvet Slipper, to reminisce with Uncle Carl and Lucy, Brother’s adopted sister.

From them, he learns that Brother had actually channeled his musical genius somehow from the late Albert Wilkes: one Saturday night at the Elks Club with Lucy and Carl, Brother simply got up from their table during intermission, sat down at the piano, and began to play, and play just like Wilkes used to, with his style, his motifs, his signature licks. The transmigration of musical genius from Albert Wilkes to Brother Tate constitutes an act of reification beyond sound itself, for Wilkes’s piano was a node of identification for the entire Homewood neighborhood: “When Albert on that piano it was like a mirror anyway,” for in his music, “you could find yourself, find your face grinning back at you like in a mirror” (68). Thus, it simply “[w]ouldn’t be Homewood if you couldn’t hear Albert’s music when you walking down the street” (70). Resuscitated by Brother, Wilkes’s piano jazz serves as the sonic signifier of Homewood, even beyond its originator’s death. For Lucy, Wilkes’s music, and by extension Brother’s too, is “so familiar because everything she’s ever heard is in it, all the songs and voices she’s ever heard, but everything is new and fresh because his music joined things, blended them so you follow one note and then it splits and shimmers and spills the thousand things it took to make the note whole, the silences within the note, the voices and songs” (189). This music, therefore, is perhaps the ultimate expression of the struggle to wrest beauty and wholeness from the centrifugal forces of modern existence. Or, as saxophonist Steve Lacy once put it, “A jazz musician”—much like Wilkes or Brother—“is a combination orator, dialectician, mathematician, shaman, athlete, entertainer, poet, singer, dancer, diplomat, educator, student, comedian, artist, seducer, public masturbator, and general all-around good fellow” (qtd. in Williams).

Yet unlike Lacy, for all we know (as the song goes), neither Albert Wilkes nor Brother Tate ever recorded. In fact, Doot cannot remember Brother the pianist

at all, for the albino stopped playing and talking altogether five short years later, after the death of his baby son, and Doot was born too late to hear Albert Wilkes himself. Yet Brother and, by extension, Wilkes are so integral to his nickname and hence to his very identity that tales of their music are essential to his own sense of wholeness and self: “One day in one of the stories I’m sure someone will tell me, I did hear Brother play. . . . One day I’ll be in the Tates’ living room listening. And I’ll hear Brother. I’ll hear Albert Wilkes” (93).² In the absence of these two musical mainstays, and after the city “urban renewed” the Homewood neighborhood of old by 1970, it falls on the “old-time swing” reverberating inside the Velvet Slipper and enveloping Carl and Lucy’s narratives to provide a node of identification (23). According to James Coleman, “the animating, unifying spirit of music” in Wideman’s novel is “transferred back and forth over the generations. It is ever alive, in the past as a repository upon which those in the present can draw; at times when the spirit abates in the present, it flows back to its repository in the past, waiting to be drawn upon later” (*Blackness* 99). And indeed, the 45s spinning inside the jukebox, in helping to recuperate individual and collective memories, call forth that “animating, unifying spirit” that has lain dormant in Homewood since the passing of Albert Wilkes and Brother Tate: the spiraling grooves of the records inside the jukebox are, of course, centripetal, and therefore quite literally sound a counterpoint to the otherwise centrifugal forces of modernity. Here, the spiral cut into the vinyl becomes something like a Benjaminian eddy that “sucks into its rhythm the very materials forming the process of origination” (Benjamin, *Ursprung* 28; Grandt “Sound” 137-40). The ability to conserve, shape, and regulate the passage of time, to project a voice, an artistic self, across geographical and temporal boundaries, that the means of technological reproducibility afford results in the creation of new identities, new authenticities—or, in this case, newly affirmed identities and authenticities.

Carl dimly recalls that Doot’s initiation into the Homewood community came after Lucy had purchased a record by Jimmy Rushing and brought it over to play it on the Frenchs’ Victrola, though he cannot remember the particular song. Later on in the evening, Lucy leaves the Velvet Slipper to cook for the two men when she suddenly recollects that December day in 1941, where everyone gathered at the French home to listen to news reports on the radio of the Japanese attack on the naval base at Pearl Harbor. Scared to listen to bulletin after alarming bulletin by herself, she too went over to the Frenchs’ and must have taken her newly acquired recording along with her. Doot, barely six months old but instantly infected by the

² The character of Brother Tate embodies a recurrent narrative strategy in Wideman’s oeuvre, namely one that Yves-Charles Grandjeat has termed “the br/other figure,” which, in a sense, is Wideman’s transliteration of the compositional technique of musical counterpoint—or, indeed, of the African American musical ritual of call and response (615-18). See also Guzzio (191-93).

groove, recoiled from Lucy's arms and attempted to dance by himself: "*Sent for you yesterday, and here you come today*. Not Dinah or Billie or Ella or Sarah. Had to be, who else could it be, Jimmy Rushing. Mr. Four by Four backed up by Count Basie. Jimmy Rushing out front. And fine as wine the Prez and Sweets and Jo Jo and Dicky, the whole shiny band, fine as wine and sharp as tacks, pressed clean in tuxedos and white-on-white wedges splitting the elegant back. No wonder little Doot got up and tried his wings" (202).

Lucy's memory here is not quite accurate in two minor respects: Jimmy Rushing was known as "Mr. Five-by-five," a complimentary nickname often given to plus-sized gentlemen (Ellison 46). Trombonist Dicky Wells would join the Basie outfit only later that year and was not yet present at the February 16, 1938, recording session that produced "*Sent for You Yesterday*"; Lester "Prez" Young, Harry "Sweets" Edison, and "Papa" Jo Jones, however, were already established stars in the band (Visser 43). But what is at issue in Wideman's novel is not the accuracy of memory, but how memory works. In the scene Lucy remembers, Doot actually reenacts the very aspect of the art form that intrigued Rushing's friend Ralph Ellison so: "It was when Jimmy's voice began to soar with the spirit of the blues that the dancers—and the musicians—achieved that feeling of communion which was the true meaning of the public jazz dance" (46). Significantly, Ellison made this observation in what originally was not an essay, but a review of seven recently released Jimmy Rushing recordings.

The glorious wall of sound produced by the Count Basie Orchestra featuring Jimmy Rushing on their recording of the Eddie Durham composition "*Sent for You Yesterday (And Here You Come Today)*" not only lends the novel its title, but orchestrates little Doot's initiation as a member of the Homewood community; Doot's impulse to dance before he could even walk that occurred contemporaneously with Brother's sudden channeling of Albert Wilkes's piano virtuosity also situates his nickname within a meaningful context, imbuing both sign and sound with cultural meaning. *Doot* is therefore not just a sound, but the sonic synchronization of signifier and signified. It was, we recall, the scat-singing Brother who named Doot; Jimmy Rushing never scatted (at least not on record). However, the distinction is irrelevant as far as Doot is concerned: toddler that he is when he first hears the blues shouter deliver his tale of woe, he is reacting to language as pure sound, not as a chain of signifiers, and his dancing thus serves to, as Roland Barthes might put it, "displace the fringe of contact between music and language" (181).

The song itself adheres to the classic blues formula in all respects. The lyrics reference all the elements of the traditional blues narrative: loneliness, night, and love gone wrong. The singer chides his lover, "*Sent for you yesterday, and here you*

come today. / You can't knock me, baby, treating me that way." And yet the lyrics speak to the dynamic of mnemonic time and distance: as the record is spinning on the turntable, the circular narrative of fulfillment—the singer's lover has returned after all, fittingly by train—is simultaneously accompanied by the linear narrative of distance—her return comes much too late. Much like Uncle Carl's "talking in circles," Doot's (and the novel's) memory at once collapses distance and enhances it, just like the recording does. The Homewood that the memories of Doot, Carl, and Lucy re-member through "Sent for You Yesterday" exists in a "strange web of space and time: a unique appearance of distance, however close it may be," to borrow Walter Benjamin's apt conceit ("Kleine" 297). Much like the indifferent lover Jimmy Rushing scolds in his song, the memories that the trio gathered at the Velvet Slipper conjures up are too close to grasp, but too far away to lose.

This paradoxical dynamic is resonating in the performance of the song itself. Recorded on February 16, 1938 (which is the version Lucy would have purchased), the Count Basie Orchestra takes the song at the sprightly clip of ca. 164 beats per minute, and the arrangement makes Rushing's persona sound more indignant than moping. In fact, the song kicks off with a call and response chorus between the brass stating the simple riff melody and Earl Warren's alto saxophone providing the extemporized commentary. Then the bandleader himself supplies one of his characteristically sparse piano solos for one chorus before handing off to tenor saxophonist Herschel Evans, Pres's great rival in the Basie organization. Only then does Jimmy Rushing, "the natural herald of . . . blues romance" as Ellison referred to him, finally have his great entrance, as if to emphasize his persona's agonizing wait for his lover (44). Singing only two stanzas—Durham's original version has four—Rushing's irritation is affirmed by the trumpet of Harry "Sweets" Edison, who has nothing 'sweet' to say about Rushing's lover in his solo chorus either. Two more choruses of call and response between the brass and the woodwind sections are accentuated by Jo Jones's drum fills, all confirming Rushing's outrage over his lover's indifference.³

As a blues, "Sent for You Yesterday" therefore underscores the genre's aesthetic, one that explores the dialectic of joy and sadness, time and distance, love and loss (Grandt, *Shaping* 75-84). In Wideman's novel, memory—both individual and collective—is propelled by a very similar dialectic. That a recording not only gives the book its title, but is intricately intertwined with the mnemonic recovery of the narrator's identity, clearly indicates the central role technologies of sound reproduction play. In fact, Doot's narrative is somewhat akin to the Velvet Slipper's jukebox: it, too, plays different songs, tells different stories, extemporizing a larger

³ For a thorough musicological analysis of "Sent for You Yesterday," see Monson (34-44); see also Muyumba (341-44).

score that can be surprising, sometimes confusing, and even contradictory at times. Doot's mind—or, rather, the narrative consciousness of the novel itself—is like a mnemonic jukebox, reshuffling seemingly at random different stories from different timeframes. Some of these songs are familiar, old, and worn, some others entirely new. Some lead harmoniously to the next selection, others create a jarring and unsettling contrast. In this sense, the jukebox is the extension of the music itself: listening to jazz, Steve Lacy pointedly remarked, was akin to “watching the process of creation . . . actually watching someone think in front of you and communicating with his fellow beings” (qtd. in Gitler). But, like a real jukebox, Doot's memory is subject to ‘programming’ too, in this case by Carl and Lucy and their recollections of Homewood and its denizens. And like with a real jukebox, the mnemonic selections are not infinite: Cat, one would think, is savvy enough an entrepreneur to understand that his customers might very well dig Chuck Berry, but probably not Lawrence Welk.

And so, one recurrent selection that the mnemonic jukebox of Lucy, Carl, and Doot's narrative consciousness makes is the song that haunted Albert Wilkes during his seven years on the run, a song about Homewood “too big to ever play through, to ever finish. For seven years he had recalled phrases, chords, runs, teasing little bits and pieces reminding him of what he was missing. And he had expected the song to dance out and just about knock him down when he returned. He wanted to feel happy, to feel good, to hear the music rushing through him again. Wanted it in his fingers and toes so he could reach up and snatch that pale moon and shake it like a tambourine” (58). Like Lucy and Brother, Wilkes was one of the Homewood “strays” taken in by the Tates (39). The elderly couple had a piano in their living room, and it is there where Albert Wilkes had honed his chops, and it is there where he is irresistibly drawn to seven years later, to finally play the song that has been in him for all this time. But it is also there, sitting on the bench of the Tates' piano, presumably in the middle of his ode to Homewood, that he is murdered.

Wilkes had to flee Homewood in 1927 after killing the policeman-husband of his white lover—in self-defense, or so most in the neighborhood insist. Returning to his old stomping grounds in 1934 after seven years on the run, he remembers the Tates, his adoptive parents, and little Lucy:

A darkness aglow with snow. Snow beginning in the morning and still falling that night seven years before when he had fled. White piling up in the darkness, the darkness shining. Old Mr. Tate in his stocking cap. Lucy's walleied teddy bear in the rocking chair. They were his audience when he sat down at the Tate's piano and played those last few licks he had to hit before he left town. One more time. Somebody had named

the notes, but nobody had named the silence between the notes. The emptiness, the space waiting for him that night seven years ago. Nobody would ever name it because it was emptiness and silence and the notes they named, the notes he played were just a way of tipping across it, of pretending you knew where you were, where you were going. Like his footprints in the snow that night. Like the trail he tramped that was covered over as quickly as he made it. (54-55)

The dialectic between silence and sound in Wilkes’s playing, a music that seeks to name, and thus fill, “the silence between the notes,” anticipates Uncle Carl’s circular storytelling, with its paradoxical dialectic of distance and closeness.⁴ And if music is the embellishment of time passing by, then it is no wonder that upon his return to Homewood after such a long time, Wilkes soon finds himself at the piano in the Tates’ house, so he can “begin playing the seven years away” (60). Unfortunately though, the police are tipped off to his whereabouts, and Albert Wilkes is shot and killed sitting on the bench of the Tates’ piano.

The recurrent color imagery of the black and ivory piano keys thus also echoes the dialectic between music and identity: as John French remembers, “When Albert stopped playing you could look down at your toes and see that black pit start to open. See your crusty toes dug in at the edge of nothing” (69). If music is life, then silence is death. But the novel’s black-and-white imagery is more ambiguous than binary, and is in itself unstable. We recall, for example, that Brother is an albino who hardly ever speaks and stops talking entirely after the death of his baby son, and who eventually commits suicide by playing one last deadly game of chicken with an oncoming train—and yet, it is the same Brother who gives life to Doot’s nickname and hence to his very identity, and who also resuscitates the music of

⁴ The silent spots Wilkes strives to fill with music are tellingly reminiscent of the African American oral tradition and how it deploys what DoVeanna Fulton has termed “strategic silence”: Fulton argues that in many early African American texts, particularly those of women, silence is not just the lot of the mute, the invisible, the anonymous, the objectified; quite often, these authors also recognize that in certain contexts, silence has the potential to convey meaning and even self-empowerment (61-68). Fulton’s analyses conclude that “Black women writers at the turn of the nineteenth century used strategic silence as a form of orality in fictionalized narratives to assert Black women’s and men’s claims to womanhood and manhood, respectively, in a period of intense racial violence and denial of their humanity” (124). In black women’s texts of the late twentieth century, strategically deployed silence as an element of orality is often explicitly linked to blues and jazz (despite the latter’s latent hyper-masculinity), two musics which, after all, constitute very much ‘oral’ modes of communication, as both defy the notational capabilities of the musical staff (124). Count Basie was one pianist famous for deploying silence strategically in his solos—although Basie was first and foremost a musician, not an activist of the caliber of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and many others (Grandt, *Shaping* 1-2). Moreover, the various descriptions of Wilkes’s playing in *Sent for You Yesterday* sometimes recall Basie, sometimes Art Tatum, whose mind-boggling virtuosity puts him very much at the opposite end of the improvisational spectrum.

Albert Wilkes. Also, the white snow that announces Albert Wilkes's impending death at the hands of police and the concomitant silencing of this crucial voice of communal identification, and the skull fragment of white bone Lucy keeps after she cleaned up the gory scene, foreshadows the black 'snow' of John French's record collection being destroyed.

After the death of her foster parents, Lucy inherits the Tates' home on Tioga Street but turns it into a flop house for drug addicts. Suffering from shell-shock after his return from the Pacific theater of war, Carl falls prey to heroin too and moves his father's record collection to Lucy's house. One day, an addict named Rodney Jones decides it might be fun to destroy the recordings and starts to throw them around the living room:

None of the others in the room seem to mind. Aren't bothered by the huge black snowflakes twisting around their heads. Maybe if she listens hard enough she will hear the tunes. Maybe Rodney found a new way to play John French's records. As they rotate, they magically unravel music into the air. The room crisscrossed with music, with flying songs like a net. She thinks she can hear them, the songs rushing past like the clickedy-clack steel wheels of a locomotive, all the music stored in the records exploding like a train does when it's dropped on the tracks and swallows you and then is gone. She thinks of broken pieces. Of the mess Rodney Jones is making. She knows someone will have to clean it up. Albert Wilkes sat on the wall and Albert Wilkes had a great fall. And she will have to find every piece. Dig them out of the dirt. Every splinter of shattered egg. The white pieces and the black pieces. . . (206)

Lucy is remembering this scene while she waits for Carl and Doot to arrive from the Velvet Slipper and join her for dinner. But Lucy's remembrances of loss, death, silence, and suffering also suggests that the records are not memories themselves. In keeping with Wideman's symbolic duality, recording technology earlier in the novel is also shown to accompany not loss and destruction, but life and love—and once again, this duality is orchestrated to the tune of black and white.

Brother, the albino with ghostly-white skin, falls in love with Samantha, the urban Homewood version of the earth mother figure, who has jet-black skin. Ordinarily, "Samantha slept only with the blackest men. Men black as she was because in her Ark she wanted pure African children" (134). But she finds herself irresistibly drawn to Brother and invites him in one afternoon. There is a record—we are not told which—on the Victrola in her Ark (which is what she calls her dilapidated shanty), and Samantha can hear "the scratchy drag of the needle hiss like a match against stone before the music begins" that serves as the prelude to their lovemaking (133). That afternoon, Junebug is conceived to the tune of

Samantha's record player. Similarly, precisely because the means of technological reproducibility manufacture a mass product, the memories connected to John French's record collection are not subject to its destruction. Recording technology manufactures easily replaceable products; these products, in turn, can allow for the temporary suspension of the passage of time, and it is this suspension that enables individual memory to bridge past, present, and future in a potentially harmonious way.

The novel's final paragraph, though tinged with loss and nostalgia as well, ultimately emphasizes how the means of technological reproducibility are instrumental for the recuperation of redemptive memory:

Then we are back in the Tates' living room and Lucy finishes the story and says, The song you danced to was "Sent for you yesterday, and here you come today." Then she turns on the FM. Not jazz and not blues and not rock and roll but it's Black music. Not fast and not slow, a little of both. The off-speed of Smokey Robinson on "Tracks of my Tears." Brother Tate appears in the doorway. He's grinning his colorless grin and pointing at the piano and Albert Wilkes starts unsnapping the duster and aiming his behind for the piano bench. I know how good it's going to sound so I start moving to the music coming from the radio. I know Albert Wilkes will blow me away so I start loosening up, getting ready. I'm on my feet and Lucy says, *Go boy* and Carl says, *Get it on, Doot*. Everybody joining in now. All the voices. I'm reaching for them and letting them go. Lucy waves. I'm on my own feet. Learning to stand, to walk, learning to dance. (207-8)

The record playing on the radio at once collapses and extends time, just like the 45s inside the Velvet Slipper's jukebox, just like the lyrics and music of "Sent for You Yesterday." The means of technological reproducibility, curling time back on itself, summon the spirits of Brother Tate and Albert Wilkes. And so, Doot's mnemonic jukebox revives the past in the present, turning blue(s) stories into redemptive sound. In doing so, he reaffirms in the end his placement in the black American musical tradition represented by the transmigrating playing of Wilkes, and validates Brother Tate's scatting (Coleman, *Writing* 108). Given the stylistic breadth of the music referenced—from "Sent for You Yesterday" to "The Tracks of My Tears"—this last paragraph is also constitutes a literary transposition of what Amiri Baraka called "the blues continuum": "as the developing strata of the city emphasized, the blues could extend in a kind of continuum from rhythm & blues all the way back to country blues. In the cities all these forms sat side by side in whatever new confusion urban life offered, and the radio made them all equally of the moment" (173). The Miracles' hit record being played on the radio in this final

scene fulfills the same function as Cat's jukebox in the Velvet Slipper and John's Victrola in the French home. Once again, technologies of sound reproduction prove essential to the recovery of a communal, whole self. Or, as Alexander Weheliye puts it, "the spatialities resulting from the juxtaposition of *consuming* sonic technologies and *being consumed* by them suggests specifically modern ways of be(com)ing in the world" (107).

One seemingly ancillary selection *Sent for You Yesterday's* mnemonic jukebox makes—or, rather, a recurrent motif or riff sounding from several different selections—proves crucial in the re-membering of Doot and even Homewood itself. That riff is the minor character of Strayhorn, who appears fewer than half a dozen times in the book, and whose voice we never hear, but who is in many ways the catalyst for all the stories connected to Doot's nickname and revolving on the turntable of memory. Just as Brother, Lucy, and Carl were inseparable growing up in Homewood, so were John French (Carl's father), Albert Wilkes, and Strayhorn. According to John's aunt Anaydee, these three were "the biggest devils ever run these Homewood streets. . . . Know they just looking for devilment. But they could sing. Yes, Lawd, those boys could sing. Ain't gon tell no lie" (51).⁵ John and

⁵ It is important to note, though, that Freeda's epistemology is the obverse of Doot's: as far as she is concerned, "living was learning to forget," and "if she was Freeda French, it had nothing to do with memories she could line up" (32). Given music's mnemonic powers, it is no wonder then that the only solace she finds in song is when she is at church, and even that solace is often tempered by "[t]empest, trial and toil and snare and miring clay" that she also hears in religious hymns (33). To her, Homewood was a "nice" neighborhood once, before the latest wave of migrants from the rural South and their "[l]oud talk and nasty talk and country ways and half-naked little children, like people in the jungle," undermined its respectability (41). The most disturbing element these unwashed hordes bring with them is their music. It seems to Freeda that every family moving onto her street arrives with a

Victrola playing for the whole block as if everybody wanted to listen to nastiness about my man done gone and left me and good jelly rolls and if you don't like my peaches don't shake my tree. Bad enough the children and any decent folk walk by the Bucket of Blood can't help hearing that terrible mess they always singing and playing round there. Now it wasn't a question of detouring bad places like the Bucket of Blood because the music was everywhere. If you couldn't hear it you could see it. In those funky undershirts the men rolled down off their chests and let dangle around their hips like raggedy skirts. In the way the young girls switched their narrow fannies and the old big-butt ones stood wide-legged, hands on hips shouting back and forth across the alley, putting their business in the street like it was everybody's and nobody's. The music was everywhere. Sneaks in like a stray alleycat and hides in your house just waiting for a chance to slink out and take over. Like the wine bottles John French hid in the cupboards and drawers. And worst of all, that low down, down home stuff had crawled inside her. Messed with the way she walked and talked and thought about things. (42)

The moral decay and looseness Freeda perceives in the music of the southern transplants she projects onto Albert Wilkes, the representative figure of the next development in the musical Great Migration, jazz. See also Muyumba (345-7).

Strayhorn are known to be "patrolling the alleys behind the white folks' houses," where they often 'find' things. One day, Freeda, John's wife, is mortified to see the two inebriated men pulling Carl's children's wagon over the cobblestone street in the summer heat, hauling a massive Victrola Strayhorn spotted, "[d]ials and fancy trim and shiny wood panels without even a smidgen of dust" (43). Even Strayhorn and John, tipsy as they are, question if the apparatus will work, and are surprised to find that it is fully operational; all they have to do is insert a new needle, and they even discover an unopened pack under the Victrola's lid. It is this very same Victrola that becomes the center of the French household, where little Doot finds his "wings" listening to "Sent for You Yesterday" and confirms his initiation into the community's membership. Strayhorn is not only responsible for bringing the phonograph into the French home: we later learn that he also drove the truck carrying the piano for the Tates' living room—the same piano on which Albert Wilkes practiced his art, and the same piano at which he was sitting when the police found and killed him (162).

Thus, the seemingly ancillary character of Strayhorn turns out to be the catalyst to many of the stories revolving around Doot's nickname. Without Strayhorn's Victrola, Doot would not be Doot; without Strayhorn's piano, the stories of Albert Wilkes and Brother Tate—and therefore the story of Homewood—would be different, too. What the pack of needles found under the lid is to John French's new Victrola, Strayhorn is to *Sent for You Yesterday*. His barely visible but absolutely essential character is Wideman's homage to the actual Homewood's greatest musical hero, Billy Strayhorn. Though William "Billy" Thomas Strayhorn was born in Dayton, Ohio, in 1915, his family soon moved to the Pittsburgh area. In 1926, the Strayhorns settled into a single-family home on 7212 Tioga Street Rear, in the Homewood district. Strayhorn later remembered that the earliest and most profound musical influences were the long summers he would spend with his grandmother in Hillsborough, North Carolina, listening to spirituals on her Victrola and picking out hymns on her parlor piano (Hajdu 6-11). A musical prodigy, young Billy aspired to be a classical concert pianist, an avenue not open to African Americans in the Jazz Age. But he was accepted into Pittsburgh's prestigious George Westinghouse High School—the same school that produced two other great pianists, Errol Garner and Ahmad Jamal (né Fritz Jones). Strayhorn's composing and arranging skills came to the attention of Duke Ellington, who recruited him in 1938 and brought him to New York City. Until his early death in 1967, Strayhorn served as Ellington's collaborator, arranger, composer, and amanuensis. The Duke himself described his partner as "my right arm, my left arm, all the eyes in the back of my head, my brain waves in his head, and his in mine" (156). Most famous for composing the Duke Ellington Orchestra's theme song, "Take the 'A' Train," Strayhorn's collaborations with his boss were so seamless that musicologists are

still assessing which elements of Ellington's oeuvre actually came from Strayhorn, a matter complicated by the fact that Ellington would often and freely take full credit for the work of his arranger and (co-)composer.⁶ Though a prolific songwriter and arranger as well as a virtuoso pianist, Strayhorn himself rarely took the stage and recorded only very sporadically, the full magnitude of his contributions all but invisible to the audience.

His namesake in Wideman's novel, though not a pianist himself, is single-handedly responsible for much of the music that defines Homewood and its people—no surprise, given that in "Daddy Garbage," the second story in *Damballah*, we are told that Strayhorn has "scavenging, hard hands that had been everywhere, touched everything" (34). By bringing the Victrola to the Frenchs' home and the piano to the Tates' living room in *Sent for You Yesterday*, Strayhorn is the catalyst for the music that comes to shape Doot's identity as well as that of his community. Moreover, Cassina Way, where Doot is raised, is in the back of Tioga Street—Tioga Street Rear, in other words, coinciding with young Billy's home address. The Tates, where Lucy and Brother grow up and where Wilkes practices his piano, live nearby, on more prestigious Tioga Street proper (20-21). But like Ellington's collaborator, Wideman's Strayhorn remains almost entirely invisible, appearing but five times, and briefly at that, in the reminiscences of the novel's principal characters. Thus, the character Strayhorn is given very much the same role that Billy Strayhorn played for the Duke Ellington Orchestra: both Strayhorns remain in the background, but both Strayhorns are crucial catalysts for the artistry in and of Wideman's book and Duke Ellington's orchestra respectively.

Because we catch nary a glimpse of Strayhorn the literary character in the novel, we do not know if he shared Lucy's adoration for Jimmy Rushing. Either way, in his review of seven compilation LPs just released under Rushing's name, Ralph Ellison concluded that "[c]ertainly this collection of discs will make us aware that there is emotional continuity in American life, and that the abiding moods expressed in our most vital popular art form are not simply a matter of entertainment; they also tell us who and where we are" (49). We don't know either if the jukebox in the Velvet Slipper ever played Chuck Berry's "Back in the USA" during Doot's nostalgia-tinged homecoming (although we do know that Ellison, for one, would not have approved at all). But *Sent for You Yesterday* resonates with

⁶ However, Ellington's relationship with Strayhorn was far from exploitative. Strayhorn was openly gay, and his association with Ellington afforded him both the privacy and the freedom to live his life as he wanted (Hadju 79-80, 19, 24).

the power of African American musics across time and genres.⁷ For Wideman, the African American tradition in general “seems to have a way that, yes, you can come back home again. If you tell your stories in a certain fashion, we’ll help you tell them, they’ll be ours, we’ll reclaim them” (qtd. in Coleman, *Blackness* 156). Music was “magical,” he asserted; “the music is the pulse, the rhythm, the force, the expression

⁷ In fact, Chuck Berry’s “Back in the USA” is the perfect sonic illustration of Baraka’s blues continuum. Released originally as Chess 1729, “Back in the USA” features Berry together, once again, with drummer Fred Below, pianist Johnnie Johnson, and, most notably, bassist Willie Dixon. Mississippi native Dixon was the house composer-arranger at Chess and in large part responsible for the success of such blues luminaries as Sonny Boy Williamson (II), Bo Diddley, Buddy Guy, Koko Taylor, or Howlin’ Wolf. Dixon penned the classic “Hoochie Coochie Man” for Muddy Waters, a song since covered by pretty much everyone from Supertramp to Motörhead. Below had honed his chops with jazz great Lester Young, Johnson with Bobby Troup. On this session, Berry was accompanied for the first time also by a vocal group, which included then almost completely unknown Etta James as well as an eighteen-year-old Marvin Gaye (Rothwell 75-79). Confirming Baraka’s blues continuum, Dixon insists that “For my money, Chuck was the first actual rock ‘n’ roller. I felt that all the others took after him. . . . I can give you a little insight into why Bill Haley and Elvis Presley got all the credit for beginning rock ‘n’ roll. Chuck was in one vein of blues and some radio stations just didn’t consider playing blues. At the time, the majority of the people got it in their minds they didn’t want the black man’s music to move and blues is the black man’s music” (91-92). Moreover, insists Dixon, “All the guitar players now that do tricks with their guitars, they’re either doing Chuck Berry or Buddy [Guy]” (111). As for Berry himself, he said à propos his most famous hit song that chronicled the career of a rambling musician very much reminiscent of a latter-day Albert Wilkes:

As it turned out, my name was in lights and it is a fact that “Johnny B. Goode” is most instrumental in causing it to [be]. I have many times said and now again say “Thanks” though I could never voice it loud enough to equal the appreciation that so many people have claimed to have enjoyed from something that I created. I imagine most black people naturally realize but I feel safe in stating that NO white person can conceive the feeling of obtaining Caucasian respect in the wake of a world of dark denial, simply because it is impossible to view the dark side when faced with brilliance. “Johnny B. Goode” was created as all other things and brought out of a modern dark age. With encouragement he chose to practice, shading himself along the roadside but seen by the brilliance of his guitar playing. Chances are you have talent. But will the name and the light come to you? No! You have to “Go!” (157-58).

Berry was inspired to write “Johnny B. Goode” after stopping in the Crescent City—perhaps not quite coincidentally the mythical cradle of jazz—on tour and learning that his great-grandfather had lived “Deep down in Loosiana close to New Orleans, / Way back up in the woods among the evergreens” in “a log cabin made of earth and woods.” As he wrote in his autobiography, “I revived the era with a story about a ‘colored boy name Johnny B. Goode.’ My first thought was to make his life follow as my own had come along, but I thought it would seem biased to white fans to say ‘colored boy’ and changed it to ‘country boy’” (157). At the same time, the advent of rock ‘n’ roll was critically influenced by developments in recording technology, particularly the advent of tape recording. In his autobiography, Berry claims that the catalyst for his songwriting was the purchase of a used reel-to-reel magnetic wire recorder (Berry 87). And the famous songwriting team of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller—the brains behind such classics as “Hound Dog” or “Yakety Yak”—once quipped, “We didn’t write songs . . . we wrote records” (qtd. in Miklitsch 54).

of the entire culture” (qtd. in Coleman, *Blackness* 154-55). Music’s redemptive powers are enhanced significantly by the ability of the technological means of sound reproduction to at once elongate and contract time. The mnemonic jukebox that is *Sent for You Yesterday* orchestrates a communal, integrative spirit that enlists recording technologies as constitutive of the humanity of the characters. And as long as the jukebox, mnemonic or digitized and reincarnated as an MP3 player, keeps jumping with records like in the USA—pace Ellison—Wideman’s novel tells us, through Samantha, that “of course blackness would keep on keeping on to the farthest frontiers. Cross mountains and prairies and sea. Boogey to the stars, to Leptomeninges, that striped, tiger-colored planet broadcasting jazz into the vast silence of the Milky Way. Blackness something to do with long journeys, and eyes, and being at the vibrating edge of things” (136).

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Commentary on Why Pedagogy Attention Is Needed in CLAJ

Monique Akassi

In 2021, many educators and students of African descent have faced invisible barriers. These include whether critical race theory should be taught in schools during the novel Covid-19. Additionally, the #BlackLivesMatter movement responded to the ongoing routine of African Americans losing their lives during a time that mimics W.E.B. Du Bois' declaration that "the problem of the twentieth century is the color line." While the debates continue in higher education, a plethora of pedagogues have become disconnected from students of African descent due to a lack of effective Africana pedagogies to cultivate pupils' authentic voices through critical thinking, writing, oral communication, and research skills.

Indeed, many pedagogues have been trained to apply mainstream pedagogical frameworks to all students as a one-size-fits-all approach. At the same time, little attention is focused on the rhetorical situation, such as the target audience. Indeed, a one-size-fits-all approach often results in many mainstream students benefiting from high-impact teaching methodologies that intersect with their Western culture. However, there is a disconnection for many marginalized students of African descent. Systemic racism is on the rise, and the colonizer is often in the classroom during these unprecedented times. Furthermore, the politics of diversity, inclusion, and critical race theory are in conversation with Stanley Fish's arguments. He contends in his controversial book, *Save The World On Your Own Time*, "[i]t is a question finally of what business we are in, and we are in the education business, not the democracy business." In comparison, bell hooks suggests in her work, *Teaching To Transgress*, that "[t]o dispel the notion" that the college writing class "should always be a safe, harmonious space" remains problematic for students silenced and ostracized in the academy.

In *Post-Colonial Composition Pedagogy: Using The Culture of Marginalized Students To Teach Writing*, I challenge English composition educators committed to preventing a cultural underclass of English language writers to disrupt, interrogate, investigate, and publish more scholarship on research that helps shape high-impact practices for marginalized pupils. Using Africana based cultural practices to connect and identify with minority students will simultaneously build bridges to promote more cross-cultural connections through ongoing learning and teaching through an Africana gaze.

Moreover, while students continue to be oppressed for using their own languages in schools and on the streets, Vershawn Ashanti Young and Aja Y.

Martinez acknowledge in *Code-Meshing as World English: Pedagogy, Policy, Performance* “the difficulties in implementing a code-meshing pedagogy” but argue that “all writers and speakers benefit when we demystify academic language and encourage students to explore the plurality of the English language in both unofficial and official spaces.”

Therefore, the need for more pedagogical attention in the *CLAJ* is more relevant now than ever before. During this moment in history where systemic racism in academia needs dismantling, educators can become liberators to assist minority students in changing from invisible to visible, unheard to heard, and alienated to appreciated. Ultimately, CLA members can consider contributing to this innovative pedagogical inclusion by implementing scholarly works in pedagogy, such as innovative lessons, lesson plans, unit plans, teaching ideas, articles, etc. In the words of James Baldwin, “[t]he paradox of education is precisely this— that as one begins to become conscious, one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated.” As CLA members, let us raise pedagogical consciousnesses together and examine our society through insightful lenses.

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Some Results of Using Culture-referenced Prompts for Pre and Post-test Writing Examinations at an HBCU

Nathaniel Norment, Jr.

Culture is the totality of [Black] people's thought and practice by which they celebrate themselves, recreate themselves, and introduce themselves to history, and [to] humanity.

—Maulana Karenga

A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin, and culture is like a tree without roots.

—Marcus Garvey

[O]ne could argue that the kind and degree of writing ability assessed by a specific prompt may be determined by the nature of that prompt, particularly by its cognitive, linguistic, and rhetorical demands and by the nature of the social [cultural] context in which the prompt places the writer.

—Karen L. Greenberg

What you learn at an HBCU is you do not have to fit into somebody's limited perspective on what it means to be young, gifted, and [B]lack.

—Kamala Harris

HBCUs are unique sites of inquiry and poised to be at the forefront of conversations about race and writing because of our institutional contexts and the student populations with whom we work each day.

—Karen Keaton Jackson, Hope Jackson, and Dawn N. Hicks Tafari

Introduction

A recent book edited by Staci M. Perryman-Clark and Collin Lamont Craig, *Black Perspectives in Writing Program Administration: From the Margins to the Center*, focuses on Black students, Black faculty, Black Writing Program Administrators, and Black experiences in higher education. They present a framework that incorporates three principles that represent a Black perspective in Writing Program Administration (WPA) work: (1) African-centered pedagogical materials are placed at the center of the curriculum; (2) programmatic assessment measures are designed with Black student success in mind; and (3) successful writing programs understand that they can implement African-centered pedagogy and antiracist writing assessment practices and still support all students. Several chapters in the book point to the advantages of centering the teaching of writing to African American students from an African-centered point of view. Writing curricula must provide African American students with content that facilitates critical thinking skills and enhance their written language skills in all types of writing. Furthermore, the goal of assessing African American students should be to accurately test the stylistic devices, syntactic, knowledge, and organizational structures that may be linguistically and culturally specific for African American students.

For example, in 1969, I made site visits to Clark Atlanta, Fisk, Howard, and Morehouse to review their writing curricula and learn their strategies and pedagogy for teaching writing to Black students. That same year, I was hired by Mina Shaughnessy to teach English in the Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK) Program at The City College of New York (CCNY). Thereafter, the CCNY's SEEK English Program developed curricula that incorporated readings such as poetry from the likes of Langston Hughes, June Jordan, Gwendolyn Brooks, Audre Lorde, and Amiri Baraka; Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Zora Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; James Baldwin's *Go Tell It On the Mountain*. Back then, many faculty members at PWIs did not have the experience of teaching writing to Black students. From my own experiences working at Morehouse, however, I believe that HBCUs had, and continue to have, a long-established history of improving the writing skills of Black students.

Many colleges and universities have some system to assess and place their students into writing courses at the entry level. Others have instituted Direct Self Placement (DSP), which permits students to select the course they think they need to improve their writing. Placement and pre-tests measure students' readiness for writing instruction within a composition curricular sequence. Writing-placement systems are established to protect the academic level of the course, support retention into the second year, and maintain and enrich faculty conversation about writing instruction. In 2018, all first-time freshmen and transfer students

at Morehouse College took an English placement or pre-test examination. Based on their test results, students are placed into English 101 and English 102, a two-semester freshman composition writing sequence. Writing and analytical skills are enhanced through extensive work in expository, argumentative, and documented essays. Course activities require exploring a variety of perspectives in different disciplines and cultures, emphasizing works by African American authors and scholars.

The purpose of a writing prompt is to invite students to think about, develop a perspective about, and write about a topic. Writing prompts introduce and focus the writing topic and stimulate learners to write. It may be an open-ended sentence, a question, a topic, or a scenario that generates the writing. Any prompt or topic used to elicit writing samples will give some students an advantage. No one prompt or topic significantly influences students' writing performance at different levels. In different modes of discourse, topics designed to incorporate positive culture-referenced references may develop and enhance self-esteem and self-efficacy, thus build confidence in African American college students to produce highly proficient writing samples. The term "culture-referenced" describes any topic or prompt incorporating values, attitudes, and information relevant to African American culture.

Furthermore, culture-referenced includes culturally, socially, linguistically, and historically determined aspects of African American life. Some of the topics used in this study included: (1) "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced"-James Baldwin; (2) "Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today"-Malcolm X; (3) "When you control a man's thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions"-Carter G. Woodson; (4) "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere"-Martin Luther King, Jr.; (5) "Say it loud. I'm Black, and I'm proud"-James Brown; (6) "Oppression makes a wise man mad"- Frederick Douglass; and (7) "A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin, and culture is like a tree without roots"- Marcus Garvey (See Appendix A).

The importance of topics and prompts to the writing performance of students has been emphasized by many composition theorists and researchers (Brown, Hilgers and Marsella, 1991; Gabrielson, Gordon, and Engelhard, 1995; Greenberg, 1981, 1982, 1993; Hoetker, 1982; Hoetker and Brossell, 1989; Huot, 1990, 1996; Keech, 1979; Norment, 1997; Reid, 1990; Ruth and Murphy, 1988; and Smith, Hull, Land, Moore, Ball, Durham, Hickey, and Ruzich, 1985). In addition, some researchers have suggested that the modes of discourse and rhetorical specifications in essay prompts affect students' writing performance (Brossell, 1982; Engelhard, Gordon, and Gabrielson, 1992; Murphy and Ruth, 1993; Oliver, 1995; Prater and

Padia, 1983; Quellmalz, Copell and Chou, 1982; and Ruth and Murphy, 1988). Oliver suggests that writing topics may also affect students in ways that are often challenging to predict or control. Furthermore, ethnic or racial background may influence the writers' perspective of the writing task (426). However, the way writing assessments affect specific groups is not at all clear.

Several researchers have questioned the "incongruences between the communicative behavior or language (context and content) of the [tests] and test constructor and the students who take the tests" (Brown, 1986; Fox, 1990; Hoover and Politzer, 1982; Taylor and Payne, 1983; Taylor and Lee, 1991; and Vaughn-Cooke, 1983). These results suggest that the writing performance of African American students may be affected by specific language and communicative incongruencies in the writing tasks. Taylor and Lee describe five possible sources of culturally based communication and language bias in standardized tests: situational bias, linguistic bias, communicative style bias, cognitive style bias, and interpretation bias (68). They further point out that African American students face a two-fold challenge: performing required tasks and demonstrating abilities on the tasks by manipulating communicative and language codes, which are frequently different from their indigenous systems. The study of language within the social context in which it occurs (i.e., the communicative (cultural) environment) led to the identification of variances in how information is imparted among and within cultural groups. Taylor and Lee note that "[t]he manner of imparting information is often referred to as communicative style. The communicative style used by an individual ... results from a combination of socially and culturally determined factors such as values, interactional rules, and perceptions of events. Such differences in communicative style may interfere with the standardized testing process" (7172). Because of these language and communicative incongruences, African American students are frequently assessed invalidly. Either they fail to demonstrate the desired cognitive, social, or linguistic behavior because of flawed [or low] expectations or of their misinterpretations, or they fail to demonstrate the desired behavior within the communication and language frameworks demanded by the tests (80). The production of written texts is psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic act. It has four distinct steps: prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing. To generate ideas to develop his point of view, the writer draws upon life experiences in cultural and social content. Misguidedly, some researchers have posited that mastery of language is associated with cognitive abilities and concluded that African American learners are at a disadvantage engaging in the writing process. Designing culturally relevant writing prompts, writing programs, and assessments acknowledge culture's importance for academic success.

Greenberg reports that the research evidence did not clarify the connections

between specific features or dimensions of writing prompts and students' writing performance. Researchers and practitioners have relatively little consensus about what constitutes an effective writing prompt--for either instruction or assessment (5). The effect of the cultural reference or the cultural context of essay topics has not been investigated. Consequently, this study is designed to examine directly whether (and how) culture-referenced topics affect the writing of African American students. Kroll and Reid discovered that the number of required tasks was related to the difficulty of a prompt. However, while Ruth and Murphy specifically suggest that the topic functions as a springboard—a prompt. Thus the “meaning potential” of any given task is relative to linguistic, cognitive, and social (cultural) reverberations set off in the respondents (413). Since writing prompts affect an essay's content, proficiency, and rhetorical style, writing prompts must be culture-referenced. Therefore, in designing prompts, HBCUs and PWIs writing programs must consider students' culture and linguistic background.

James proposes that “the writing instruction at historically Black colleges and universities should reflect African American students' voices, experiences, and heritage” (35). Essay topics associated with Black cultural history and cultural identity may develop positive self-esteem and self-image “through cues embedded in the text of the topics” that can affect the writing performance of African American students (Norment 37). Research by composition specialists and linguists confirms the observation that aspects of African American culture are reflected in the grammatical, stylistic, and discourse features of African American students' written prose and written language performance (Ball, 1992; Cunningham, 1995; Fowler, 1985; Linn, 1978; and Norment, 1990, 1995). Cooper reports that cultural and dialectical differences affect the writing styles of African American college students in several ways. Culturally based stylistic aspects of their writing may be indicative of cultural knowledge and values. Ladson-Billings posits that culturally relevant teaching [that] uses student culture in order to maintain it and to transcend the adverse effects of the dominant culture” (19). Culturally relevant pedagogy engages African American students in critical thinking about their culture and history. It also helps them develop self-worth about themselves and self-awareness about their families, communities, and society.

Research on Effects of Essay Prompts

Much of the research in composition over past decades has focused on some aspects of students' writing proficiency and writing performance; yet, considerably few studies have examined the effects of essay prompts or topics on the writing performance of students (Brossell and Ash, 1984; Conlan and Chambers, 1987; Greenberg, 1981, 1982 and 1993; Hoetker and Brossell, 1986, 1989; Hoetker, 1982;

Murphy and Ruth, 1993; Ruth and Murphy, 1984 and 1988; Smith et al., 1985) and the rhetorical specifications in topics (Brossell, 1982; Engelhard, et al. 1992; Oliver 1995; Prater, 1985; Quellmalz, et al., 1982). This research has been influenced by the large-scale writing assessments used to place students into basic writing and freshman composition courses. Millward notes that while acknowledging the need to place students in their proper courses, many remain concerned about how the testing situation affects writing performance; there is also a concern that these exams have a more significant impact than simply determining proficiency levels (100). Even though various studies have examined the writing performance of African American students (Ball, 1992. 2009; Chaplin, 1987; Cooper, 1977; Cunningham, 1995; Fowler, 1985; Norment, 1990, 1995, 1997; Scott, 1981; Smitherman and Wright, 1984; Wilson, 1985; and Zeni and Thomas, 1990), only one (i.e., Norment 1997) has investigated the direct effects of culture-referenced essay prompts or topics on their writing. Writing assignments on different prompts provide teachers and researchers material to assess better the effectiveness of curricula content, instruction, pedagogy, and student's writing performance at different proficiency levels.

Melzer observes that "few composition researchers have made [writing assignments] the focus of significant study" despite their ability to reveal "a great deal about their [instructors'] goals and values, as well as the goals and values of their disciplines" (3). Research on writing assignments has typically discussed assignments in two ways: descriptions of assignments and prescriptions of effective design. Much of the early research on assignments were studies that sought to describe broader practices of writing instruction in university contexts. Melzer's research on assignments across the disciplines draws on 2,101 writing assignments from 100 post-secondary institutions across the United States. This research provides a large-scale description of the purposes, audiences, and genres faculty assign in academic writing contexts (6). Melzer also reports that faculty design assignments with limited purposes and frequently prompt students to write to the teacher-as-examiner. In other words, faculty most frequently "ask students to display the 'right' answer or the 'correct' definition to the instructor through a recall of facts" (90). Gardner suggests that writing assignments should "define the writing task, explore the expectations, [and] provide the supporting materials and activities" (36). Any prompt or topic used to elicit writing samples will give some students an advantage. However, no one prompt or topic significantly influences the writing performance of students at different grade levels. In other modes of discourse, this researcher proposes that topics designed to incorporate positive culturally oriented references may develop and enhance self-esteem and build confidence in African American students to produce highly proficient writing

samples. Throughout this paper, the term “culture-referenced” describes any topic or prompt that incorporates values, attitudes, perspectives, and information relevant to African American culture. Furthermore, culture-referenced includes culturally, socially, linguistically, and historically determined aspects of African American culture.

Culturally Unfamiliar Writing Prompts

Student writers will not necessarily come to an exam with the same cultural and linguistic frame of reference. Differing cultural backgrounds can potentially cause different interpretations of writing prompts and lead to unexpected responses. Ruth and Murphy claim that the meaning of any particular writing prompt depends on the “linguistic, cognitive, and social reverberations set off in the respondents” (413). They further note that “the language of the topic and the general knowledge of the participants interact in a writing test to determine what meanings the topic may elicit.” The intended meaning of the prompt may not be the same as the understood meaning of the test taker. The understood meaning will be dependent upon a range of test taker factors such as, “inadequate control of linguistic and semantic knowledge, weak commitment to succeeding on the test, inadequate world knowledge, and inexperience with testing contexts and conventions” (415). Reed similarly contends that the prompt topic “should be about a subject that all potential test takers have enough relevant information on, or opinions of, to be able to write to the best of their ability” (110). Kroll and Reid state that “cultural interference could cause test takers to misconstrue or even miss the point of writing prompts. Those without the assumed cultural reference could be disadvantaged by specific writing prompts, especially those who assume Western cultural values” (236). At many PWIs and HBCUs, the writing prompts used on placement examinations are often unrelated to and unrelated to African American students’ life experiences and circumstances. Consequently, they do not engage students in critical intellectual thought that demonstrate their knowledge of academic knowledge.

The Rationale for Culture-referenced Prompts

Although there may be some difficulty in determining how linguistic patterns correlate with culture, the Whorf hypothesis suggests that languages not only report information but shape our perceptions of reality. It suggests that linguistic communities differ in their perceptual environmental experiences and that language functions like a filter that molds one’s perception of reality and determines thought. According to Geertz, culture is a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form. People

communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge and attitudes toward life. He writes that every culture provides an unexamined and mostly unconscious set of beliefs, attitudes, and labels through which we judge the world. There are at least three major views about the nature of culture. One is that culture is knowledge or the accumulation of information, values, and experiences (89). According to this view, culture can and does accumulate collective and ancestry memory, and that the distribution of knowledge is such that “linking understandings” are maintained. A second view is that culture consists of “conceptual structures that create the central reality of a people so that they inhabit the world they imagine” (Geertz 89). Culture is inter-subjectively shared so that everyone assumes that others in the cultural group see and interpret the same things they experience. A third concept views culture as knowledge and hence culture as a constructed reality. Culture is a set of learned systems of meaning, is communicated through natural language and other symbolic systems, has representational, directive, and effectual functions, and can create specific senses of reality. Kirkland notes that “all writing practices are evocatively tied to culture and society” (86). Writing prompts are only effective if they invite students to construct meaning from their cultural center and write in the language of who they are and from where they come. Therefore, writing teachers and evaluators must grant students the right to express themselves in ways that honor their culture, history, community, and personal experiences to fulfill the requirements of the writing assignment. In this way, writing prompts can be reliable means by which writers from different linguistic backgrounds can enhance their writing skills.

Nobles defines culture as “the process that gives people a general design for living and patterns for interpreting their reality; it implies that there are cultural laws consistent with the requirements of the people’s cultural deep structure” (52). Nobles further claims that aspects of culture “are ideology, ethos, and worldview; its ‘factors’ are ontology, cosmology, and axiology; and its ‘manifestations’ consist of behavior, values, and attitudes. Hence, the African worldview comprises the fundamental assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes toward life, toward all of nature, and toward the universe that characterizes African (American) people, and thus constitutes the philosophical--ideological basis of African [American] culture” (53). He further states that culture is the process that “gives people a general design for living and patterns for interpreting their reality. Culture implies that there are cultural laws consistent with the requirements of the people’s cultural deep structure” (54). Kaplan further suggests that the “organization of a paragraph written in any language by individuals will carry the dominant imprint of those individuals’ culturally coded orientations to the phenomenological world” (1). This research suggests that written language maps the individuals’ experiences

in culture—or denotative meaning—and expresses the aroused qualities of such experiences (such as feelings, images, and relationships to words and symbols)—or connotative meaning. Written language is shaped by the cultural and linguistic background of an individual. Writing assignments that respond to culture-referenced prompts construct ways African American students can express their aspirations, thoughts, and feelings about themselves and their communities using the symbols and signals of their cultural and linguistic background.

Essay topics aligned toward cultural heritage and cultural identity may develop positive self-esteem and self-image through cues embedded in the text of the topics that can affect the writing performance of African American students. Research by linguists and composition specialists confirms the observation that aspects of African American culture in the grammatical, stylistic, and discourse features of African American students' written prose and written language performance (Ball, 1992; Chaplin, 1987; Cooper, 1977; Cunningham, 1995; Fowler, 1985; Linn, 1978; Lipscomb, 1978; Norment, 1990, 1995; Smitherman and Wright, 1984; Scott, 1981; Wilson, 1985; and Zeni and Thomas, 1990). Culturally determined differences within a language occur at phonology, syntax, vocabulary, or referential context levels. The variables that account consistently and predictably for these differences include social status, age, sex, ethnicity, and written language proficiencies (Wolfram and Fasold 372). Cooper reports that cultural and dialectical differences affect the writing styles of African American college students in several ways. Culturally based stylistic aspects of their writing are indicative of cultural history and values (7). Redd writes that "there is some evidence that having students read and write about African American texts develops more positive attitudes toward writing" (99-100). Incorporating African American cultural readings in the writing curricula provides African American students with content that facilitates critical thinking skills and enhances analytical thinking in their writing.

The Present Study

While researchers have examined the educational experiences of African American male students at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), researchers have neglected the writing skills experiences of African American male students at these institutions. Studies reporting their reading experiences usually call attention to African American male students' lack of reading preparation. This qualitative study highlights the importance of HBCUs in enhancing African American male-written language skills. Findings provide evidence that culturally relevant writing prompts contribute to the improvement of African American male writing.

The present study differs from previous research on the writing ability of

African American students in that it addresses the gap in both qualitative and quantitative research. For example, although research has been conducted on the effects of African American English (AAE) dialect on the quality of African American students' writing, almost no research has been conducted on the effects of culture/ethnicity referenced essay topics contributing to their written language performance. Cooper suggests that cultural and dialect differences affect the writing styles of African American writers in several different ways. Some stylistic features involve confusing word choice, grammatical deviation, or incorrect word order. Other culturally based stylistic aspects of writing include extensive use of imagery in expository and argumentative writing. Second, much of the research on the characteristics of African American students' writing has focused on the effects of grammar/mechanical errors (7). Most linguists acknowledge the legitimacy of African American English (AAE), African American Language (AAL), Black English (BE), Black English Vernacular (BEV), or Black English Dialect (BED) as a correct, grammatical, standard model of communicating African American culture. Third, most research has classified African American students as basic, remedial, or inexperienced writers.

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects that culture-referenced essay topics have on the quality of writing produced by African American male college students within the context of Morehouse College's writing program. It should be noted that some colleges and universities have been moving away from administering placement examinations and are permitting students to select directed self-placement (DSP). Results of college placement exams assign students to the appropriate composition course designed to improve their writing skills. In contrast, DSP permits students to select the course they think they need to improve their writing. Culture-referenced topics establish a context framework for African American students' responses in which a "common linguistic, cultural, and social frame of reference is shared." This study examines two specific characteristics: (1) the overall quality of writing produced by the students (e.g., development, content, usage, and mechanics) and (2) the content, structure, and task of the topic. This study presents the effects of culture-referenced topics on the quality of writing produced by the 2018 cohorts of students at Morehouse College, an all-male liberal arts college. Culture-referenced topics establish a context framework for African American students' responses in which a common linguistic, cultural, and social frame of reference is shared. We developed two specific research questions as follows:

Question 1: Are there interactions among the prompts and topics that incorporate African American culture-referenced content and the quality of students' writing samples elicited within the college pre-test and post-test examinations?

Question 2: Is there a relationship between the prompts and topics that incorporate

African American culture-referenced content and the syntactic complexity, coherence, fluency, organization, and length of essay in male college students' writing elicited within the college pre-test and post-test examinations?

Hypotheses 1: Culture-referenced prompts will enhance the writing performance of African American males.

Hypotheses 2: Writing prompts and topics that incorporate African American culture-referenced content will affect the syntactic complexity, coherence, fluency, organization, and length of essay of male college students' writing.

Based on the research on the writing abilities of African American students, it was expected that the quality of writing would be different for each proficiency level, and students would receive higher ratings on each of the variables. It was also expected that the levels for writing quality on the college's placement topics would range from novice to advanced. The culture-referenced writing prompt would elicit better writing from the students, and these essays would receive higher scores. Finally, it was expected that the students would receive higher ratings on the post-test than they received on the pre-test regardless of the writing prompt.

Subjects

This study involves 411 African American male students selected from 673 students at Morehouse College. The study included students required to register for freshman English composition 101 and 102. Ninety percent of students were between the ages of 17 and 18 years old, approximately 3% were between the ages 19-21 years old, and 1% were between 23-5 years old. The socioeconomic status of the subjects included students from middle-class and working-class backgrounds. The intended academic majors of the students varied. The sample population was African American males from the following cities: Atlanta, Austin, Baltimore, Birmingham, Boston, Buffalo, Charleston, Charlotte, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Dallas, Denver, Detroit, Fort Lauderdale, Gary, Hartford, Hempstead, Houston, Indianapolis, Jackson, Jacksonville, Kansas City, Lagos, Las Vegas, Little Rock, Los Angeles, Memphis, Miami, Milwaukee, Montgomery, Nashville, Newark, New Haven, New Orleans, New York, Oakland, Philadelphia, Phoenix, Pittsburgh, Raleigh, Richmond, Saint Louis, Savannah, Silver Springs, Tallahassee, Washington D.C., and many other cities and small towns.

Essay Prompts Topics

As the researcher, I selected and piloted the writing prompts. The culture-referenced topics incorporated characteristics based on the research on the writing abilities of African American students (Brossell and Ash, 1984; Conlan and Chambers, 1987; Greenberg, 1981, 1982 and 1993; Hoetker and Brossell, 1989;

Hoetker, 1982; Norment, 1997; Ruth and Murphy, 1984 and 1988; Smith et al., 1985). It also incorporated research related to language patterns influenced by cultural and linguistic contexts (Ball, 1992; Chaplin, 1987; Cooper, 1977; Carson, 1988; Eller, 1989; Fowler, 1985; Hoover and Politzer, 1982; Linn, 1978; Norment, 1990 and 1995; Scott, 1981; Smitherman and Wright, 1984; Wilson, 1985). The culture-referenced prompts selected for use as pre-tests and post-tests adhered to similar guidelines suggested by Conlan and Chambers, who recommended that topics should be: (1) clearly stated, using language familiar to the audience, (2) appropriate to the population being tested, (3) reasonable for the allotted writing time, (4) suited to the purpose of the test, (5) accessible to the broadest range of students, (6) enjoyable to write about, and (7) capable of producing writing across the range of student abilities (9). For this study, culture-referenced essay topics are defined as those related to the African American cultural knowledge base that writers are assumed to draw upon to respond to the essay topic or prompt. The prompts/topics appear in Appendix A.

Instructions to Students

Directions for the pre-and post-test essay: The purpose of this pre-test essay is to determine how well you can write an academic essay. The purpose of this post-test essay is to determine if your writing has improved beyond the pre-test. You have fifty minutes to write an essay on the topic you select. Read each topic carefully and choose the one on which you feel you can do your best writing. Start planning your paper after you choose your essay topic. The organization of your essay is essential. A well-written essay has a central idea directly related to the topic. It has a clear organizational plan, develops points with support, is coherent and logical, and is free of frequent errors in grammar, mechanics, word choice, and sentence structure used in Standard English. (See Assessment Standards for Essay Rubric –Appendix B). Below are three topics. Select only one to write. Next, read the topic carefully to understand and discuss precisely what it means to you. Finally, write an essay (3-5 coherent paragraphs) in which you discuss whatever meaning the following quotation has for you: (See Appendix A).

Testing Procedures

Pre-test and post-test Writing Measures: Students selected a prompt for writing essays on pre-test and post-test topics (See Appendix A). The writing samples, produced as responses to topic questions, were collected by each instructor who taught a freshman composition class. The students were requested to write on the topics during their scheduled class periods (50 minutes). They were not asked to write a specific number of words.

Training of Readers for Scoring

The cohort of six readers included: (1) three men and three women; (2) five African Americans and one white person; (3) four faculty English instructors, one political science instructor, and one history instructor; and (4) they had seven to twenty-one years of teaching among them. All have taught at Morehouse College for at least five years. They were trained during three three-hour workshop sessions. In addition, I facilitated a one-hour training session immediately before each scoring session. In session one, the aim and design of the study were explained in an introductory workshop. Distribution of the writing rubric and instructions for analyzing the compositions were completed during this session as well. In session two, each of the six readers were assigned eight compositions (two from each of the proficient levels randomly selected from the data sample) and asked to score each composition according to the instructions and procedures provided by the researcher. They completed this scoring process four times so that each rater scored 32 compositions (two from each proficiency level). This second session aimed to familiarize readers with the scoring procedures and gather data to establish inter-rater reliability. In session three, readers discussed the reliability results and procedures to be followed in the scoring of compositions in the study.

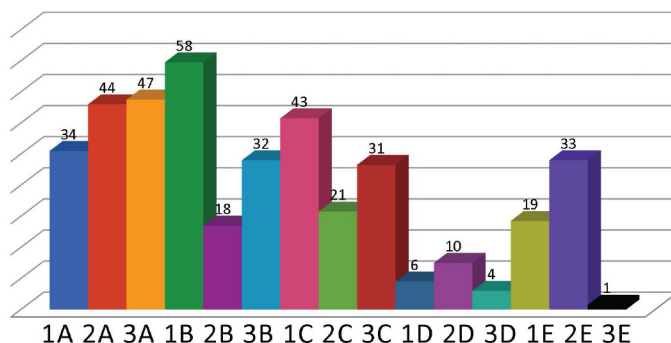
Analysis of Essays

Each essay was assessed and evaluated according to the Assessment Standards for Essay Rubric content and criteria (see Appendix B), which included main idea/thesis, evidence, organization, grammar, mechanics, and diction. The assessment and evaluation rubric used to grade each essay included four levels of proficiency: Novice, Intermediate, Proficient, and Advanced. All essays were scored holistically. Each reader assigned a number that indicated their overall judgment of the quality of the essay, considering such things as the student's ability to handle ideas logically, write in a style appropriate to the audience and situation, and use standard grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Two trained readers gave each essay a numerical score from one through four, based on a set of specific criteria used to score the essay holistically (see Appendix B). Readers made no marks or corrections on the essay. The score was adjusted as appropriate for any essay that readers scored more than one level apart; for example, if one reader gives a two and another reader gives a three, a third reader will determine the outcome. The readers' scores on essays were selected randomly from the total sample of approximately 473 students and checked for inter-rater reliability. The overall reliability scores (coefficients) of ALPHA for readers' ratings ranged between .87 and .92.

Results

Polk notes that research on writing assignments has been discussed through “descriptions of assignments and prescriptions of effective design” and that much research on assignments was “embedded in studies that sought to describe broader practices of writing instruction in university contexts” (89). The use of culture-referenced writing prompts has a positive impact on freshmen’s academic writing level. This section shows the general results of the pre-tests and post-tests of African American males’ essays written in response to culture-referenced prompts. This study presents data on students’ choice of the culturally referenced prompts (Appendix A) to write the pre and post-tests in Graph 1 and Graph 2. Graph 2 and Graph 5 show the different proficiency levels for each prompt of the pre and post-tests. Graphs 3 and 6 show the comparison between the pre-test and the post-test for each proficiency level. The two graphs also show that the students who had the lowest levels of writing competence on the pre-test showed improvement in their writing level on the post-test. Thus, students in this study improved their academic writing at each level (See Appendices C, D, E, F, G, H I, J K, and L).

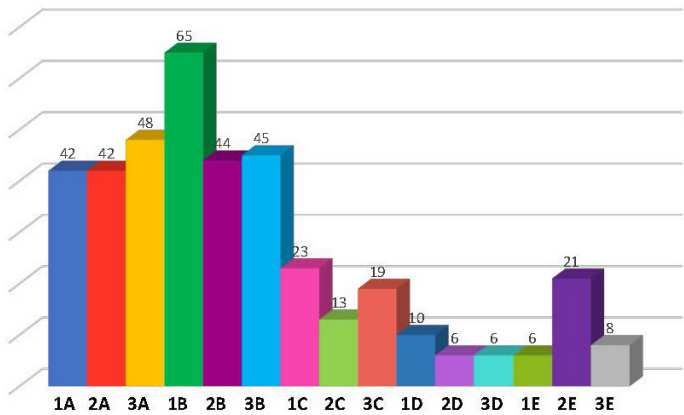
Graph 1
Pre-test Culturally Referenced Writing Prompts



Graph 1 shows the frequency of each topic selected from the Fall 2018 writing prompts. The African American culture-referenced topics selected the greatest number of times (1B, 3A, 2A, 1C, 1A, and 2E) accounted for nearly 70% of the selected topics. Fifty-eight of the students wrote on the topic (quotation 1B) by Carter G. Woodson; forty-seven of the students wrote on the topic (quotation 3A) by Malcolm X; forty-four wrote on the topic (quotation 2A) by James Baldwin; forty-three wrote on the topic (quotation 1C) by James Brown; and thirty-four

wrote on the topic (quotation 1A) by Alice Walker. The topics selected least were (quotation 3E= 1) by Booker T. Washington; (quotation 3D=4) by W.E.B. DuBois; and topic (quotation 1D=6) by Marcus Garvey (See Appendix A for topics).

Graph 2
Post-test Culturally Referenced Writing Prompts

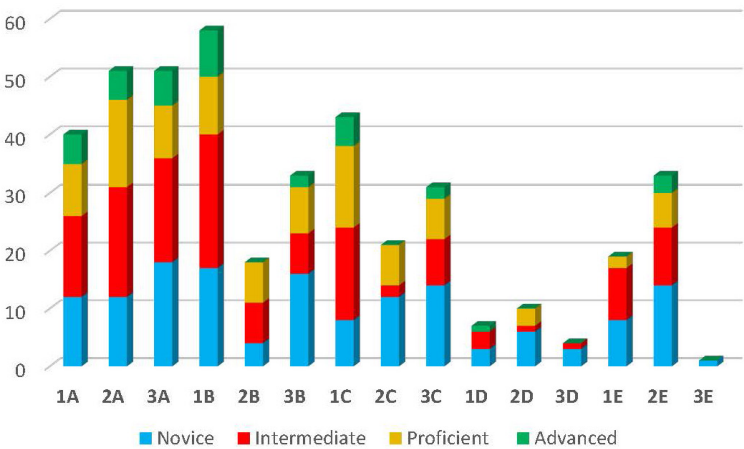


Graph 2 shows the frequency of each topic selected from the Spring 2019 writing prompts. The African American culture-referenced topics selected the greatest number of times (1B, 3B, 3A, 2A, 2B, and 2E) accounted for nearly 80% of the selected topics. Sixty-five of the students wrote on the topic (quotation 1B) by Carter G. Woodson; forty- five of the students wrote on the topic (quotation 3B) by Benjamin Banneker; thirty-four wrote on the topic (quotation 3A) by Malcolm X; thirty wrote on the topic (quotation 2A) by James Baldwin; twenty-eight wrote on the topic (quotation 1A) by Alice Walker; and twenty-eight wrote on the topic (quotation 2B) by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The topics selected least were (quotation 3D=6) by W.E.B. DuBois; (quotation 1D=3) by Marcus Garvey; and topic (quotation 3E=8 by Booker T. Washington; (**See Appendix A for topics**).

This study was designed to investigate two research questions:

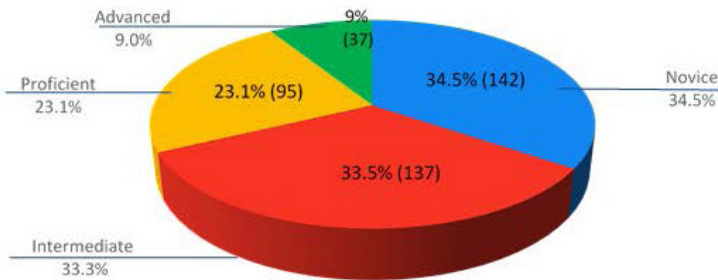
Question 1: Are there interactions among the prompts and topics that incorporate African American culture-referenced content and the quality of students’ writing samples elicited within a college pre-test and post-test examinations?

Graph 3
Prompts and Level Proficient Level on Pre-test

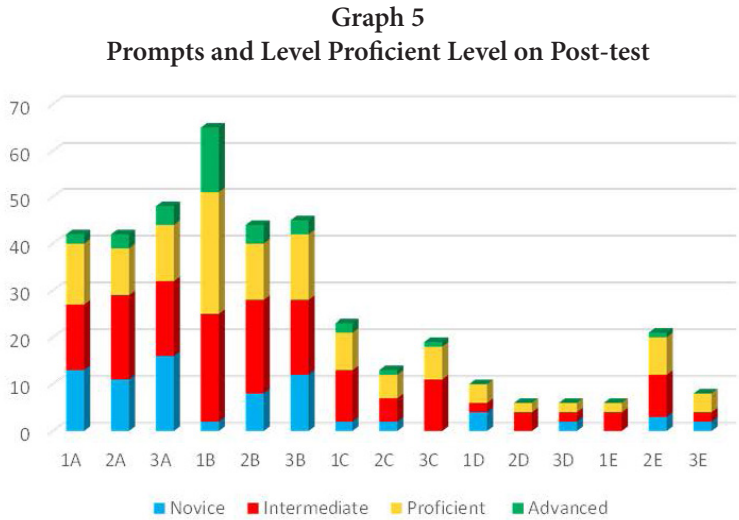


Graph 3 shows the number of pre-test essays scored at each proficiency level for each writing prompt. For each prompt of the pre-test, most of the essays were written at the Novice and Intermediate Levels. See Table 1 for the number and percentage of each prompt written about on the pre-test.

Graph 4
Pre-test Essays Proficient Percentages

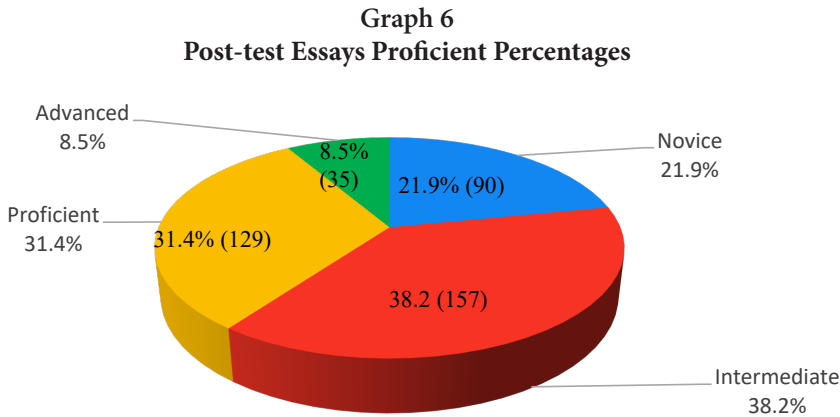


Graph 4 presents the proficient levels of 411 students who took the Fall 2018 Pretest. One hundred and forty-two students (34.5%) were scored **Novice**; one hundred and thirty-seven students (33.5%) were scored **Intermediate**; ninety-five students (23.1%) were scored **Proficient**; and thirty-seven students (9%) were scored **Advanced**.



Graph 5 shows the number of pre-test essays scored at each proficiency level for each writing prompt.

For each prompt of post-test, most of the essays were written at the Proficient and Advanced Levels. See Table 6 for the number and percentage of each prompt written about on the post-test.



Graph 6 presents the proficient levels of 411 students who took the Spring 2019 post-test. Ninety students (21.9%) were scored **Novice**; one hundred and fifty-seven students (38.2%) were scored **Intermediate**; one hundred and twenty-

nine students (31.4%) were scored **Proficient**; and thirty-five students (8.5%) were scored **Advanced**. Notice the change in the percentage of students at each level of proficiency on the pre-tests and post-tests. For example, students who initially scored at the Novice level decreased from 34.5% to 21.9%; students at the Intermediate level increased from 33.5% to 38.2%; students at the Proficient level increased from 23.1% to 31.4%; and students at the Advanced level decreased from 9% to 8.5%.

Question 2: Is there a relationship between the prompts and topics that incorporate African American culture-referenced content and the syntactic complexity, coherence, fluency, organization, and length of essay in male college students' writing elicited within a college pre-test and post-test examinations?

To collect data to answer Question 2, randomly selected essays of the most frequently chosen topics were analyzed conforming to the Assessment Standards for Essay Rubric (Appendix B). The rubric, which has criteria for each proficiency level, was used as a qualitative measure to evaluate students' pre and post-test writing samples. Overall, the proficiency level of the post-tests improved. Most of the post-tests were assessed at the Proficiency Level of the Assessment Standards for Essay Rubric. The post-test essays were more clearly written, more developed, more coherent, and contained fewer errors in grammar, punctuation, and other Standard English features. In addition, the post-test essays exhibited more effective use of appropriate word choice and included more ideas than the pre-tests essays.

Discussion

The results indicate that culture-referenced writing prompts affect discourse features of the essays produced by African American college males. Summary results of the number of words, number of sentences, and length of sentences for each pre-test and post-test essay are included in Appendices C through L. Generally, the culture-referenced topics facilitated fluency and topic development. Development of ideas and content occurred more frequently in essays responding to culture-referenced topics. In addition, these topics elicited a significantly higher number of ideas from the culture-based knowledge of the students. The writing quality of students who wrote their essays in response to culture-referenced topics differed considerably from those students who wrote on the other topics. The culture-referenced essays generated more ideas about the topic and a greater number of words and sentences. The essays contained more information and more specific details relevant to the topic. The culture-referenced essays were more focused, organized, and rated as better than essays produced in response to the non-culture-referenced topics. The present results support specific culture-referenced topics for African American students rather than prompts and topics

exclusively used in large-scale assessment and locally developed topics. Culture-specific essay topics facilitate greater fluency, coherence, and clarity. In addition, culture-referenced prompts effectively encourage African American writers to include more culture-based knowledge of self and community.

Future research might investigate the development of culture-referenced topics that examine the influence of experiential demand, a feature of topics described by Greenberg that signifies the kind of knowledge a writing task demands and ranges from personal experiences to facts and generalizations. Research should also be conducted to determine the effects of culture-referenced topics that incorporate cognitive needs required by different writing tasks and modes of discourse (e.g., narration, exposition, definition, and argumentation).

Limitations

The present results contain some limitations. The culture-referenced topics (statements, quotations, and proverbs of African American culture) were the only prompts used to elicit writing samples; no other prompts were used in the study to compare. Questions also remained concerning using culture-referenced topics to enhance African American writers' self-esteem and confidence in writing. Students may not be familiar with the cultural context and significance of the prompts. Some students may not even identify any recognizable experiences within the prompts and may not respond adequately. However, introducing the culture-referenced topic enhanced critical thinking and elicited relevant thoughts and ideas about assigned topics. There is very little or no prior research on the overall writing abilities of college-aged African American males. Therefore, research is needed on all aspects of African American males' writing process and writing skills to develop an entirely new research typology to provide data and present the need for further development in teaching and assessing culture-referenced writing.

Implications

The results suggest that teachers should develop knowledge of African American students' linguistic competency and linguistic environments. Doing so would improve African American male students' written language skills and allow teachers to assess African American male students' writing better. Since this study aimed to examine the effects of culture-referenced essay topics, the results may provide several implications for teaching writing to African American students overall, culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally relevant assessment, and culturally relevant composition curricula at HBCUs.

Culturally Influenced Writing Style of African American Students

Writing, the production of written text, is inextricably embedded in cultural contexts; it is imperative to understand the conceptualization of the African worldview, which Azibo suggests is “compelled by the deep structure of African culture, the cultural factors, and cultural aspects, which projects interconnectedness, interdependency, appositional harmony, oneness, and the primacy of life” (82). Fox suggests that “cultural position” as a central concept in the exploration of African American student writers requires a pedagogy that investigates how history, culture, institutions, social relations and race interest and influence” (292); and “that a central strategy of African American writers is to seek authorial control and legitimacy in the face of an audience [known or unknown] that seeks to deny the very literacy that African American [writers] demonstrate” (293). Ball noted that discourse preferences that are influenced by both social and cultural experiences could have positive effects on students’ [writing] (524). Students’ writing can be strengthened through culturally relevant readings and writing assignments.

The writing quality of students who wrote essays in response to culture-referenced topics elicited a more significant number of ideas from the culture-based knowledge of the students. Culture-referenced prompts encouraged African American writers to include more culture-based knowledge of self and community. The nature of rhetoric/discourse is culturally specific. In addition to using Black life, history, and culture topics as subjects for writing, students themselves are centered as sources of knowledge. Researchers, such as Ball, Fowler, Chaplin, Gay, Norment, Richardson, and Wilson, among others cited within, have suggested that the writer’s experiences and culture influence a writer’s attitudes about written discourse. Language not only maps the individual’s culture but also facilitates and shapes thought. An understanding and validation of their linguistic styles of written language communication empower the writers.

Culturally Relevant Writing Pedagogy

Culture-referenced prompts develop ideas for writing in all situations and each mode of discourse. The use of topics and African American texts connects students with realistic and relevant writing prompts. Fox suggests that writing teachers who recognize the urgent need to reconceive writing pedagogy can look to [African] American literacy theory for strategies of reading to interpret African American students’ writings that are free from a narrow understanding of dialect “interference,” strategies free from the residue of deficit theories of language that still govern the reading of African American student writing, and strategies that instead see African American literacy in social, economic, and historical contexts (292). Ladson-Billings suggests that culturally relevant teaching requires

recognizing African American culture as an essential strength to construct the education of African American children. Thus, culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy of opposition recognizing and celebrating African and African American culture (314). Culturally responsive teaching elicits substantial and intellectual reactions from students since it brings about and enhances student-centered critical thinking.

African American English and African American Rhetoric

Scholars have provided valuable research on African American English and the African American rhetorical tradition (Baker-Bell 2020; Ball, 1992; Balester, 1993; Gilyard, 1996, 1999; Haddix, 2010; Young, 2010; Perryman-Clark, 2013; Richardson, 2004; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007; and Smitherman and Wright, 1984). For example, Ball names the three most used patterns among African American student writers: circumlocution, narrative interspersion, and recursion. She defines circumlocution as writing “characterized by a series of implicitly associated topics with shifts that are lexically marked only by the use of ‘and.’” Narrative interspersion is a pattern that weaves narratives throughout the writing, and the recursion pattern is apparent when a writer introduces a topic and refers to it often with “different words or images.” Interspersion is a pattern in written discourse that will appear when the student is changing from one topic to another (Ball 509-511). In another study, Ball reports that “[t]eachers scored texts written in vernacular-based patterns (narrative interspersion and circumlocution) lower than those written in academic-based patterns” (520). Richardson analyzes the rhetorical patterns in students’ writing and found that the most frequent uses of Black preacher rhetoric in students’ texts were “references to the Bible...sermonizing and moralizing.” She reports that these features are usually characterized as “unsupported assumptions, disconnected ideas, unexplained examples, and truncated logic” (162). Balester concludes that these students shift from AAE in speech to Standard American English (SAE) in writing, which causes their writing to appear informal. Sealey-Ruiz’s study reveals three main trends that emerged in African American females’ writings: “language validation, the fostering of positive self and group identity, and self-affirmation or affirmation of goals” (44). These studies report a variety of written discourse patterns in African American students’ writings. Culture and language affect the writing style and structure of any individual. Consequently, each language group has a unique pattern of developing and structuring written text. The difference in the stylistic features of each language group involves cohesion, word choice, grammatical deviation, sentence structure, patterns of paragraph development, and organization.

Writing Curriculum at HBCUs

James explores the following questions: What is the subject matter of first-year writing at HBCUs? What does the writing curriculum look like at HBCUs? Are the mission statements of HBCUs reflected in their first-year writing program? Is African American English present in first-year writing courses at HBCUs? (22). She reports that the first-year writing courses at three HBCUs (Stillman College, Tougaloo College, and Tuskegee University) aligned with their institution's mission statements. However, she noted that first-year writing students had a vague understanding of African American English. More conversations are needed in the first-year writing classroom to help African American students value and appreciate their language as they learn the academic discourse and use Standard American English (ii). She argues that the "Conference on College Composition and Communication's Students' Right to their Own Language" resolution is not being fulfilled in the first-year writing classroom and that first-year composition instructors must rethink what constitutes Standard English and how attitudes toward language affect African American students' identity (ii). Some HBCU writing programs have recognized and incorporated AAE in various ways to change students' attitudes about the status of AAE and its use in writing good academic essays. The goal of HBCUs and PWIs is to graduate students proficient enough in Standard American English to write accurately written discourse. Hence, the intended readers understand that intention, purpose, and content. While HBCUs may employ various modes of instruction, the final effectiveness of their programs will be their students' ability to write acceptable discourse within the rules self-constraints of the accepted American English language.

Incorporating African American cultural materials in the writing and English curricula would provide African American students a content knowledge that would facilitate critical thinking skills and enhance analytical thinking and writing among male college students. Fox makes a valid point when he states that "teaching texts by African American authors teaches 'positions' (political, relationships between the literary critic and culture, history, and institutions). These 'positions' present intersections between race and history and history, race and institutions, race and gender. . . that would help writing teachers and their students map cultural and historical positions. . . as a means of exploring the relationship between self, race, language, and education" (292296). The quotations and topics from African American scholars, activists, individuals, and artists listed in Appendix A facilitate and enhance critical thinking and promote writing to learn. In addition, Redd recommends including African American rhetoric in the writing curriculum at HBCUs. She believes that instructors at HBCUs should teach students to weave African American English into Standard Written English (28). Teaching African American students about the Black Vernacular traditions and African American English connects them to the literacy legacies of Black people.

Teaching Writing at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

There is a continuous discussion about teaching writing and rhetorical composition, First-Year Writing Programs, and Writing Centers at HBCUs. In 1937, the College Language Association (CLA) was created because Blacks were not allowed to participate in MLA activities fully. Members of CLA progressed with teaching English/Composition to Black students at **Lincoln University and Morehouse College**. Most striking is the relative scarcity of historical accounts of composition instruction and rhetorical practices (HBCUs). However, there are rich, complex rhetorical traditions that have developed at HBCUs. Three separate symposiums held at North Carolina A&T in 2014, Howard University in 2018, and Morehouse College in 2019 spotlighted the needs of writing program administrators, composition teachers, and faculty who teach writing at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Jackson, Jackson, and Tafari argue that “the narrative about teaching writing to African American students is incomplete, and HBCUs are poised to fill the void left (192-193). Gilyard wrote that “there never was a time when we failed to contribute to the field in some way. We [HBCUs] may not have always been in the house of mainstream composition studies, but we were always knocking on the door” (642). For 150 years, HBCUs have developed curricula models, pedagogical strategies, and assessments to improve the writing skills of African American students. Writing programs at HBCUs have had the challenge of enhancing African American students’ literacy. In the 1960s, with the advent of open enrollment at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), they designed their Basic Writing Programs to teach Black students enrolled at PWIs for the first time based on writing programs at HBCUs. The field of Basic and Remedial Writing evolved from the Writing programs developed at PWIs. Writing program administrators, scholars, and teachers in basic writing, composition Studies, first year writing programs, and rhetoric and composition at PWIs have duplicated curricula and pedagogical strategies of HBCUs writing programs.

Assessment of African American Students’ Writing

Eller suggests that we need to examine how differences in students’ intentions are expressed linguistically and culturally in their written texts. Do these variations (if any) have cultural implications (and implications for designing topics, prompts, teaching, and assessment)? For example, do African American male students have different ways of meaning, and if so, do these variations become evident in a linguistic analysis of their written compositions (Eller 344). This current study investigated the interactions among the prompts that incorporated African American culture-referenced content and the quality of students’ writing samples elicited within the college pre-test and post-test examinations. It also analyzed the relationship between the prompts that incorporate African American culture-referenced

content and the syntactic complexity, coherence, fluency, organization, and length of an essay in male college students' writing elicited within the college pre-test and post-test examinations. The purpose of the assessment should determine the nature of the prompt. That is the goal of providing the best writing prompt from which all students can write. The goal of assessing African American students should be to test the stylistic devices, syntactic, knowledge, and organizational structures that may be linguistically and culturally specific for African American students. Universities' testing and placement examinations should incorporate culture-referenced prompts to investigate how African American students view various positions when asked to produce writing samples for placement. Researchers need to examine the particular discourse features of African American students' written language to relate these features (if relevant) to cultural positions.

Furthermore, in his article "Expanding the Dialogue on Writing Assessment at HBCUs: Foundational Assessment Concepts and Legacies of Historically Black Colleges and Universities," David Green, Jr. suggests that "HBCUs provide a unique site for inquiry into questions of writing assessment and social justice because of their long histories negotiating social justice agendas with an academic focus on development and knowledge building. He calls for call for "the study of writing assessment practices at HBCUs" and that "[s]tudying assessment practices within the context of HBCUs also provides a powerful heuristic for rethinking foundational measurement concepts like validity, reliability, and fairness (157). Zandra Jordan notes that HBCUs provide "informative sites for examining complex issues surrounding writing assessment and language diversity" (98). The relationship between culturally relevant writing tasks and the rhetorical process in written discourse needs to be investigated: (1) to identify and develop efficient analyses for evaluating African American students' writings; and (2) to ascertain the effects of social, cultural, socio-economic, and political circumstances on Black students' written discourse content and development. Quantitative and qualitative research on the writing produced by African American students in various discourse modes and proficient levels should be conducted using culturally relevant assessment models.

Recommendations for Further Study

This study analyzes the effects of culture-referenced essay prompts on the writing quality of 411 African American male students at Morehouse College. Although the two research questions were answered, many additional research opportunities related to this study still exist. Therefore, this study's areas can be replicated and expanded:

(1) Further research should investigate African American male students' attitudes toward the demands and content of different culture-referenced prompts.

Moreover, their preference for a particular topic type to determine which kind of topics interact to affect the performance of African American writers of differing reading and writing ability levels.

(2) Another study might determine how culture-referenced prompts designed for each discipline affect the writing of African American males.

(3) A study might approach the topic of writing from the students' perspective. What topics improve students' enjoyment of writing, and what topics have the opposite effect? What do students feel are the most impactful and helpful topics to enhance their writing?

(4) Another extension of the study could include a more longitudinal aspect of testing students' writing using a proficiency examination administered at the of their sophomore year and in their senior capstone course to determine if their writing skills improved or have declined over the past few years? What factors may have contributed to this improvement or decline?

(5) Future research might investigate the development of culture-referenced prompts that examine the influence of experiential demand, a feature of topics described by Greenberg that signifies the kind of knowledge a writing task demands and ranges from personal experiences to facts and generalizations. Research should also be conducted to determine the effects of culture-referenced prompts that incorporate cognitive needs required by different writing tasks and modes of discourse (e.g., narration, exposition, cause and effect, comparison and contrast, definition, description, and argumentation).

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Appendix A

Pre and Post-Test Topics –Fall 2018-Spring 2019

- 1A “No person is your friend who demands your silence or denies your right to know.”
—Alice Walker
- 2A “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”
—James Baldwin
- 3A “Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today.”
—Malcolm X
- 1B “When you control a man’s thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions.”
—Carter G. Woodson
- 2B “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” —Martin Luther King, Jr.
- 3B “The color of the skin is in no ways connected with strength of the mind or intellectual powers.”
—Benjamin Banneker
- 1C “Say it loud. I’m Black, and I’m proud.”
—James Brown
- 2C “Oppression makes a wise man mad.”
—Frederick Douglass
- 3C “There is no future for a people who deny their past.” —Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.
- 1D “Education is the medium by which a people are prepared for the creation of their own particular civilization and the advancement and glory of their own race.”
—Marcus Garvey
- 2D “For colored people to acquire learning in this country makes tyrants quake and tremble on their sandy foundation.”
—David Walker
- 3D “One ever feels his two-ness--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”
—W. E. B. Du Bois
- 1E “What you do for yourself depends on what you think of yourself. And what you think of yourself depends on what you know of yourself. And what you know of yourself depends on what you have been told.”
—Ghanaian proverb
- 2E “When I discover who I am, I’ll be free.”
—Ralph Ellison

3E “The first thing to do is to get into every school, private, public or otherwise, Negro literature and history [art, music, dance, anthropology, religion, political science, economics, philosophy, sociology, psychology, science and technology, film]. We are not trying to displace other literature, but trying to acquaint all children with Negro literature and history.”
—Booker T. Washington

Other Culturally Relevant Prompts

“Dear Young Black Males, It’s okay to be different. Don’t be afraid to be yourself. Have courage! Follow your dreams, no matter how BIG your dreams may seem. Attitude is everything! Make sure that you keep a positive one, in spite of any obstacles that may come your way. Don’t be so quick to give up, and please remember that self-discipline is your friend. Be strong, persevere, and most importantly, BELIEVE in yourself. Don’t listen to anybody’s negativity. Move forward knowing that you CAN and you WILL. Be unstoppable!”
—Stephanie Lahart

“Black men hold a pivotal role in the advancement of the Black community. Black men must take responsibility and accountability for themselves.” Discuss your views about the role(s) and responsibility(ies) you have as a Black man.

—Brandon Jones

“We’re the only people on the planet who have been taught to sing and praise our demeanment. I’m a bitch. I’m a hoe. I’m a gangster. I’m a thug. I’m a dog. [I’m a nigger]. If you can train a people to demean and degrade themselves, you can oppress them forever. You can program them to kill themselves and they won’t even know what happened.”
—Frances Cress Welsing

“What are your thoughts and feelings about the murder of George Floyd?”

“The trigger for white rage, inevitably, is black advancement. It is not the mere presence of black people that is the problem; rather, it is blackness with ambition, with drive, with purpose, with aspirations, and with demands for full and equal citizenship.”

—Carol Anderson

“You have just met someone you would like to become your friend, and you want to tell that person something about yourself. What would be the most memorable childhood event that happened to you that you would want to share with this person (how old were you, what happened, how did you feel)?

Appendix B

Assessment Standards for Essay Rubric

Criteria	Advanced (4) A	Proficient (3) B	Intermediate (2) C	Novice (1) F
Main idea	Essay has a focus and a clear thesis statement that responds to the topic.	Essay has a focus, but the thesis lacks specificity.	Essay's focus is unclear or not related to the topic.	Essay lacks a focus and/or fails to address the topic.
Evidence	Essay shows a good understanding of and response to critical arguments and ideas. Quotations or paraphrases are integrated into prose.	Essay shows an adequate understanding of and response to critical arguments and ideas. Quotations or paraphrases are clearly identified.	Essay shows a basic understanding of critical ideas. Essay shows some problems introducing and citing quotations or paraphrases.	Essay shows a lack of understanding. For example, textual support may be missing, or references may fail to identify source material adequately.
Organization	The introduction engages the reader and states the thesis. The body paragraphs connect to and develop the main idea logically. Transitions are clear. The conclusion points to the essay's purpose.	The introduction sets up the focus of the essay. Body paragraphs connect to the main idea but may need further development or clearer transitions. The conclusion summarizes the argument.	The Introduction is missing or not directed to the essay's focus. Body paragraphs too short (not developed) or too long (lack logical divisions into topics), or not connected to the main idea. Lacks transitions. Conclusion missing or off the topic.	The introduction is missing or not directed to the essay's focus. Body paragraphs not developed and/or lack connection to the main idea. Lacks transitions. Conclusion missing or off the topic.
Grammar, mechanics, and diction	Essay is essentially error-free and employs the conventions and diction of academic discourse.	Essay has occasional errors, but is comprehensible and attempts the conventions and diction of academic discourse.	Essay has numerous or distracting errors but is comprehensible and commensurate with good writing.	Essay lacks mastery of basic skills and makes numerous grammatical and mechanical errors and errors in syntax, paragraphing, and diction.

Appendix C (sample pre-test)

“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”
—James Baldwin

People often avoid their problems because they are nervous of the outcome. Those who fulfill their commitments, promises, and goals are the ones who make a real difference in this world. This statement by famous American novelist James Baldwin, “Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced” holds a deep meaning that many need to grasp today in order to be successful with anything that they choose to do. It explains the dilemma of one conquering their problems. This phrase is universal and can be applied to almost any challenge in life.

In order to grow intellectually one must realize that every problem you come across cannot always necessarily be fixed. Analyzing the first part of the phrase, “Not everything that is faced can be changed,” means that you will come across problems that are inevitable. It is normal in human nature to take losses. The concept of perfection is not real because there are flaws within everything. Perfection is the unimaginable and does not exist because any situation has room to improve. It is unhealthy to stress over problems that one cannot do anything about. There are things one cannot change and one must learn to accept them.

On the contrast, there are challenges that can be fixed, but one may never know unless they attempt to change. The next portion of the quotation from James Baldwin states, “but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” Meaning that problems that are avoidable will not go away unless you do something about it. This particularly is a strong life lesson to learn, avoidable problems do not solve on their own and in fact have room to intensify over time if not

dealt with. People tend to run away from their issues with the mindset that it will go away on its own when that is far from the truth.

After analyzing the quote by famous American novelist James Baldwin, “Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” is very impactful and holds lot of potential in the lives of many. It reminds everyone that problems do not fix themselves and one will never the outcome or see a change in a situation unless something is done to improve the given circumstances. It also reminds those to not live in stress after crossing paths with a problem that is inevitable.

Comment: This essay includes 409 words and 20 sentence (average sentence length 20.4 words). Its proficiency level of writing on the pre-test is represented below:

Proficiency Level	Thesis Main Idea	Evidence Support	Organization Development	Grammar, Mechanics, and Diction
Intermediate Level (2)	This essay's focus is unclear or not clearly related to the topic.	This essay shows basic understanding of key ideas. The essay shows some problems introducing and citing quotations or paraphrases.	Introduction missing or not clearly directed to the essay's focus. Body paragraphs too short (not developed) or too long (lack logical divisions into topics) or not clearly connected to main idea. It lacks transitions. Conclusion missing or off the topic.	This essay has numerous or distracting errors but is comprehensible and commensurate with good writing.

Appendix D (sample post-test)

“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”
—James Baldwin

As a species human beings have come a long way. They have been through disease, war, death, and many other tragedies. For centuries humans have suffered racism and other forms of discrimination that go against human rights. All of these issues have not been solved, but they have been made better over time. James Baldwin beautifully puts it as “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced. If people decide to give up on the world then the world will give up on them.

Humanity will continue to have problems, but without facing these problems they will continue to stay just as bad as they are. If human beings decided that since there will always be disease, we will stop trying to advance medicine then so

many would die and continue to die from diseases that have long been eradicated. Medicine is continually advanced so that the quality of life for people can be improved. People cannot simply give up hope on trying to make the world a better place because problems exist. If this is the case then humanity would have been doomed a long time ago. People must face their problems so something can change and perhaps overtime, like in medicine drastic changes will be made. If humanity becomes full of people who do not want to fix the world's problems then humanity would not have lasted this long, and if it did, society would be in a fixed state. Nothing would ever change, what society was two hundred years ago would be the same today.

Baldwin, being an African American subject to racism all of his life knows this more than anyone. It would be easy for Baldwin to stop advocating for social justice and just conform to society, but he chose to face the problem of racism head on and try to make a change. Although racism is still present in modern society, if he and other people who publicly fought against racism decided to stop trying to get rid of racism, racism would be much worse in America. Attempting something does not mean you will be successful all of the time, but it means you would have done something. If every human being decided to not face any of their issues, then humanity would not last. The world keeps moving forward, the Earth will not decide to stop spinning on its axis. Baldwin's quote is suggesting that we do not live in a stagnant reality we have to move forward like everything else. Plants and animals evolve and learn from their mistakes, humans are to do the same or else they will be left behind.

In anything people do there will always be problems they have to face. Baldwin discusses what to do under these circumstances. People can either face their problems head on or do nothing. Neither option will completely solve the problem, but one will make progress towards doing so. Modern medicine has not eradicated all disease, but improves quality of life and the life expectancy of people in the modern era compared to people five hundred years ago. These steps towards solving problems makes things better for all people. However, if people were to not make these advancements then people would die and suffer, which could be prevented. Baldwin's point is that we cannot stay stagnant, we must do something to fix problems in the world or else nothing will change, in fact humanity would most likely deteriorate. Standing by and doing nothing to fix worldwide issues will doom humanity.

Comment: This essay includes 597 words and 31 sentence (average sentence length 19.3 words). Its proficiency level of writing on the post-test is represented below:

Proficiency Level	Thesis Main Idea	Evidence Support	Organization Development	Grammar, Mechanics, and Diction
Proficient Level (3)	This essay has a focus but the thesis lacks specificity	This essay shows adequate understanding of and response to key arguments and ideas. Quotations or paraphrases are clearly identified.	Introduction sets up the focus of the essay. Body paragraphs connect to the main idea but need further development and/or clearer transitions. Conclusion summarizes the argument.	This essay has occasional errors, but is comprehensible and attempts the conventions and diction of academic discourse.

Appendix E (sample pre-test)

“When you control a man’s thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions.”
—**Carter G. Woodson**

Carter G. Woodson’s *Miseducation of the Negro* focuses heavily on how poorly Blacks are educated on their culture and just how dangerous the effects are on the African-American community. With very few classes in African-American culture and African-American history it’s hard for blacks to become truly conscious of the world around them. How does miseducation hinder blacks and their society on the issue of racism?

The “educated Negroes” have the attitudes of contempt toward their own people because in their own as well as in their mixed schools the Negroes are taught to admire the Hebrew, the Greek, The Latin, and the Teuton and to despise the African. While this isn’t as true back then as it is today, today the African does not have as big a share in history as the others cultures do. The African culture is diluted in the school system for one to many reasons thus not giving blacks proper understanding of their culture.

The thought of inferiority of the Negro is drilled into him in almost every class he enters and in almost every book he studies. As James Baldwin put it his talk to teachers “But on the other hand he is also assured by his country and his countrymen that he has never contributed anything to civilization – that his past is nothing more than a record of humiliations gladly endured.” African American culture has always been downplayed in America while European culture as gruesome as it is glorified. Thus making the average African-American question his own existence and purpose in the world simply because he is being told his culture will only be prosperous under the white man.

Due to Miseducation blacks forcibly become unconscious on the issue of racism and just what it is. Miseducation hinders the black mind view of his own culture and the effects America has had on it thus the Negro becomes unaware on why his people act the way they do and he believe that they are just squandering their existence. He also glorifies and becomes comfortable with White culture adopting the same negative views of his culture that White society has. Miseducation in terms of racism is a huge step back for the African-American race.

The great Malcom X once said “Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today”. Reading this quote I could only wonder what happens when one’s education becomes corrupt? What happens when the education that is being taught is built upon misleading those who partake in it? What then happens to their future? These questions arose within my mind in relation to Dr. Carter G Woodson’s book the “The Mis-Education of the Negro” where he makes the assertion that education within black communities is flawed. In retrospect i agree with Dr. Woodsons analysis of the role that education plays for black people, however I feel as though his work is incomplete in some aspects.

Comment: This essay includes 494 words and 20 sentence (average sentence length 24.7 words). Its proficiency level of writing on the pre-test is represented below:

Proficiency Level	Thesis Main Idea	Evidence Support	Organization Development	Grammar, Mechanics, and Diction
Intermediate Level (2)	This essay's focus is unclear or not clearly related to the topic.	This essay shows basic understanding of key ideas. The essay shows some problems introducing and citing quotations or paraphrases.	Introduction missing or not clearly directed to the essay's focus. Body paragraphs too short (not developed) or too long (lack logical divisions into topics) or not clearly connected to main idea. It lacks transitions. Conclusion missing or off the topic.	This essay has numerous or distracting errors but is comprehensible and commensurate with good writing.

Appendix F
(sample post-test)

“When you control a man’s thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions.”
—**Carter G. Woodson**

In this excerpt of “The Mis-Education of The Negro” by Carter G. Woodson, Woodson addresses many issues revolving around the African American community. Many of these issues have occurred for many decades before, and many are still occurring in 2017. The issues that Woodson presents in this excerpt strongly revolve around the Black community, and how the Black community has become so far removed from their culture and belief standards that were once the norm. He points these suggested topics out as a significant issue, especially when it is being caused by the very thing that is supposed to help the Black community, education. Woodson has specified education as being the root cause of these very issues because the lack of information given to the Black community about prominent people in the Black community is few in numbers, if not nonexistent. The effects of this then in turn causes the Black community to become whitewashed, basically overturned by the White community.

“The Mis-Education of The Negro” by Woodson suggests that he is saying that White people are purposely utilizing the education system, a system that the Black community has fought to have for so long, to ultimately swindle these Black people into almost unconsciously assimilating to White culture. If you think about it, it is actually a brilliant plan, having White people utilize the thing that Black men, women, and children have fought to have the right for. Education is the very thing they have sought to receive for themselves and their community. It is a brilliant plan. By whitewashing Black people, Black people will then begin to turn on those who are a part of their own community. Once the community begins to become divided that then causes a riff within the community and then families within the community, then causes issues within the household, and finally issues within the very person themselves. This division that education was and is causing with the Black community continues to grow every day. The system created Black people that began to feel that they were not obligated to uplift and encourage their fellow Black neighbor, because they had begun to assimilate to White standards which was to only look out for yourself and where you were going societally, and not to worry about anyone else. This is a very hostile way of thinking that would really hurt the Black community because a group of people who were once so strong together and could not be divided no matter what, will then begin turning their backs on one another and looking the other way when they saw someone in need. This type of Black people rarely gave back to their community because they felt that it just “was not their problem”.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities have seen the issues that the Black community are encountering and have taken this very issue to heart to try to rectify the issues and to correct what has now been a broken issue for way too long. If this division continues then we will come to a point where there will be no rectifying the issue whatsoever. HBCU's have been known for trying to bring the Black community together, and to commit to uplifting their Black brothers and sister because the sad truth is, if we do not do it, then who will? We have to take the initiative, and the task to want to do better for ourselves, and want to do better for our community for someone else to want to help us. The Black community has to show the outsiders who are looking in that we are willing to take on the task to begin cleaning our own house before we want to let people inside. It is not easy, and I do not believe that Woodson is saying that it is or should be an easy task but that the Black community has to be willing to stand up for a cause, to stand up for our own cause which is to help ourselves, and our community first. In our eyes, we should see beyond me, myself, and I, we need to learn to be able to see "us".

Woodson then argues that if the Black community has to adopt any rules and rituals from the White community then we should adopt their ways in which they look after one another. This would become a tactic that would help the Black community grow stronger as a whole, because the White community typically sticks together in times of need. That fact tends to be true in my own personal opinion. I believe that the Black community may have misinterpreted what we have taken from the White community as, "look after yourself, do what you have to do, forget anyone that you are leaving behind, and do whatever it is that you have to do to get to where you want to be". That is a major mis-interpretation. That fault is mainly on The Black community because we were so quick to assume and try to beat other Black people to the conclusion that we did not take the time to fully evaluate their actions and therefore we then in turn interpreted it for something that it really was not.

Finally, the Black community has to do a better job of not being so invested in what and how other people will perceive us because ultimately it does not matter. The Black community has to get back to its roots of uplifting one another and making sure that Black people are continuing to soar right alongside of one another, because that is what we were doing in the past and Black on Black crime was down, there was not so much hatred within the community, and we were ultimately striving with love and care because that was the norm. With that we need to let go of trying to adapt to White standards of "how to live life" and get back to being ourselves, and what we know, because it has been proven to work.

Comment: This essay includes 1011 words and 32 sentence (average sentence length 31.6 words). Its proficiency level of writing on the post-test is represented below:

Proficiency Level	Thesis Main Idea	Evidence Support	Organization Development	Grammar, Mechanics, and Diction
Proficient Level (3)	This essay has a focus but the thesis lacks specificity	This essay shows adequate understanding of and response to key arguments and ideas. Quotations or paraphrases are clearly identified.	Introduction sets up the focus of the essay. Body paragraphs connect to the main idea but need further development and/or clearer transitions. Conclusion summarizes the argument.	This essay has occasional errors, but is comprehensible and attempts the conventions and diction of academic discourse.

Appendix G (sample pre-test)

“Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today.”
—**Malcolm X**

Malcom X has always been a Trend setter when it came to giving our people hope in times of need. He has always given us hope of when it comes speaking his mind on certain subjects. He was a pioneer for important topics for our people such as education. When I look at the quotetoation that is Given I see It As two whole parts. In the end It combines to build something that Is a very true and understanding statement for the future. This quote means to me the importance of how education can lead us to tomorrow.

The first part of this Quotation is “Education is our passport to the future,”. What I can understand from this first part of the Quote is the importance of education. This opens up the fire and future of our people. Malcom X was an advocate for the Civil Rights Movement. In the 1960’s getting an education was nearly impossible for African Americans. Our people needed motivation and a powerful response to those who question our right for education. Malcom X has many quotes for explaining the importance of education. In this quote he explains that importance of Education and how it leads to the future.

In the second part of the quotation explains more about the future tense. One of MalcomX’s tendencies were to talk about the future and what it meant to stay positive. “for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today. Which means that he wants for us to remain and keep hopeful. We need to prepare for today and how that can Impact tomorrow.

Once you put these two Quotes together. It blends A creative quote that talks about Education and the future. Which was Malcom X’s greatest goals During the Civil Rights Movement.

Comment: This essay includes 299 words and 21 sentence (average sentence length 14.6 words). Its proficiency level of writing on the pre-test is represented below:

Proficiency Level	Thesis Main Idea	Evidence Support	Organization Development	Grammar, Mechanics, and Diction
Intermediate Level (2)	This essay's focus is unclear or not clearly related to the topic.	This essay shows basic understanding of key ideas. The essay shows some problems introducing and citing quotations or paraphrases.	Introduction missing or not clearly directed to the essay's focus. Body paragraphs too short (not developed) or too long (lack logical divisions into topics) or not clearly connected to main idea. It lacks transitions. Conclusion missing or off the topic.	This essay has numerous or distracting errors but is comprehensible and commensurate with good writing.

Appendix H
(sample post-test)

“Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today.”
—**Malcolm X**

Malcom X fathered a significant quote that plays a large role in my life to this day. That quote states that “Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today.” Throughout my life I always struggled when it came to doing simple things as going to school everyday. My mother told me this specific quote and taped it onto my door to consistently remind me that in order to prepare for tomorrow I’ve got to get this education. All the time, I would hear this quote, but when I arrived here at Morehouse I realized what she was trying to do for me.

This quote obviously means that in order for us to succeed, we need a particular component. Without that component we could be set back immensely. This component is our education, our education is much more than something you learn in order to get past school. This education is vital to us, it can help us treat and address problems in a good manner. Without this education many people would be without jobs, names, and many other essential items.

Our education is also our formula to solve tomorrow and in my eyes I believe that is what Malcom X was trying to promote. The people that give us this education are essentially giving us the password to solve this thing called life. With our education our future achievements cannot be measured, the list would be endless. Life can flow so much easier with this education, however by no means is this education easy to attain. That's the thing about life, nothing worth chasing is easy to acquire.

Through today, you can set yourself up for a good tomorrow. When you see the key for a test what will you do, your immediate thought is to study the key to see if your answers will align with it. Malcom X provided us with a lesson that can take you places in life that you couldn't ever dream of. He showed us that we have the key for tomorrow and if we want that tomorrow to be a successful one we know how to do it.

What Malcom X stated spoke volumes to me because that all life is, is the preparation for the next day. Poor preparation will lead to a poor day, but poor prep is always a bad thing, if you don't study for a test will you pass? Everyday I wake up & consistently get up & go to class, I do this because I believe Malcom to be true in his words. If you live by these words that he spoke life will be nowhere near as hard as it would be for someone who abides by something else. Throughout life you've got to remember that in everything you do, there is a form of preparation. In life & for every day that follows that prep is your education. When you work for that education day in day out, tomorrow will match the energy you put in for it on the previous day.

Comment: This essay included 517 words and 26 sentence (average sentence length 17.7 words). Its proficiency level of writing on the post-test is represented below:

Proficiency Level	Thesis Main Idea	Evidence Support	Organization Development	Grammar, Mechanics, and Diction
Proficient Level (3)	This essay has a focus but the thesis lacks specificity	This essay shows adequate understanding of and response to key arguments and ideas. Quotations or paraphrases are clearly identified.	Introduction sets up the focus of the essay. Body paragraphs connect to the main idea but need further development and/or clearer transitions. Conclusion summarizes the argument.	This essay has occasional errors, but is comprehensible and attempts the conventions and diction of academic discourse.

Appendix I
(sample pre-test)

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” —**Martin Luther King, Jr.**

What is justice? For most it is a righteous word that means the punishment of some type of wrong doing. If this is considered to be the definition everyone is already committing an injustice. This can be said because your justice might not be the same as my justice. Or could be in direct opposition of my justice. So to this I say lets completely get rid of what society believes what justice is. The quote “Injustice everywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” is a valid one and the only way to truely achieve this is to completely get rid of justice everywhere.

While this is a radical and idealistic way of thinking it is the only way to get rid of all injustice. If morals change this actually wouldn't be that hard to pull off. The only way to have absolute justice would be to get rid of everyone's injustice. But because the world can't exist without injustice we create an injustice that bring everyone together. This is a terrible way of thinking but it would make everyone put aside their difference to get rid of this overbearing problem. With everyone working together people could see there isn't a difference from one another.

Ethically this may not be the best choice because many people would lose their lives in the long run it would save the human race from injustice. Bring it back to the quote by creating one huge global injustice people would have to get over their small injustices and by doing so creating a global justice that can protect everyones interests.

Comment: This essay includes 266 words and 15 sentence (average sentence length 17.7 words). Its proficiency level of writing on the pre-test is represented below:

Proficiency Level	Thesis Main Idea	Evidence Support	Organization Development	Grammar, Mechanics, and Diction
Intermediate Level (2)	This essay's focus is unclear or not clearly related to the topic.	This essay shows basic understanding of key ideas. The essay shows some problems introducing and citing quotations or paraphrases.	Introduction missing or not clearly directed to the essay's focus. Body paragraphs too short (not developed) or too long (lack logical divisions into topics) or not clearly connected to main idea. It lacks transitions. Conclusion missing or off the topic.	This essay has numerous or distracting errors but is comprehensible and commensurate with good writing.

Appendix J (sample post-test)

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” —**Martin Luther King, Jr.**

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a very important leading figure in the Civil Rights Movement, not only created solutions to injustice in the world but also discovered the root of the problem with injustice everywhere. For years, African Americans have been the of injustice, mainly from whites dating back to slavery days. Injustice in any community often times leads to anger and revenge, resulting in murder and death. Just as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stated, no matter how small the scale of the problem is, it will eventually impact others in the same light.

Injustice still exists today as many races in America are treated unfairly and receive undeserved outcomes. People today are more aware about these incidents through organizations fighting for justice and via social media. Injustice is not just amongst racism but could also be in the criminal justice system or the education provided in areas of little wealth. Injustice disturbs the peace of this great nation as we are exposed to a world of instability and dehumanization. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. took on injustice head on as the organized numerous many movements and non violent protests to combat a form of injustice called racism.

Personally I feel that together we can over come injustice and create a world that is understanding of differences instead of tearing each other apart over these differences. As an African American growing up in a predominantly white school, I was exposed to a lot of injustice just because of the color of my skin, but sadly I’m not the only person going through the same experience. Nor can I change the world single handedly, thus I believe that someday we will get better at communicating with each other and living our lives in the other person’s, opening out perspectives for the better.

Furthermore, in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., justice will never exist again unless we take on the necessary steps to stop injustice. The fact that the world is still in need of change has now become urgent. If we treat everyone around us with the same love and care as we treat ourselves then this world will be a more beautiful place to live in. If we do this then justice anywhere will be a threat to injustice everywhere.

Comment: This essay includes 385 words and 16 sentence (average sentence length 24.1 words). Its proficiency level of writing on the post-test is represented below:

Proficiency Level	Thesis Main Idea	Evidence Support	Organization Development	Grammar, Mechanics, and Diction
Proficient Level (3)	This essay has a focus but the thesis lacks specificity	This essay shows adequate understanding of and response to key arguments and ideas. Quotations or paraphrases are clearly identified.	Introduction sets up the focus of the essay. Body paragraphs connect to the main idea but need further development and/or clearer transitions. Conclusion summarizes the argument.	This essay has occasional errors, but is comprehensible and attempts the conventions and diction of academic discourse.

Appendix K
(sample pre-test)

Say it loud. I’m Black, and I’m proud.” —James Brown

“Say it Loud! I’m Black and I’m proud”. One of Brown’s most influential songs led the movement for black people having a new found pride within themselves. During the aftermath of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. being killed, Brown was in Los Angeles, California where he witnessed a fight between black people. The event caused him to go back to his hotel and write this song.

The impact of “Say it Loud! I’m Black and I’m Proud!” had its positives and negatives Positively, the song gave hope in the time of need. Negatively, the song was seen as militant and angry. Brown stated in 1986 “... if you listen to it, it sounds like a children’s song. That’s why I had children in it, so children who heard it could grow up feeling pride...”. Although his intentions are justifiable, Brown lost much of his crossover audience due to the song. Brown also stated, “The racial makeup at my concerts was mostly black after that. I don’t regret it, though, even if it was misunderstood.”. Nevertheless, the song affected millions and put pride and hope back in black people’s state of mind.

Currently, the song is just as important as it was in 1968. Our black brothers are constantly being shot at, falsely accused, and murdered for actions we did not commit. Even though segregation is illegal, even though we can sit anywhere we want on any public transportation, and even though it is no longer to love someone of the other race, there is still a need for black pride. Racism did not vanish off the

face of the earth, So when we are faced with adversity, we must always remember to “Say it Loud! I’m Black and I’m Proud!”

Comment: This essay includes 290 words and 16 sentence (average sentence length 18.1 words). Its proficiency level of writing on the pre-test is represented below:

Proficiency Level	Thesis Main Idea	Evidence Support	Organization Development
Proficient Level (3)	This essay has a focus but the thesis lacks specificity	This essay shows adequate understanding of and response to key arguments and ideas. Quotations or paraphrases are clearly identified.	Introduction sets up the focus of the essay. Body paragraphs connect to the main idea but need further development and/or clearer transitions. Conclusion summarizes the argument.

Appendix L (sample post-test)

Say it loud. I’m Black, and I’m proud.”

—James Brown

“Say it loud. I’m black and I’m proud.” This phrase is stated by James Brown. He decided to use his stature as a musician to influence a community as a whole. Through his speech, he influenced the mindset of all. Indoctrination has brainwashed African Americans to believe they are inferior. This, however, is outright dumb. With influential leaders such as James Brown, people should be proud of the melanin in their skin. This quote has a positive effect on me through positivity, ascension, and leadership.

The quote speaks to me in a positive manner. This quote exemplifies how one’s speech brightens others. The power of the tongue has vital importance. Through speech, many deeds are possible. Mantras, certain sounds, are sounds that when spoken bring a great deal of power. Through this, people believe that whatever is said will definitely happen. With this idea of positivity, the quote shows how speech is crucial for success.

Ascension is another aspect that is intertwined with the quote. Knowledge is pivotal in terms of ascending towards greater goals. This quote provides information that is necessary to advance. Knowing one’s status is beneficial to themselves and successfully binds them to greater thoughts. Through epistemology, one finds inner truth and exploits the negative perceptions dawned on them. I find this especially beneficial to me, as I was once lost. Stuck between shifting mindsets and a lack

of self-confidence, all I needed were some reassuring words, and these were the words. I experienced an epiphany and understood myself truly. In a sense, being narcissistic towards myself ultimately provided inner peace and happiness. James Brown and his musical presence invoked a spirit of pride in me.

Lastly, a aspect of leadership is implied with this quote. It takes a leader to understand the skill of manipulation. James Brown understood the manipulative ways of the oppressors. Rather than submit to their teachings, he reversed the teaching and created his own. He understood his prowess as a musician and stated a opinionated fact. The opinionated part is removed as this is is now a fact. The possibility of convincing me to hate my own skin is useless. I know for a fact the trials and tribulations of my ancestors. I know the struggles my people face today. I know the fight escalates day by day. Yes I know, and refuse to go back. I refuse to allow the oppressed to remain in a state of shambles. I refuse to lower my tone. This simple quote has inspired me to practice my rights for my people.

All in all, this quote has infused me with pride for my people. I never want to feel oppressed or humiliated ever again. I know the extreme pride James Brown feels when he states, “Say it loud, I’m Black and I’m proud.” This simple quote holds massive weight. Never will I cease to restrict myself from advancing. I will, through positivity, ascension, and leadership, advance in society.

Comment: This essay includes 493 words and 46 sentence (average sentence length 10.7 words). Its proficiency level of writing on the post-test is represented below:

Proficiency Level	Thesis Main Idea	Evidence Support	Organization Development	Grammar, Mechanics, and Diction
Advanced Level (4)	This essay has a focus and a clear thesis statement that responds to the topic.	This essay shows good understanding of and response to key arguments and ideas. Quotations or paraphrases are integrated into prose.	Introduction engages the reader and states thesis. Body paragraphs connect to and develop main idea logically. Transitions are clear. Conclusion points to essay's purpose.	This essay is essentially error-free and employs the conventions and diction of academic discourse.

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Meaning and Inspiration: A Brief Reflection on *CLAJ*'s Creative Writing Section

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Greetings, Dear CLA Colleagues, Comrades, Kinfolks! Invocations of total well-being and health to all, from the Cherokee Homelands (Appalachian foothills of Northeast Georgia) where, in the midst of ongoing world pandemics (including toxic ytmale supremacy & global acts of violent misogyny), i still find joy, faith, meaning, and inspiration in us and in the world(s) that we create.

Here, as at CLA conferences, we acknowledge and honor our collective past, as we create and *insure* the future. *CLAJ* must include creative writing because CLA members generate passion whether as creators of literature or critics of literature. Literary criticism may be one of the most intimate of passionate acts. As critics, we write, often sublimely, about poetry, short stories, creative non-fiction, novels, and emergent forms of literature. As such, *CLAJ* needs a sustained engagement with creative writers and their works to showcase, not only traditional creative writing, but also inter-disciplinary, cross-genre collaborations and interactive art forms. Multi-generational, multi-gendered creatives are working with archival and futuristic art forms, setting standards for inclusivity and boundary breaking.

There are many reasons, including my being a poet, literary and performance artist with a passion for dance, music, and photography, for my belief that a creative section is critical for *CLAJ*. This organization (and its publication) has been a necessary aspect of my life, of our lives, and it should be a place where both our scholarly-academic selves and our creative- (more) authentic selves can find a home. Wonderfully, these offerings from our colleagues, Dr. Sandy Govan, Dr. Seretha Williams, and Dr. A. Rich Robinson exhibit a commitment to the creativity that shapes our scholarship. Robinson's creative non-fiction piece, "Testament" is a tale of the sometimes excruciating, traumatic experience of coming out to a family member. The character's terse sense of humor adds a unique dimension to this story.

Govan (whom i affectionately call "Dr. Sandy") gave me the pleasure of hearing her read these poems. The musical rhythms, word choice, rich resonance of "Dem Bones," plus the archival historical content of "Ms. Betty's Fro," leaves me dancing and grinning. Williams's sweet, well-crafted, evocative "Gary, Indiana: A Poem" and "Augusta, Georgia" are rich with descriptive energy, intonational rhythms, and immediacy. Each one has something unique to offer the *CLAJ* audiences.

Now, in closing, i am listening to Duke Ellington's "New Orleans Suite" and Rosie Ledet's "I'm a Woman," as i mourn and celebrate our indomitable Adelle (*Adella Adella the Storyteller*) Gautier of New Orleans (Jan. 15-1948-Aug. 10, 2021). While i do often listen and dance to music as part of my writing process, not quite like this. Yet, in honoring her spirit, i move forward, welcoming the meaning and inspiration that art and creativity offers us. Peace and love, Everybody.

Gary, Indiana: A Poem

Seretha Williams

Built on dune sand and immigrant backs,
Gary was the city of the twentieth century.
The ghosts of the indigenous Calumet
haunt the rusted belt that squeezed life out of
Sears Roebuck and Frank Lloyd Wright homes.
The great lake threatens to swell over the
smokestacks and reclaim downtown as shoreline.
This stilled city was a town of steel where
Africans in exile built safe harbors among
trees bearing progeny, not strange fruit.
The sands of Gary sing quietly now;
marram grass and driftwood bespeckle southern shores.
Gary, Indiana, Indiana, Indiana,
my home sweet home.

Augusta, Georgia

Seretha Williams

Pinks and whites
bloom in every neighborhood

in Augusta, Georgia
where trees are a metaphor

for the coming together
of black and white

houses with centipede lawns or swept-clean red patches
with metal, glass, mesh storm doors

that set the backdrops
of Southern porches framed
by azaleas and dogwoods.

Cities within a city,
separate and unequal,
South and east meet west and north

in Augusta where you can smell the
funk of race, the stench of class

travelling between Sand Hills and Summerville,
Pinched Gut and Bethlehem,
Laney Walker and Harrisburg.

Augusta, where the Westobou falls
across the Piedmont
and the ghost of Bobby Jones
walks the greens of Fruitland.

Augusta, where Woodrow Wilson
spent his childhood
and Butterfly McQueen caught fire
lighting a kerosene heater.

Here, pinks and whites bloom
in April, the month when
neighborhoods look the same.

Monroe, Georgia

Seretha Williams

(after a trip to the Morris Museum)

The horror unfolded on July 25, 1946. Two couples,
George and Mae Dorsey and Roger
and Dorothy Malcolm,
were lynched at Moore's Ford Bridge. Two couples
were dragged out of a truck, down a trail,
and tied to dogwoods. The bodies
of four human beings were penetrated
by a barrage of ammunition. The souls
of four human beings oozed into the dirt
beneath their feet. Everyone
knew the perpetrators of this crime. No one
uttered a word.

Up the road, a boy pumps well water, gazes at azure skies and dreams of
flying. His lean arms pull slowly on the handle, prolonging this moment
of solitude, of possibility.

In July, pristine cotton flowers have given way
to the split-open bolls ready to be picked. Cotton folds
into the horizon, and field hands deftly pick fibers
from between dried bristles that slash skin like razors.

Hums of Leadbelly's blues rise up from the rows and
lilt on the slight breeze that teases the backs of stooped-over workers.
Dusk settles over Georgia. The field hands stand in line.
The sharecroppers wait for judgment.

The cotton haul must be weighed. It will not be enough. It is never enough to free them from this land.

The boy holds two sticks in his right hand, a cross, and swoops his outstretched arms through the air as he runs unfettered through broomsedge, circling the grayed home where he and all his siblings were born.

Near the bridge, where teenagers play at love, the FBI recovers spent bullets from shotguns and pistols. President Truman sends men to ask questions, but Georgia is silent; the bridge is an impasse not even the brave are willing to cross. Walton County looks like a place where men and women can breathe. Farms and smiling faces are organic to the Piedmont topography. The air stifles. Red clay chokes.

Murders go unsolved.

Up the road, a boy watches the sun slip behind dogwoods; he imagines a life beyond those trees, flaps his lean arms preparing to fly over broomsedge, over cotton, over dogwoods, over bridge, over Apalachee, over, over, over.

Dem Bones

Sandy Govan

Used to be I worried
struggled even some might say
angry with my body my joints and yes
dem bones
Cockeyed crooked skewered bones
bones not made
of water and sand
when da Lord was making Man
annoyed by how they fit or don't together

Since my arrival to my risible years
the grating and the grinding
the cracking and casual snapping
the all too often locking popping twisting turning
of often painful too loose joints
while they supposed to be holding me firm is,
as they say,
annoying.

Now I know in most true lives
the center does not always hold
and bodies before things will fall apart
and no matter the light in my eyes
or the charm of my smile
or that never met a stranger
way of walking through the world
or my Chicago way of loving folks

and Louisiana Hot Sauce
whatever the heat my outer self projects
it is the interior disjointed joints
the inflexible muscle those brittle bits
of bone
on bone
or muscle altogether lax

The constant binding grinding tearing
'till all connecting links
dissolve
disband
disintegrate
leaving behind
to do as they will
joints or bones
to stand alone
make do on their own

Oh dem bones

Bones that may
or may not
rise again
Dem Bones
Dem Bones
Dem Bones

**Ms. Betty's 'Fro
(On Women's Day)**

Sandy Govan

Glorious, dense, impenetrable
thicket atop a long angular frame
Ms. Betty's unconquered 'fro
renounces ribbons braids barrettes combs
heat hats caps scarves
to stand staunch
unwavering, majestic.

I cannot imagine it suppressed
constrained by any fashionable cover
nor by a drum major's marching rig
I cannot envision it yielding
one inch to parts or twists
or complicated curls
to Dreadlocks or Sisterlocks
and certainly never
the dreaded pressing comb.

Perhaps a skillful scissor sculpts it
now and again and surely
to retain its beauty it must be washed
and somehow dried now and then

but whenever I look
that magnificent
Unthinned Bush remains
dense
impenetrable
unbossed by any hair taming tool

Ms. Betty's Magnificent Afro
Proud
Natural
Uncompromised

Testament

Angelo Rich Robinson

The Summer of 1998 begins as my previous three summers: working in Atlanta using the skills from my first career as a computer programmer analyst. I'm on break from doctoral studies in English at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. While routine, there is something new to this summer. In June, I officiated at two friends' wedding in western Virginia and I visited Europe for the first time with a trip to the Netherlands in early July. But now, both of these new and exciting experiences seem like a lifetime ago, although it is only July 24th. I'm sure my impending trip home and what I must face there have much to do with agony and pain replacing the immediacy and joy of these experiences. Adding to the emotional misery, I was plagued with the distress from a multitude of canker sores in my mouth. This is already the most stressful week of my life and it's only Friday.

With existential dread and physical discomfort, I board a flight home to Pensacola. On the plane, I sit next to a white minister who questions me about my faith. I wonder if this is a sign from God that I'm about to do the wrong thing. He continues to talk about worshipping and attempts to blame blacks for the lack of integration during Sunday worship. I politely point out the errors in his thinking, educating him that it was whites who would only worship with blacks if they were in segregated inferior spaces or refused to worship with blacks at all. He doesn't say much after that. I'm reassured that God did not send him as a sign to abandon my mission.

I have told no one that I am flying home to finally share the truth about my sexuality with my parents, particularly Mama. I have always known that I would do this because I wanted her to hear it from me firsthand. I have never wanted her to get this news from a second party, and I certainly have never wanted someone to use it in an attempt to hurt her. Not surprisingly, I decide to put it in a letter that I will present to her. As the nine drafts attest, it is the most important letter that I've written in my life.

I arrive home late Friday evening but do not plan to share the letter with Mama that night. She works overnight, and I don't want to be insensitive. She has also previously insisted that she not be given any bad news before going to work--and definitely not at work. As a histologist, she works with sharp medical instruments and fears cutting herself upon hearing bad news. I have little doubt that this will be

bad news to her. So although it is killing me, I wait. I have waited thirty-six years; I guess I can wait one more night.

It was a long night to say the least. Between the anxiety and the pain from the numerous canker sores, I don't get much sleep, and the sleep I get isn't that good. When Mama arrives home from work the next morning, she is busy with tasks. But she immediately begins to ask about my trip to Amsterdam. She is also curious about what I bought her. The gift is uncharacteristically skimpy, and I feel terrible about it but linen from Belgium was the only thing that was truly unique. Of course, there's also Belgium chocolate, but that doesn't appeal to her. So after talking pleasantries about the trip, I interrupt Mama's business and ask her to sit as I want to talk to her. She hears the seriousness in my voice and complies with an almost stern look. I present her with the letter and impatiently wait as she slowly reads it with her head down, not once looking up at me. I watch for a reaction as my heart pounds like never before, but I do not get one as she continues to read in deafening silence. I frantically, but patiently, wait for her to finish.

July 25, 1998

Dear Mama,

This is probably the hardest letter that I have ever written, but in my opinion, the most necessary. The subject of this letter is my homosexuality. By homosexuality, I mean that I am physically, romantically, and sexually attracted to men. This is why I have not seriously dated women during my life. It is also the reason why I more than likely will not marry a woman and produce grandchildren for you. For me, it would be dishonest and cruel to marry a woman under these circumstances.

How long have I been a homosexual? Well, I trace my feelings back to elementary school and definitely knew by middle school. But since society, church, and family do not approve of this lifestyle, I have repressed and hidden these feelings for many, many years and tried to please you, the church, and society.

Who knows that I am homosexual? Some of the friends I had before moving to Amherst know. But for me, the North has been very liberating. When I moved to Amherst, I decided to make a new start in my life and refused to lie about or hide my sexuality. As such, many people there know that I am homosexual, including faculty and friends. My friends there love me as I hope and pray you will continue to do.

In addition, Pastor Bright has known for two years and continues to love me and tells me that Jesus does also. I am presently seeing a counselor recommended by Pastor, and I am discussing my homosexuality as well as other topics.

From these sessions, I know that my homosexuality is not a curse, demonic, or something that can be cured. God made me this way and he loves me. I know that no amount of praying by me or others has changed this. I am writing this letter in the hope that you and I will finally have an honest relationship. For the past few years, I have felt resentment toward you and society because I felt forced to lie and live two separate lives in order to please you foremost, and a few others as well. More importantly, I believe that it is unfair and a shame that the people that I love the most, you and Mallory, do not know everything about me.

Mama, I hope that my honesty will begin a new and better phase in our relationship and I invite and welcome you to ask any and all questions that you might have. While I know that this letter will cause you initial pain, sorrow, and unhappiness, I hope that it will bring us closer than ever.

I love you.

Angelo

When Mama finally looks up very calmly from reading the letter, I can tell that she is not pleased. I can see her choosing her words very carefully before she speaks. She begins with a question: "Is this the kind of life you want?" I'm not offended and welcome the inquiry as an opportunity to further explain that although it is my choice, it really isn't a choice. It is who I am and who God created. With that, I pour my heart out to Mama and try to explain my romantic same-gender attraction as openly and honestly as I can. However, when my philosophical and intellectual attempts fail to clarify my desire for men, I have to break it down to Mama and say that women do not give me a sexual erection. While my sexuality is definitely more complicated than this, I think it best at this point to take this stance. I don't want to give her any hope of romance and marriage with a woman. I have come too far for this. I am reminded of scholar/artist E. Patrick Johnson's conversation with his mother when relating his same-gender desire to her in his book, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (2008). As Johnson puts it:

I knew then that I could only make her understand by providing her with some kind of anecdote or analogy. I asked her, "Mom, have you ever found yourself attracted to another woman?" She said, "No," drawing out the word while simultaneously shaking her head. I replied, "Neither have I," which was actually a lie, but I thought that it would help her to understand where I was coming from. (111)

After at least making it past the hurdle of getting across to Mama why I am not seeking romantic relationships with women based on physical desire, she moves on to her next concern: my desire is a sin, and I will be doomed to hell for my

attraction to men. I expect this reaction from her as a Christian as it had also been on my list of concerns. To be honest, I can't say that it was ever my biggest fear, but I did have an adolescent dream that I was caught in bed with a man on Judgment Day. Nevertheless, I always found it unbelievable that God would create me with this desire and give me no outlet for expression.

Wouldn't that be cruel? What kind of God would do that?

My therapy sessions had also helped me to begin to believe that my homosexuality was not a sin. Ultimately, I was always more fearful of my family's--particularly Mama's--and society's reaction, but not of God's. I was also fortunate enough to grow up in a church that was not outwardly homophobic or participated in gay bashing to my knowledge. Perhaps this was Pastor Bright's regret when he mailed me a brochure earlier this year. On it was the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod's formal doctrinal disapproval of homosexuality, especially since my prior therapy sessions failed to cure me or communicate that I was living in sin.

Upon listening to my understanding of Christianity and interpretation of scripture concerning homosexuality, Mama did not challenge my views or attempt to refute my explanation of God's view on the subject. I could tell that, however, she was not convinced that I should walk away from heterosexual marriage or abandon having children in the traditional way. As such, I resort to the pre-dawn secret that I overheard more than two decades ago: I ask if she wanted me to subject a woman to what her friend Pat had endured when she discovered that her husband was gay. Mama is stunned by my question and knowledge of this truth. She, nevertheless, does not answer my question and I wonder if Mama, like another female relative, thinks I should still get married even though she now knows of my homosexuality.

Do they think marriage will cure me or is it simply a solution for respectability? Is it a call for black unity and heteronormativity? Were they predating Minister Louis Farrakhan's message: "Get a woman brothers, even if you a little gay now?"¹

When Mama does not respond to my original question about who I should marry, I know then that we have gone as far as we can today on the subject of my gayness and her acceptance.

But tomorrow is another day.

Before I return to Atlanta on Sunday, Mama and I talk again; she asks how others take the news of my homosexuality. I tell her that they all accept it and offer their unconditional love. She particularly asks about my father's--her ex-husband's--response and seems displeased by it. I laughingly imagine her saying, "Damn, he isn't good for anything, not even helpful in keeping our son straight!"

¹ Hip Hop & Entertainments Leaders. Atlanta, GA, October 13, 2016.

She tells me that she has hope and confidence in my therapy sessions and prays they will work to heal me. I respond that my therapist recommends some books to help her accept my homosexuality. We leave things there; I don't want to give her any false hope. I have come out and I'm not going back in for anyone. It's my turn to live my life on my terms and do what's best for me without apology or compromise. Mama wants me to be straight and I can't and won't; we are at a stalemate. I hope that love will see us through our discord. Time will tell.

Work Cited

Johnson, E. Patrick. *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008.

Temple, Christel. *Transcendence and the Africana Literary Enterprise*. New York: Lexington Books, 2018. 217 pp. ISBN 978-1-4985-4510-5. Paperback.

Transcendence and the Africana Literary Enterprise ends with a discussion of James Baldwin's *Esquire* article in which he introduces the notion of an "atmosphere of freedom." Relegated to the periphery in the arts, media, and literature, this strategic exclusion of Blackness supports the necessity of a monograph that not only centralizes African American culture. It provides tools for the creation of an "atmosphere of freedom" and the "'transcendence' enabled by...Africana Studies critical approaches to literary criticism [and] literary phenomena" (191).

Creating an atmosphere of freedom requires the deliberate consideration of the traumas—psychological, economic, and cultural—endured from the *Maafa*¹. Specifically, the colonization of Africana people in the Global South and the perpetual enculturation of Eurocentric ideals reiterated ideological centrality and implied white neutrality. The result is a tug-of-war to rescue and reclaim people of African descent's cultural, intellectual, and technological contributions.

The effectiveness of Western enculturation is a testament not of the physical enslavement of Africans. Instead, it speaks to the educational and institutional obstructions imposed through the Constitution, anti-literacy laws, Jim Crow, Separate but Equal, redlining, continued underfunding of schools, vehement opposition to critical race theory and the truthful teaching of history, and relegating African American culture to the periphery of American identity. *Transcendence and the Africana Literary Enterprise* provides scholars of Africana studies, cultural studies, humanities, literary studies, and a range of interdisciplinary pursuits a survey of a dozen African American texts to demonstrate the value in applying Literary Africology to the exploration of culturally affirming texts. This book presents a multidimensional dynamism of Africana studies. It further encapsulates a "unique method and logic for layering ideas, concepts, theories, history, and data into usable narratives and tools to advance Africana experience as a model of the human capacity for renewal and regeneration" (Temple xxii). Thus, *Transcendence* presents a framework for "culturally grounded, agency-focused, transformative discourse," and approaches to the analysis, critique, and pedagogical exploration of African American literature and creative production that is uniquely informed by Pan-Africanist sensibilities (Karenga 577).

¹ The *Maafa* is a Kiswahili concept introduced by Marimba Ani referencing the "great disaster" of the African Holocaust by violent European cultural infringement. It refers to the physical as well as psychological enslavement and oppression of the African (Wells-Wilbon et. al. 509-526; Richards, 1980).

The African American literary enterprise has birthed a range of literary traditions. Despite African Americans' literary and creative contributions to American and international literary annals, the exploration and critique of these works have been largely sustained by scholars' application of theories and methodologies. Though valuable, they are not born from culturally informed inquiry or bolstered by the invaluable perspective of informed-insider analysis and critique. In *Transcendence*, Christel Temple presents a manuscript demonstrating the necessity, feasibility, and enjoyment of engaging Africana literature and other cultural productions. The traditional canon of literary and textual analysis alongside traditional Africana perspectives and the audacious application of Black cultural mythology present an innovative framework for critical and comparative analysis of Black cultural and creative productions.

Temple argues that effective literary criticism of African American literature cannot be achieved without proper consideration. She argues that for "understanding of how literature is a prism that reflectively signifies the cultures historical, social, political, psychological, linguistic, narrative, and conceptual realities." She further encourages a culturally informed analysis of Africana texts and inspires the development of a literary imagination that is agentively Africanist (xvii). In Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison explains that coming to terms with what makes American literature distinct is its "unsettled and unsettling population" (6). Morrison goes on to explain the literary imagination, as derived from Euro-American cultural and political consciousness, compels the American (white) writer to "talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence" (17). This too can be said of the African American, who either through constraints imposed by teachers or employers—or because of their own inclinations—is oppositional to a holistic portrayal and analysis of an Africanist presence. Temple provides a solution to the problem of reading and writing "with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive 'othering' of people and language" (Morrison x). She encourages the centralization of Africana identity to connect with and engage in a meaningful and immersive critical analysis and interpretation of scholarly inquiries. The text is a thorough response to the problem of the choked representation and analysis of the African presence in literature and a reply to the challenge to move away from Western science's bifurcation of the study of human experiences.² Temple demonstrates how the Africana literary tradition is ripe with possibility for

² Asante discusses the core philosophies that lead to the Black Studies Movement and the eventual pursuit of Africology. Specifically, the responsibility of departments of Africology to take a holistic approach to the study of African phenomena (Asante 206).

engaging the social sciences, humanities, and literary studies.

Organized in 13 chapters, Temple gives the reader an introduction to the “Canon of the Africana Worldview.” This introduction provides an overview of the text, fundamental explication of literary criticism, and its “significant role in maintaining the canon, the tradition, and society’s understanding of how literature acts as a prism that reflectively signifies the culture’s historical, social, political, psychological, linguistic narrative, and conceptual realities” (xvii). *Transcendence* provides a critical review of the social context that necessitates the development of African American and Africana studies programs. Along with situating the reader’s orientation in understanding the “why” of Africana Studies, Temple further explains the need to create and refine theory and method for examining the literature. Delineating the theory and method of literary Africology, its pedagogical employability, and social scientific application for research makes chapter one of *Transcendence* invaluable as it invites scholars to enjoy “a space, literal and figurative, which is exactly as real as the limits which have made it necessary” (191) as discussed by Baldwin from beginning to end (Baldwin “Color” *Esquire* para. 7).

As Baldwin’s analysis presents, *Transcendence* suggests an articulation of freedom through a thoughtful collection of culturally-centered, agency-focused theories and methodologies for examining and critiquing Africana literary and creative productions. The examples teach how applying the theory and methodology can elevate the traditional canon of literary analysis and criticism. In short, *Transcendence* is written for scholars and students who desire to engage with and critique African diasporic literature and creative productions. In reading DuBois’ *The Souls of Black Folk* and Dorothy West’s *The Living Is Easy*, the second chapter subtly encourages the reader to pursue technocultural innovation in Africana Studies and models the complex intellectual exercise of comparative literary analysis. It draws a symbolic connection and contrast to the mortality and vulnerability of Black males through a framework developed in “Molefi Kete Asante’s synthesis of African-centered cultural epistemologies drawn from the work of Cheik Anta Diop” (14). In addition to presenting theoretical models for literary criticism, *Transcendence* lays out pedagogical approaches for educators to assist students in examining a text through Africological *reader-response* (Chapter 5) and introduces the demographic literary standards (DLS), a social scientific methodology (Chapter 7) that “merges humanities and social science skills and methods into a functional engagement of literature” (91). *Transcendence* presents example after example of applied literary Africology, in theory and methodology, along with modeling comparative literary analysis.

Transcendence is essential reading for students, lecturers, and scholars to pursue a curricular or research agenda that is culturally centered and rigorous in

its approach to literary criticism and comparative analysis. For application and inspiration, this text is especially useful in informing strategies for instructing post-secondary developmental literacy and for instructors searching for inspiration for exploring texts and cultural productions for courses in Africana humanities. Inclusive of the fundamentals of Africana Studies, *Transcendence* successfully demonstrates the employability of the Africological paradigm in exploring the depths of the literary enterprise.

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Warren, Nagueyalti. *Alice Walker's Metaphysics: Literature of Spirit*. Landham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2019. 220 pp. ISBN: 978-1538123973. \$129.85 Hardcover.

In multiple interviews, Alice Malsenior Tallulah-Kate Walker, has shared the story of seeing the dead body of her classmate's mother whose husband had shot her in the face. Walker explains that as a child, she knew that she would tell that woman's story and that while she didn't yet have the words, she would learn, and that story would be about poverty, rage, oppression, sexism, and misogyny. As Walker surmised at a young age, she would indeed learn to tell such stories; in fact, addressing these social ills has been the focus of her life's work. Professor of African American Studies, Nagueyalti Warren, in *Alice Walker's Metaphysics: Literature of Spirit*, seeks to securely place Walker and her work in the African American homiletic tradition. Warren's ambitious book delves fully into Walker's body of work. She locates Walker in the tradition of Sojourner Truth who wrote on matters of race and gender drawn explicitly from her own lived experiences. The truth is Walker's only guide and compass. Warren blesses her audience with theological, metaphysical, ecocritical, ecofeminist, cultural, and structuralist readings of Walker's texts. Her access to Walker's private notes and manuals provides profound insight into Walker's thinking, further heightening the book's appeal. Warren presents Walker's works as the culmination of an aesthetic vision of her theology of spiritual liberation and transformation, embedded with a rejection of religion, dualism and suffering. She depicts Walker's search and exploration of mystical truth for self-empowerment. Alice Walker is represented as literary mystic, pagan sage, and healer.

Warren introduces Walker as mystic born of childhood trauma: the eye injury she sustained at 8-years-old, the unwanted pregnancy and abortion, and a long illness which she self-diagnosed as Lyme disease. These existential crises brought Walker to experience the dark night of the soul, a common experience for mystics, and as mystic, she draws on her own experience as an African American woman in her writing. I was first introduced to Walker's work as an undergraduate at Wesleyan University and was instantly captivated by Walker's own story. The daughter of sharecroppers, Alice Walker rose to become a major writer of the 20th century, becoming the first African American woman to win a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and National Book Award in 1983 for her novel *The Color Purple*. A prolific writer, Walker has written several novels which Warren dissects chronologically illustrating how with each novel, Walker takes her audience deeper into the "mystical realm." Warren concludes that Walker's collective work has brought about a paradigm shift, which unveils and challenges our archaic binary thinking

about life as simply defined by our notions of good and evil. Walker's writing then, opens up a sacred and communal space to the "infinite possibilities" created in a spiritual universe for readers who dare to journey with her. Walker's first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), Warren describes as a "mediation on choice" where free will, fate and destiny are highlighted with sexism, classism, and poverty categorized as intersecting symptoms (21). Walker's second novel, *Meridian* (1976), is followed by her magnum opus, *The Color Purple* (1982), which Walker herself posits is a theological work and which Warren depicts as a sermon. The novels: *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998), *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004), and a memoir, *The Chicken Chronicles* (2011) follow to varying degrees of acclaim. Walker has also produced several collections of short stories: *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Woman* (1973), *You Can't Keep A Good Woman Down* (1971), *Alice Walker Banned* (1996), *The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart* (2000).

Warren uses Organic Inquiry—a research method and spiritual inquiry blend aimed at transformative change—to unpack Walker's short story collections and poetry. Organic Inquiry places value on the researcher's own story and emphasizes the interconnectedness of parts. This directly ties to Walker's beliefs in the unity of all life and oneness with oneself and with the world. Warren's reading of *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, for instance, points to the "de-centering of the narrative voice" in the novel as Walker's method to accentuate the unity of the individual experience. Warren notes that Walker contextualizes all her novels in their preface in the form of an epigraph, long quotation, or, poem, but Warren provides frameworks for reading Walker in multiple places in her book. The concept of Endarkenment as epistemology and methodology, for example, focuses on parables as transformative tools and values reason and science while refraining from diminishing intuition and mysticism (145). Walker writes in the vein. Reminiscent of Baldwin's numerous ruminations on the role of suffering in the human condition, Walker's writings reject suffering and instead offers a redemptive vision that heals.

In addition to her novels and short story collections, Walker has also published a number of children's books, and non-fiction and poetry collections (she continues to write to date). Walker's first book of poetry *Once* (1968), is sequenced by her second volume of poetry, *Revolutionary Petunias* (1973). Several other volumes of poetry followed including *Good-night Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning* (1979), *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful* (1984), *Her Blue Body Everything We Know: Earthling Poems* (1991), *Absolute Trust in the Goodness of the Earth* (2003), *A Poem Traveled Down My Arm* (2003), *Hard Times Require Furious Dancing* (2010), *The World Will Follow Joy; Turning Madness Into Flowers* (2013), and *Taking the Arrow Out of the Heart* (2018). Warren maintains that Walker's early poetry reflect

her view of “oneness with herself and the world” (3). *Once*, in particular illustrates Walker’s burgeoning theological standing where “she affirms spirit is all” (3). The natural world is sacred and as such, Walker’s attention to nature illustrates her recognition of nature’s Divinity. Walker’s poetry, often deeply personal, highlight her concern for the environment, her musings on love and nature, her experience with the Civil Rights Movement, her paganism and rejection of organized religion, and ultimately expresses her worldview. It is not surprising then that Walker was awarded the Humanist of the Year Award in 1997, and a Domestic Human Rights Award in 2007.

Walker has also written numerous essays compiled in the following texts: *Anything We Love Can Be Saved* (1997), *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), *Living By The Work* (1988), *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult* (1996), *Sent by Earth: A Message from the Grandmother Spirit After the Bombing of the World Trade Center and Pentagon* (2001), *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For* (2006), *Overcoming Speechlessness* (2009), and *The Cushion in the Road: Meditation and Wandering as the Whole World Awakens to Being in Harm’s Way* (2013). In her essays, Walker continues to commit to the issues of importance to her while responding to real world events. In *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose*, Walker embarks on a quest to determine the tenacity of the creativity of African American women despite a history of slavery. Walker argues that spirituality is the basis of art and creativity, and according to Warren, articulates “the cruel and deliberate efforts to stifle the creative impulse in black women through overwork, violence, and sexual abuse” (8).

In her book, Warren also addresses the especially mean-spirited nature of the criticism leveled at Walker and her literary works especially by those who read Walker in a strictly literary context. However, Warren reminds us that, “while Walker fits squarely with the African American spiritual tradition in which her homiletic style certainly does belong, she is also a bona fide member of the literary realm” (187). Critics have also dismissed Walker’s narratives as new age gibberish and fault her texts for their preachiness, perhaps because Walker delves into the spiritual and metaphysical in her work. Warren concedes that Walker is indeed “speaking the word” but points to the difference between the words preach (verb) and preachy (adjective) (98). Moreover, Warren reasons that the spiritual can be political just as the personal is political. Further, Warren posits that storytelling for its sake is not a viable option for the black writer/artist noting that “The black literary position from the slave narratives onward and in African literary tradition from the oral tradition forward tended toward education and the transmission of cultural values as well as a call to action” (132). Walker’s critics often take issue with her didacticism, but Warren argues that Walker writes in the African American

homiletic tradition where most sermons and spirituals are didactic, and that the sermon is a high art form (145). Warren explicates that Walker's spiritual views and mysticism coincide with the beliefs of physicists in the unity of all things and a connected universe though her mysticism is grounded in the Gnostic scriptures. Here, Walker's gender and race work against her, and she is dismissed because she is woman and Black. Warren clarifies that women are rarely credited with great spiritual insight, but her own text credits Walker for her prodigious spiritual and literary insights and mystical philosophy.

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Patterson, Robert J., Ed. *Black Cultural Production: After Civil Rights*, Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019. 282 pp. ISBN: 9780252084607. \$26.00 Paperback.

It would be difficult to think of a moment in which *Black Cultural Production: After Civil Rights*, edited by Robert J. Patterson, would land with greater resonance. The volume arrives during a season of widespread protests against police violence, a significant shift in public opinion on the connection between law enforcement and implicit bias, and a substantive debate on reform versus defunding. What began as a grass-roots effort to dismantle racist iconography—particularly statues of Confederate soldiers—has been taken up by municipal governments, which have ordered the removal of these Jim Crow-era relics by city workers, sometimes under cover of night. In the wake of these sustained protests, cultural organizations have been issuing apologies for blind spots in their diversity efforts, and a period of soul-searching—at least some of which seems to be in good faith—has begun in the fields of literature, entertainment, and the arts. On June 19, 2020, the commemoration of Juneteenth, an astonishing array of Black writers, performers, and artists gathered under the banner of Black Artists for Freedom issued a statement calling for commitments from the institutions they work with, not only to sever ties with the police, but to advance opportunities and representation. “No more stereotypes,” the statement reads. “No more tokenism. No more superficial diversity. We will no longer watch Black culture be contorted into a vehicle for self-congratulation, complacency, guilt relief, experiential tourism, fetishism, appropriation, and theft” (Black Artists for Freedom).

The moment of reckoning for the culture echoes the decade of the 1970s that *Black Culture* examines, an explosion of artistic and political activity following the conclusion of the Civil Rights era, and its eradication of Jim Crow laws. The passage of the Voting Rights and Civil Rights Acts left huge areas of institutionally embedded racism untouched, in housing, employment, education, and healthcare. “The post-civil rights era retrenchment of a de facto segregations revealed how white supremacy and antiblack racism were interconnected, intertwined, interrelated, and deeply embedded in America’s values and institutions. Neither legislative acts nor a naïve belief in the general goodness of the American people could undo their historical and emotional sentience” (Patterson, 2). The political fight shifted from Civil Rights to Black Power; demands for institutional measures like affirmative action found their footing; and the culture, in all its manifestations, reflected the push to continue the struggle against racism on a new stage. Although the accomplishments of the Civil Rights Movement were finite and fulfilled, the

struggle had also instilled a momentum that continued into the cultural sphere long after its legislative battles had concluded.

The cover of *Black Cultural Production* features a photo of actress Cicely Tyson, brandishing the two Emmys she won in 1974 for her lead performance in the television miniseries *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (Tyson was awarded the best actress award and a special citation as “Actress of the Year”). The gleam of Tyson’s smile and the shiny awards suggest a promise of a new period in the arts, one in which Black stories could be told without the use of caricature or of white interpreters. Three years after *Jane Pittman* established the receptivity of white audiences, as well as Black, for stories of Black lives, the miniseries *Roots* was a cultural juggernaut, with 100 million viewers, a record that remains, as Lisa Woolfork in her essay on “Generations” states, unbroken (59). Mainstream television comedies like “Sanford and Son,” “Good Times,” and “The Jeffersons” portrayed Black families in a range of socioeconomic circumstances. The theater and poetry of the Black Arts Movement was shaking up the intellectual world. In the movies, Blaxploitation, which began as a low-budget response to the erasure of Black lives from action films, grew into a multimillion-dollar industry. Women novelists like Gayl Jones, Alice Walker, and Octavia Butler began to publish highly personal and experimental fiction, and the editor who nurtured many of these talents, Toni Morrison, began to publish work of her own.

The political and social forces on cultural production in the 1970s played out on different fronts, including the defeat of the United States in Vietnam and the birth of the women’s liberation movement. Against this backdrop, participants in the vital Black Arts Movement embarked on an aesthetic of uncompromising anti-racist theater that mirrored the emergence of Black Power. In the book’s opening essay, “Freedom Now,” Madhu Dubey examines how BAM negotiates the legacy and trauma of slavery in its cultural production, a chapter missing from the traditional canon of writings on slavery. Foregrounding theater, with its capacity for real-time confrontation and response, and its reliance on uttered proclamation rather than psychological interiority, BAM responded to white writers whose recent works on the psychological effects of slavery decentered agency and resistance—in particular William Styron’s *Confessions of Nat Turner* and Stanley Elkins’s *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, which posited the “Sambo thesis” of a docile slave figure locked in a symbiotic cycle with his master.

The militancy and urgency of the Black Arts Movement stressed allegorical figures in its representations of slavery, Dubey writes, rather than profoundly complex characters. Looking chiefly at playwrights Amiri Baraka, Loftin Mitchell, and Joseph Walker, Dubey contends that their works’ “reliance on flattened abstractions rather than rounded characters is suited to the didactic, consciousness-

raising intentions of BAM theater” (36). The job of probing the psychic scars of slavery would fall, later in the decade, to novelists, and mostly women novelists. While BAM sought to respond to white theorizing by centering the black (and male) experience of slavery in the discussion of its repercussion, it provoked its own response by white writers. Dubey’s essay ends by placing the *Planet of the Apes* film series in conversation with the slave stories generated during the Black Power movement, with its portrayal of white subjugation by a barbaric subspecies. “Race-reversal narratives of white enslavement can be seen as attempts to reclaim the future, to stave off anxieties about the impending extinction of white power” (45-7). Like much of the production of BAM, *Planet of the Apes* reveals a particular anxiety not just about race, but about masculinity. The equation of masculinity and self-determinism intimates the tension that underlies most of the essays in this volume, between masculinism and feminism, a tension that deepens with each essay, as Patterson has organized them to present with successively greater depth the richness of black feminism in this period.

As Monica White Ndounou observes in her essay “Slavery Now: 1970s Influence Post—20th-Century Films on American Slavery,” the cinematic treatments of slavery privileged the male experience. “The sexual exploitation of black women, in particular positions black men as active agents without considering the revolutionary potential of black women” (79), deemphasizing the role that women took in resistance not only during slavery, but within the Black Power movement which provided the context for these movies. While 21st century audiences, inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, were less receptive to a male-centric slavery narrative, 1970s films like *Mandingo* and *Drum* placed a premium on male resistance and male procreative and sexual expression.

The case with *Roots* is more complex, at once because of its huge audience and also because of its inclusion of matriarchal figures. Lisa Woolford, in her chapter on “Generations,” contends, “If a single word could encapsulate the defining message of African American literary works about slavery in the post-civil rights years of 1975 to 1980, that word might well be *generations*” (51-2). By invoking the concept of generations, Woolford addresses both how representations of slavery portray the transmission of trauma from one generation to the next (often from mother to daughter), and also how each generation of artists interprets slavery and its effects. Woolford considers *Roots*, both Alex Haley’s book and the television adaptation, as well as Ishmael Reed’s postmodern novel *Flight to Canada*. But it is her discussion of Octavia Butler’s speculative fiction *Kindred* that grounds the discussion in the particular trauma of women, including sexual coercion. Dana, the time-traveling protagonist of *Kindred*, is descended from an act of interracial rape; by intervening in the violence of her ancestors, she obliterates herself, and her situation encapsulates the conflicts and paradoxes of inherited trauma.

In her chapter on the influence of the war in Vietnam on black feminist literature, Nadine M. Knight paraphrases Alice Walker's call to arms: "Black men may want to arm themselves against white America, but black women, for Walker, must arm themselves against black men" (128). The exclusion from the center of the Black Power Movement and the middle-class white Feminist Movement left black women to carve not only their own brand of struggle but also their own aesthetic, and, unfettered from the pedagogic mission of BAM, black women staked out for themselves a broad variety of genres and styles, from Butler's speculative fiction to the blues-inflected idiom of Gayl Jones. Samantha Pinto asks readers to place Fran Ross, author of the postmodern novel *Oreo*, as well as the experimental playwright Adrienne Kennedy, within the context of this artistic explosion, rather than as "ahead of their time." *Oreo* and Kennedy's play *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* both play with comedy, caricature, and cultural references; the protagonist of *Oreo* (which was out of print until it was restored by Harryette Mullen for a 1999 reissue) is a half-Jewish polyglot who embarks on an odyssey with mythological echoes. The protagonist of *Movie Star* writes herself *into* the margins, as a bit player in a classic Hollywood romance, as white movie stars crowd her out to narrate her story. Yet both works avoid the predictable polarities of black versus white experience, suggesting instead that while mainstream culture is part of the African American experience, it has never escaped the influence of black culture. Notably, Ross and Kennedy reframe mainstream culture "through their repurposing of African American and white western civilization's cultural touchstones as part of a black literary genealogy—as part of the experience of blackness—but not only in antagonistic or oppositional terms" (143). Pinto applies Paul Gilroy's concept of a literary double-consciousness here, not as a marker of inauthenticity but as an evolving method of understanding black feminism which anticipates artists like Suzan-Lori Parks and Kara Walker.

While Terrion L. Williamson's chapter "From Blaxploitation to Black Macho: The Angry Black Woman Comes of Age," begins with a discussion on the heroines of woman-centered Blaxploitation flicks like *Foxy Brown* and *Cleopatra Jones*, positing them as a "deliberate misinterpretation of the image of Angela Davis" and thus a "mechanism for recasting the black liberation movement as vacuous outlawry" (185), Williamson extends the discussion to the origins of the "angry black woman" trope. "Anger or any one of its derivatives—sassiness, bitterness, meanness, bitchiness—underlies almost every popular narrative of black women, past and present" (185). Williamson locates this caricature as a direct, if unconscious, response to the 1965 Moynihan report. "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" was issued by President Johnson's Assistant Secretary of Labor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who would later serve as a United States senator. The Moynihan

report placed the onus of black poverty squarely on the “matriarchal structure” of the family, which “imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male” (188-9). The report, rather than provoking counterclaims of systemic racism, found traction with areas of the black struggle, particularly among men. Black sociologist Robert Staples upheld the tradition of patriarchy in slave times, equating women-led families with sociological instability. When a young writer, Michele Wallace, issued *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* in 1978, attacking the misogynist assumptions of the Moynihan report, she was widely attacked.

The timeliness of *Black Cultural Production* lies in the fact that, to one degree or another, these issues are still with us, although viewed through the lens of the #metoo and Black Lives Matter era. The breadth of essays here indicate the reach of conflicting, sometimes competing voices that interpreted the decade following the Civil Rights era, a period whose profound impact continues to make an impression on our culture.

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Notes

1. Black Artists for Freedom. <https://blackartistsforfreedom.com/>

Evans, Stephanie Y., Andrea D. Domingue, and Tonia D. Mitchell. *Black Women and Social Justice Education: Legacies and Lessons*. Albany, State University of New York Press, 2019. 398 pp. ISBN: 9781438472942. \$35.95 Paperback.

This book is well-needed, especially during tumultuous times like these. *Black Women and Social Justice Education: Legacies and Lessons* contextualizes the ways in which Black women survive and thrive in academia, community engagement, and nonprofit work. Organized into four sections, the readings center Black women's voices and experiences, theorizing and putting social justice education into practice. Liberatory consciousness, an essential component of social justice education, is incorporated within every section of the book. In the readings, not only is social justice explained, but readers are made privy to how the authors navigate their work and fields of activism to put into practice social justice education that often fails to take our identities or needs into consideration. As Black women have shown, the practice of putting social justice education into action leads to the transformation of institutions. The writers argue that the implementation of social justice education is effective because it values the knowledge and experiences of oppressed communities. In addition, those who engage in social justice education not only want social justice and community transformation, but also inner peace. Several of the pieces in this edition focus on how Black women learn to value themselves and their communities while doing this incredibly difficult work.

Part 1 underscores the importance of theory and identity as key components of social justice theory in 6 chapters. This section of readings demonstrates that we not only have responsibility for our communities, but to ourselves when engaging in social justice work. Social justice is theorized as liberation for all people. Layli Maparyan's "Social Justice Education and Luxocracy" is particularly engaging because of the focus of the Divine nature in all of humanity. It is a call for to see everyone through the practice of Imago Dei even if people oppose the advances of social justice. Another key issue in this section's readings is the relevance of intersectionality. Diversity will mean nothing, and equality and equity are not likely to manifest without using an intersectional approach. On an individual level, using an intersectional perspective is helpful in examining individual identities and the function of privilege versus being marginalized. Understanding our identities, the writers assert, will provide a better ability to both survive in oppressive environments, but also thrive while dismantling systemic inequalities. Michele D. Smith and Maia Niguel Moore in "Black Feminist Thought: A Response to White Fragility" posit that Black women navigate and survive by being persistent, remaining knowledgeable about society, finding sisterhood with other Black women, and creating and maintaining a healthy image of oneself. Practicing

social justice education and thriving while doing so is not an individual feat. A community of supporters are needed.

Part 2 includes 4 chapters and is a collection of narrative and historical accounts of Black women who contended for power, equality, and equity. The emphasis of Black women's voices that were often silenced in social justice movements is a theme in this section. In Ashley Robertson Preston's "A Seat at the Table: Mary McLeod Bethune's Call for the Inclusion of Black Women During World War II," we learn that Mary McLeod Bethune not only advocated for her own upward social mobility, but for many other Black women's ability to work during WWII. This chapter also illustrates that although this work is arduous, we should not give into despair and hopelessness. We learn in this chapter and others in the book that education can be used as a means of fighting for equality. Social justice does not only take place in the classroom and traditional forms of education. Modern forms of activism, such as students' protests are highlighted in Shennette Garrett-Scott and Dominique Garrett-Scott's "This Ain't Yo' Mama's Revolution--Or Maybe It is: #TakeBackTheFlag and the new Student Activism." An important point in this chapter is the awareness that upward social mobility in an oppressive system should not be the goal, but rather to dismantle barriers that undermine all working-people.

Part 3 consists of 5 chapters that focus on pedagogy and incorporation of social justice content in a politically charged climate while focusing on the positionality of Black women educators. Incorporating social justice content offers students an understanding of the reality of inequalities and develops their ability to think analytically. Liberatory consciousness is also highlighted in this section. One of the components of liberatory consciousness is to help learners understand their lives and how oppressive systems and institutions function and affect their lives despite being socialized in ways to suppress that understanding. Social justice education is also useful for Black women educators in that it is put into action when interacting with others who adhere to a colorblind ideology. Colette M. Taylor's "And the Tree is NOT ALWAYS Happy!: A Black Woman Authentically Leading and Teaching Social Justice in Higher Education" is a revelatory read. This chapter reminds faculty and instructors that not only can we love our students and provide them with quality education, but that we *cannot* do this as a martyr. Social justice education focus on disrupting and dismantling systems of oppression and also accentuates respect, care, recognition, and empathy for self and others. One need of Black women educators that is often unmet is mentoring. Brenda L. H. Marina in "Social Conceptions and the Angst of Mentoring Women of Diverse Backgrounds in Higher Education" illustrates how mentoring has different meanings across different groups. Mentoring should have the goals of not merely adding women, but changing the institutional culture.

Part 4 is comprised of 4 chapters. This section posits that social justice education can be used in various contexts and the writers provide suggestions on how readers can apply such lessons to their own situations. Activist Cherjanet D. Lenzy describes her experiences and how she became more self-aware in, “Navigating the Complexities of Race-Based Activism.” Pointing out that Blackness is not monolithic, but rather multifaceted, Lenzy encourages educators to facilitate conversations not only about racism, but also about the interconnection of sexism and racism. In addition, the writers point out that Black women’s experiences should be centered. Discussions and curriculum should be intentionally directed towards activism. Lydia Washington in, “Storytelling: Advising Black Women Student Leaders in White Spaces” suggests storytelling as a tool to retain and support Black women leaders on campus. Washington explains that storytelling provides examples of hope and resilience. Social justice education can also be applied in other contexts, such as K-12 public schools and the workforce.

Part 5 includes 2 chapters. This section applies liberatory consciousness to the personal and communal spheres. Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor in, “The Dialectic of Radical Black Feminism” recommends that we look to Black women elders, in particular the Combahee River Collective, to learn from their liberatory pedagogies. Rhonda Y. Williams contends that mindfulness should be used for social justice work that is sustainable in her chapter, “For Black Women Who Educate for Social Justice and Put Their Time, Lives, and Spirits on the Line.” Both of the readings illustrate the importance of understanding that all oppressions are linked, and by focusing on the liberation of Black women, we all can be free.

Black Women and Social Justice Education: Legacies and Lessons is wonderful and speaks to Black women educators professionally, emotionally, and spiritually. It serves as a resource to help Black women in particular understand the obstacles set before us but gives hope that we do not have to die or sacrifice our work in our efforts to liberate ourselves and our communities. Educators who are non-Black can also utilize this book to gain insight into a few Black women’s experiences, learn from them, and implement social justice education into their own practices. Liberation is for everyone and should be practiced by all who are aware of systemic oppression, and used to transform our society. This book is not merely about learning about social justice education, but more importantly putting it into practice in a variety of contexts. Social justice is about healing and being resilient. Martyrdom is not necessarily a requisite for freedom.

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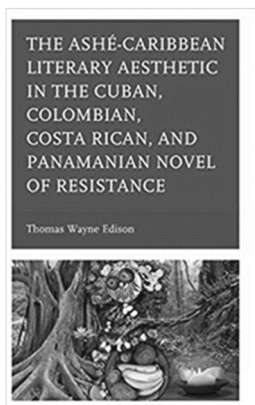
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ASHÉ-CARIBBEAN LITERARY AESTHETIC IN THE CUBAN, COLOMBIAN, COSTA RICAN, AND PANAMANIAN NOVEL OF RESISTANCE

By Thomas Wayne Edison



"In this book, Thomas W. Edison argues convincingly in support of the importance of the philosophical concept of Ashe' to the worldviews of the selected Cuban and Afro-Hispanic authors. Ashe', in this context, underscores the resistance to the oppression and dehumanization of black peoples and is an integral component of the cultural maroonage that has sustained them throughout the African Diaspora. *Ashé-Caribbean Literary Aesthetic in the Cuban, Colombian, Costa Rican, and Panamanian Novel of Resistance* is original, thoroughly researched, meticulously documented, and represents an excellent example of literary intertextuality in critical practice."

— Marvin A. Lewis, University of Missouri

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Ashé-Caribbean Literary Aesthetic in the Cuban, Colombian, Costa Rican, and Panamanian Novel of Resistance contributes to understanding the important role that African-influenced spiritual cultures play in literature that challenges the concept that European aesthetics are superior to African-inspired cultures. Thomas W. Edison highlights the novels of four courageous Caribbean writers who have used their novels to integrate aspects of African ontology with literary techniques, themes, and history. The common element in these works is the inclusion of African-inspired faith traditions and culture. As a result of this perspective, their literature stands out as keen examples of Ashé-Caribbean resistance literature. While each writer presents their unique literary style in the works, collectively they draw on a foundation of the Afro-Caribbean. The Circum-Caribbean region will be the geographical unit because of its collective history of slavery, colonial rule, and parallel patterns of religious syncretism. This book makes an important literary connection among Caribbean Hispanophone nations.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thomas Wayne Edison is associate professor of Spanish in the Department of Classical and Modern Languages at the University of Louisville.

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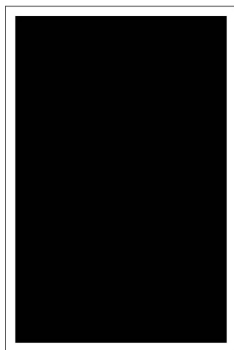
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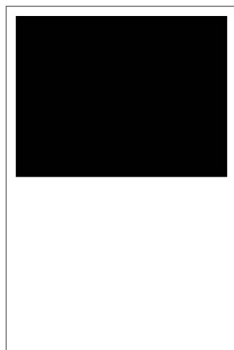
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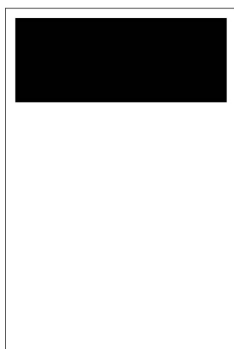
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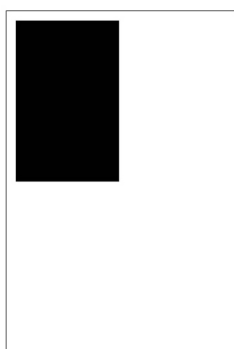
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