Music’s Poetry, Poetry’s Music

by

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Part I

1. Introduction

Poetry and music are tied in fundamental ways. They present modes of expressing that which we, as humans, find inexpressible through other forms of communication. These art forms are unique in that they literally inhabit the air around the performers and beholders—surrounding the bodies of those involved with vibrations from vocalizations, whether those be from a human vocal apparatus or a instrumental extension of one. The shared medium of vibration allows music and poetry to coexist on the same plane, and to intertwine and work together in a way that is fundamental to the human experience.

This essay will be a walk through the relations, intersections and social potential of music and poetry. It will be comprised of two sections: the first, a collage of some prevalent intersections of music and poetry, and what those intersections mean for artists and audience of both forms. The second will be an exploration of these ideas through analysis of pieces by Langston Hughes and Kendrick Lamar, whom I chose for their respective locations on the spectrum of poetry and music, as well as both artists’ abilities to employ techniques that rely on a deep understanding of both forms.

In the first section, I begin by showing the permeability of the boundaries of poetry and music. I then explore musical elements embedded in spoken language, and vice versa. Before moving on, I pause to explore the power both music and poetry have to conjure atmosphere and mood. This phenomenon is most accurately referred to as *Stimmung*. By invoking *Stimmung*, I am invoking the work of Hans Gumbrecht,
and, by extension, Martin Heidegger, providing a unique means of examining the power of where these two intersect in performance, contrasting with other lenses such as flow, etc, which have been written about more prolifically. With this lens in play, I will begin to tour analyses of intersections of poetry and music in the 20th and 21st century African-American cannon, drawing on recent scholarship by Meta DuEwa Jones, Brian Dorsey, Graham Lock and David Murray. This is not an endeavor to address all of the important artists, movements, or pieces of art—only an effort to engage with observations, insights and philosophies from artists who work in the spectrum of music and poetry within that tradition. This tour will lead to a discussion on the voice and its role in bridging music and language. Again, I cannot hope to give an exhaustive account of the numerous ways in which the voice interacts with and shapes our relations to music and poetry—However, I aim to explore enough to illustrate meaningfully the importance of the voice to the blurring of the boundaries, or the “worrying of the line” between the two art forms. I will then spiral back to explore influences each form has on the other, which will segue into the sometimes nebulous relations poets and musicians have when working collaboratively. From this chapter, I draw on the idea that music provides a “megaphone,” with the power of its amplification available to any poet who learns to wield it.

With these ideas in mind, in the second section I undertake a close reading of several pieces by Langston Hughes and Kendrick Lamar and explore how each artist, in each piece, shows, through their artistry, a deep understanding and connection with the intersections of poetry and music, as well as their social implications. The lenses provided in the first section will all come into play in these analyses. I hope to
demonstrate that, for their all their temporal, aesthetic, and sonic difference, Kendrick Lamar and Langston Hughes tap into the same continuum; that is, they draw from similar toolboxes that utilize the intersections between these two forms in the African-American tradition.

I do not aim to say that the ideas brought forth in this essay apply only to the African-American musical and poetic traditions—on the contrary; I believe the specific, in this case, makes a case for the general. Analyzing the work of these artists, who draw from the same overarching tradition, allows for more direct dialogue and intertextuality. It also happens that literature on this subject is both plentiful and varied. From interviews of artists about their own work and work of their peers, on both sides of the musical/poetic aisle, to historical accounts, to sociological lyrical and musical analyses, to sheer vastness and variety of works and artists, to its role as a foundation for musical, poetic, and other aesthetic movements in this country, the African-American musical/poetic tradition is as rich as any in its depth, interconnectedness and sociological importance.

The social, cultural, and economic conditions that have shaped Black arts, and the social, cultural, and economic effects that that art has had on America, Black and otherwise, cannot be understated. “All African music-making is driven by and permeated with memories from the cultural past and the recognition of the viability of such memory should play an important role in the perception and criticism of works and performances of the music.” (Dorsey, 39). One cannot speak of these arts without acknowledging their roots in slavery, the middle passage, and the plantation
foundation of this country. This essay’s focus is not that history. However, there are many titles that do explore this subject.

1 See, for example, *The War on Words* by Michael T Gilmore, *The Black and White of American Popular Music* by Vera Lee, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, by
2. Distinguishing Between Poetry and Music: What Difference Does Difference Make?

To find potential boundaries between music and poetry, it makes sense to look at the areas where they are closest. Although poetry and music borrow from each other in many places, a place where their boundaries clearly and often blur is at the intersection of lyrics and poetry.

In examining this nebulous divide, a good place to start would be listening to some professional artists. Doug Hammond, who is by trade both a drummer and a poet, is, as such, in a unique position to offer perspective on differences between the two domains. What follows is a transcript of an interview that does not focus on this issue, but briefly touches upon it. I quote at length to demonstrate the nuances of Hammond’s response, in particular, to the ideas of Ned Rorem, a 20th century art-songwriter.

“Dorsey: ‘Ned Rorem puts it like this: ‘poetry is self-contained, while lyrics are made to be sung and don’t necessarily lead a life of their own.’ He adds that ‘when ‘real’ poets write with song in mind they fail both as poets and lyricists because, in ‘helping’ the composer, they overindulge in presumably felicitous vocables that emerge as self-conscious banality.’

Hammond: ‘I disagree. I don’t like this kind of writing about what poets and lyricists are, because one can have a great lyric that’s like a poem, and there are great poets who have written bad poetry. I look at it as a different thing. When Monty Waters recited the actual lyrics of the song…, he recited them like a poet. All lyrics might not work that way, but it did the way he did it. When one thinks about the way somebody like Ray Charles sings the words to a lyric, he makes it sound good and it makes sense. It’s like the delivery of a poem. Some poems are only for reading and some are for actual speaking. Well, I think all poems could actually be recited. It depends on the one who does it, the delivery, the emphasis, and all that. If I have a poem in my hand, I can read it, but I also love lyrics… It’s not just poetry for poetry’s sake or music for music’s sake, these are just concepts I never liked.’” (Dorsey, 258-259).

Hammond articulates that any potential gap between these two forms is quite easily (and, in fact, often) surmounted. It is important for context of his disagreement
with Rorem that Rorem’s work is mostly on the page, and Hammond identifies performance as a crucial element of enacting both his poetry and his music. The two artists’ approaches make sense with their respective viewpoints, and present an example of the types of working contradictions that exist in the intersections of these realms.

The discrepancies between these opinions show that it would be shortsighted to say that music and poetry are two separate domains and that every piece of art falls into one or the other category. Even the notion that every piece of art could be broken down into components that individually fit this way is troubled by this fluidity of form. However, it would be equally shortsighted to discard these categories completely, or deem them useless on the grounds that their borders are flimsy, or porous. This would be foolish because there are certainly works of art, careers, and aesthetics that belong wholeheartedly to one category, even if they are influenced and affected by the other. One might say that Bob Dylan, usually referred to as a musician, is also great poet, but it’s unlikely one would say the same thing of Brahms, Santana or Coltrane (though it would not be out of the question to argue). One might say Gil Scott-Heron is a great musician, but it’s unlikely one would say the same of Robert Frost (though, again, it would not be off the table). Here, an idea from Hammond’s quote is pertinent: “When one thinks about the way somebody like Ray Charles sings the words to a lyric, he makes it sound good and it makes sense. It’s like the delivery of a poem. Some poems are only for reading and some are for actual speaking.” (Dorsey, 259). This may seem like a contradiction—where are the lines in the sand? What, if anything, makes these forms—prose, poetry, lyric poetry, lyric,
non-lyrical music—separate from each other? The point is that these lines do not exist, and do not have to in order to make these genres meaningful as descriptors. Poetry and music may have permeable, shifting, even unpredictable borders, but using those terms evokes connotations and expectations (as forms do) with which an artist can choose to engage. Whether the artist engages those connotations and expectations in a way that embraces, challenges, or blurs them becomes an artistic choice in and of itself.

Or, perhaps sometimes the challenge or blurring is an artistic choice, but sometimes instead the blurring comes from the perception of the beholder: “(Moves) was... the first lyric (Doug Hammond) set to music. Hammond remembers: ‘I didn’t really set a poem to music as much as writing lyrics for the music. I didn’t really consider it as a poem, but from what people said, it came off like one.’” (Dorsey, 266). It was beholder perception that interpreted as poetry what Hammond considered to be lyrics, which couldn’t have happened if these forms had clear distinctions at their boundaries. It becomes clear that there is much wider difference under the breadth of each umbrella than between their closer points.

The ways in which one encounters music and poetry are tied in a somewhat parallel way—they have separate elements, and, at the same time, blur at their numerous borders. There are ways that music is used socially where poetry would perform strangely: in an elevator or department store, for instance, or at a café. However, some spaces where music is the norm also could work for poetry: busking in the subway or on a corner, for example, or a floor show at a restaurant. The same is true for poetry. One expects a poetry reading in a library, or in an academic space at a
university—but those same spaces could also house the right music. The expectation of one form over another is completely erased in some spaces—from community open mics to protest gatherings. With regard to their relationship to social influence, the two forms are tied to and reliant upon each other as well as upon the erasure (or highlighted non-existence) of distance between them—which will be the topic of a later chapter.

It is in this spirit that I will use the terms poetry and music in hopes of evoking their connotations and expectations as forms without attempting to define their edges.
3. Music in Language, Language in Music

I would like to begin this exploration of what might feel like a nebulous, difficult-to-pin-down relationship by analyzing an extended quote defining prosody from a source considered by many to prize concreteness and tangibility: the Princeton Encyclopedia.

Sound is produced by the breathing and vocal apparatus of the physical body and is felt as vibration and resonance for semantic, emotive, and aesthetic effects. Temporal and measurable, sound is energy in the form of waves. It becomes meaningful in lang. when perceived by users as consisting of elements and structures of the phonological system. As temporal, the structural units (e.g., feet, phrases) have perceptual *isochrony (though not actual isochrony) and *rhythm. The more rhythmic a passage of lang., the greater the tendency toward isochrony, with metered verse bearing the closest perceptual equivalence among units and groupings of units. The tendency toward isochrony is a feature of lang., but in poetry, the more highly regular the recurrence of units from which a pattern is built, the closer the tendency toward approximation. While some theorists disagree that isochrony operates in lang., testing of perception by actual hearers gives evidence that perception counts as much as actual phonic measurement. What is important is the perception of isochrony, the felt equivalence of time, as in music. Similarly, with sound in written texts, what counts is the perceptual experience of sound “heard” by readers of poetry and rhythmic prose as an approximate equivalence of timing with which a performance’s phrasing works as the baseline for expansive expression. (Lehiste; Bolinger). (The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, 1118 {under prosody}).

Using this definition of prosody, I will engage with the central tenets of the ties between music and poetry: their sonic medium, their origins in the human vocal apparatus, the rhythmic grouping of syllables in language, punctuation as rhythmic direction, the necessity of the audible reality of language, and the echo lingual elements in instrumental musical performance. Analysis of these tenets will lay crucial groundwork for understanding the ways that music is naturally found in and inseparable from both poetry and language more generally.

Though it seems like recalling genesis, it is important to remember and understand the roots of each genre.
“Sound is produced by the breathing and vocal apparatus of the physical body and is felt as vibration and resonance for semantic, emotive, and aesthetic effects. Temporal and measurable, sound is energy in the form of waves. It becomes meaningful in lang. when perceived by users as consisting of elements and structures of the phonological system.”

In investigating the relationship between language and music, it is important to note, first and foremost, that they are cut from the same cloth: sound, and, more specifically, the human vocal apparatus. While both areas have evolved and found iterations of themselves outside of this origin (written language, non-vocal instruments), it is paramount to acknowledge that the first language and music of human history began in the vocal apparatus. Brian Dorsey articulates a link between this apparatus and its extensions in instruments: “Being the first instrument, the human voice is echoed by instruments ‘speaking’ in human-like tones, as anyone who has ever heard one of Luther Allison’s dialogues with his guitar or the ‘talking drums’ of African-American music will tell you.” (Dorsey, 3). That echo is the crux of the argument for language’s innate presence in music. Upon further consideration, it is clear that this common ancestor is responsible for many of the ties between poetry and music. Returning to the Princeton Encyclopedia:

As temporal, the structural units (e.g., feet, phrases) have perceptual isochrony… and rhythm. The more rhythmic a passage of lang., the greater the tendency toward isochrony.

The rhythmic grouping of structural units of language is unavoidable, due to those units manifesting as temporally sequential pieces of sound. Read any sentence of this or any other paper in a natural speaking voice, but replace each syllable with a single repeated nonsense syllable—“dah” is a good one. Chances are, this will produce a perceivable rhythm that ends in an (at least somewhat) recognizable cadence. When given attention, this phenomenon’s existence becomes clearly
apparent. It is (along with timbre, another link between language and music for which their sonic parent is responsible) what separates captivating speakers from dry speakers, pleasant sentences from unpleasant ones, good paragraph flow from monotone. Short phrase, long phrase. Dynamic arc, plateau. The compliment of “quality cadence” can be awarded to a public speaker, a poet, or a drummer, and mean the same thing.

The tendency toward isochrony\(^2\) is a feature of lang., but in poetry, the more highly regular the recurrence of units from which a pattern is built, the closer the tendency toward approximation.

Approximation, in this context, could be read as imperfection, “faking it,” or compromising sanctity of the rhythmic properties of the language for the development of the material. There is an argument there. However, the stance I prefer is that the label of approximation is A) sometimes false, as it is a product of written language, which in many cases has friction with or does not parallel the spoken sound (E.g. number of syllables, accents), B) misleading because an “approximated” phrase can simply be a more advanced or tasteful cadence, and/or C) privileging of exact repetition or mimicry, when in some traditions, “making it work” (getting a satisfying or otherwise pleasant result) using crammed or stretched syllables, “slant rhymes” (which is a term that disparages and undervalues that which it aims to represent), or other types of unorthodox cadences is valued above, or separate from, a “cleaner” sound. These viewpoints may seem to unfairly eschew neatness, but the encyclopedia concurs. The quote continues:

While some theorists disagree that isochrony operates in lang., testing of perception by actual hearers gives evidence that perception counts as much as actual phonic measurement. What is important is the perception of isochrony, the felt equivalence of time, as in music. Similarly, with sound in written texts, what counts is the

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\(^2\) Isochrony refers to the division of time by units of a language.
perceptual experience of sound “heard” by readers of poetry and rhythmic prose as an approximate equivalence of timing with which a performance’s phrasing works as the baseline for expansive expression.

The point to take from this section of the quote is that poetry capitalizes on the isochronic (quick definition of isochrony) nature of language to make itself more deliberately musical. As I said above, some people naturally have a grasp on, or a feel for, this aspect of language—consciously or not. Good cadence makes room for emphasis. Emphatic, deliberate delivery gets attention. This is a key aspect of what makes poetry compelling. The other key aspect, entwined with the first, is the mixture of word-sound and word-meaning. This mixture of content and conjuration through connotation will be the subject of the subsequent chapter on images and Stimmung.

Before moving on, though, I will elaborate on how the concepts discussed thus far in this chapter apply to written language, as well as revisiting the aforementioned “echo” that represents the language in music.

Written language presents an interesting conundrum to the idea that all language is intrinsically musical, as it exists in a physical, visible form. However, much like written music, written words, prose or poetry, can be thought of as directions towards a reality that they do not encompass. This can be interpreted literally as well as figuratively.

Lock and Murray, in dialogue with Lynn Truss, explore the literal sense of punctuation as direction.

“The earliest known punctuation,” (Lynn Truss) relates in a chapter on commas, was a “system of dramatic notation… advising actors when to breathe… For a millennium and a half, punctuation’s purpose was to guide actors, chanters and readers-aloud through stretches of manuscript, indicating the pauses, (and) accentuating matters of sense and sound.” Punctuation today has a similar goal. “On the page,” contends Truss, ‘punctuation performs its
grammatical function, but in the mind of the reader it does more than that. It tells the reader how to hum the tune.” (Lock & Murray, 109).

The words are the notes, and the punctuation marks are the rests, accent and dynamic marks. Indeed, Truss says it herself: “…one ‘distinct function’ that grew out of the ‘mixed origins of modern punctuation’ is ‘to point up—rather in the manner of musical notation—such literary qualities as rhythm, direction, pitch, tone and flow.” (Lock & Murray, 111). In this sense, written language admits itself to being incomplete as such, for a standalone performance would not need to give directions on how it is to be interpreted. It would simply exist, with its intentions deliberately positioned to be noticed or hidden, as with spoken speech or music. Additionally, similar to the limits western musical notation faces in accurately portraying the vast variety of possible musical intentions, there are certain functions of spoken language or vocal sound that are partially or wholly lost when transcribed to the written word.

Figuratively, the written words are but directors, pieces of code that only point towards the sounds that deliver meaning. This can be demonstrated by a simple exercise: trying to read without hearing, at least in some capacity, the sounds of the words. It is impossible, at least according to the group of people with whom I have spoken about this (which, admittedly, only consists of people who speak English, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, Hebrew and French, so my study cannot be called comprehensive), not to hear the words in some way. If not in the author’s voice, then in someone else’s: the reader’s own, that of an imagined character, that of a cultural reading figure like Morgan Freeman, or whatever intrinsic voice the words themselves have. The sounds of these voices, intrinsically musical, are not written into the page, but are a part of our act of interpretation. It is thus that
we cannot glean meaning from language in absence of sound, or, thus, in absence of musicality.

However, there is undoubtedly a layer (or several, as I will argue) of difference between the sound of the words in the reader’s head and the sound of the same words spoken aloud. This difference is key in poetry. Many poets and poetry appreciators, myself among them, believe that to truly read a poem one must read it aloud. In the same interview quoted in the previous chapter, Doug Hammond articulates why this is important.

“Dorsey: ‘Does poetry lose something when it appears on the printed page?’
Hammond: ‘Well, hearing it is always better, because you have the delivery. When you’re reading it you’re using your mind, you don’t necessarily have to say it. I think it’s a good idea to recite it, to get an audible reality in the poetry. It makes a difference sometimes, and sometimes it doesn’t work.’” (Dorsey, 259).

Hammond’s phrase “audible reality” hits the mark of what doesn’t quite occur in a “silent” reading. This is not to question the argument presented in the last paragraph—when one reads without speaking, there is perhaps a parallel “audible imagination,” as the word-sounds that are tangible to the reader do not exist outside of the reader’s mind. However, the “audible reality” is a more profound experience for several reasons. First, the tactile experience of the sonic vibrations brings the words to life. Instead of existing only in imagination, where the words and their meanings are already visible, the words exist in a physical way when they are spoken aloud. “Speech itself is musical, and in most African languages, words and their meanings, as Hettie Jones notes, ‘are so bound up with music that language itself is a form of music—a word cannot be considered without its sound…”’ (Lock & Murray, 53). This physical presence produces a textured experience that allows the reader-
listener to feel the grit or smoothness of the words, their contours and counterpoints, where the air begins to flow through them, where that air rushes out, where it is cut short—all of these experiences are unique to the physical presence of words in the air, weather-like in their presence around and upon our bodies. This phenomenon relates to *Stimmung*, which I will address in the next chapter.

Another important part of reading aloud is that it is a “tempo check.” Many people read in their heads faster than they would speak aloud, and that difference is crucial to note when engaging with a poem. While the language of a poem may not be dense in the classic academic sense of the word, it is usually dense in the sense of carrying a great deal of meaning using few words. Of course, there are exceptions to this trend—as with any convention, the expectation of each line being loaded with layers of meaning is played with, twisted, or broken by many poets (as it should be). Nonetheless, it is a characteristic of the large majority of celebrated poems that each line is laden with meaning and thus warrants attention, thought, or at least time to let the word-sounds settle. It is thus paramount to read poetry somewhat slowly (unless it’s part of the theme of the poem not to do so). Reading slowly allows for time to process (read: physically inhabit) the word-sounds, for reconciling the overall narrative of the poem with otherwise potentially distracting evoked emotion, and for the different layers of meaning to float to the surface.

The tempo check of reading aloud often urges the reader to slow down, but it also steadies their time (in the musical sense). When reading on the page, one can stop and reread a line, or rush through several, perhaps acknowledging but not experiencing the music in the flow of the poem—much like a dream, the temporality
of the lines in conjunction with each other is not firm. Having steady time, especially when the sounds of the words are physically present, breathes life into the cadences of the poem. The rhythm of the syllables, the patterns and forms they create and dance with, are vibrantly alive and much more concretely observable when read aloud. The act of speaking brings the music into the language.

The language embedded in music is perhaps more simple, though perhaps less describable. What I am not talking about is the “language of music” metaphor that exists in discourse to describe the framework of rhythm and harmony in which one can become fluent. This is a charming metaphor, but it looks at music as one of many languages, like French or Spanish, with which one can learn to communicate. There are hard limits to this idea, such as communicating specific ideas with music rather than emotions. A great instrumentalist or composer can communicate the intricate and complex set of emotions of bittersweet experience more profoundly than perhaps any writer could, but there isn’t a player alive that can give a concise grocery list in an instrumental piece (although there may be a Ghanaian drummer who could—drum languages in some communities can have immensely detailed vocabulary).

No, what I am interested in is the “echo” mentioned towards the beginning of this chapter—the echo of the human voice by instruments. While the human voice has musical elements at its core, it so too has lingual elements, and some elements of the voice have a close bond with both music and language. Phrasing, for example, is an element that cannot be considered without both its musical and lingual implications. When the phrasing of a set of utterances is considered, it is usually discussed in terms of cadence, rest, accent, etc.—musical terms. However, the phrases that musicians
play, whether they be lead parts or supporting, percussion or horn, mirror those uttered in speech. It is no coincidence that the way virtuosic soloists space their phrasing reflects the same set of aesthetic values as those held by great orators. Mixing long and short phrases, keeping attention through consistent variation; prizing motivic development, threading themes that can reappear and shift across seconds, minutes or hours; playing with rhythmically and tonally formed tension and resolution, the natural breath cycle of temporal experience—while there are many, many different styles of music and speech, each with their own set of sensibilities and conventions, these characteristics appear time and time again in the works of great composers and improvisers both of speech and music. By using these techniques, performers of these forms and others have the capability of changing the very air in the space of their performance—which brings us to Stimmung.
4. Conjunction through Incantation: Images and *Stimmung*

*Proper evaluation of words and letters//In their phonetic and associated sense//Can bring the peoples of Earth//Into the clear light of Cosmic Wisdom*

—Sun Ra, *To The Peoples of Earth*

The German word *Stimmung* has a meaning that is translated alternately as “atmosphere” or “mood.” A way to tangibly consider *Stimmung* is through the metaphor of weather, which I introduced briefly in the previous chapter. In his book *Stimmung*, Hans Gumbrecht illustrates this comparison.

Every tone we perceive is, of course, a form of physical reality (if an invisible one) that ‘happens’ to our body, and, at the same time, ‘surrounds’ it. Another dimension of reality that happens to our bodies in a similar way and surrounds them is the weather… being affected by sound or weather, while among the easiest and least obtrusive forms of experience, is, physically, a concrete encounter… with our physical environment. (Gumbrecht, 4)

Part of the power of both music and poetry (as well as other art forms) is their ability to change the space they inhabit, to bring about the existence of something more than the sum of its parts. An empty concert hall is not the same space as that same concert hall brimming with the sounds of symphony. A bedroom is not the same space as that bedroom inhabited by a poem being read aloud. The space changes, although this phenomenon in its more intense forms is often described romantically (though not inaccurately) as “transportation”—that sensation of being transported from one’s reality to another place entirely. Where that other place exists is not clear—is it “inside” the art itself? Inside one’s mind in a place “unlocked” by the art? Is it in the same location one physically remains, but a different “place” because that location has been profoundly changed by the art? This is an individually experienced phenomenon, and is described differently by different people, so these questions are
not quite answerable. However, the fact that such a drastic shift of perceived reality (only paralleled by dreams, psychedelic drugs, religious experiences, or emotional/physical extremes) can be achieved through experiencing art is certainly worthy of investigation.

*Stimmung* may arise in many subtle forms as well. A room of readers on couches can be warmed by a fingerpicked guitar. The right laugh can ease the tension at a table, and the wrong one can inflame it. This becomes clear by “…paying attention to the textual dimension of the forms that envelop us and our bodies as a physical reality—something that can catalyze inner feelings without matters of representation necessarily being involved.” (Gumbrecht, 5). However subtle these things may be, they have power. Though it may be unconscious, the majority of people are able to detect and acknowledge them if they are brought to attention.

*Stimmung* has social implications—we know not to disrupt when something heavy is going on. In the U.S. and many other places, applause is a widely socially accepted way to break the reverie. If applause is not warranted due to genre or sensitivity, it is still unlikely for the first deliberate sound made by a beholder, at the end of the act of beholding, to be anything other than an acknowledgment or appreciation for what just transpired. If one were to walk into a room (with one’s wits about) where a heavy poem was being read, *even if one hadn’t heard any of it,* the *Stimmung* hanging around in the air would be palpable, and would usually elicit a socially informed response. While this response may differ person-to-person, culture-to-culture, and era-to-era, its existence is ubiquitous. “…there is no historical period, no phenomenological plane, no genre, and no medium that displays an exclusive
affinity for *Stimmung*. Paintings, songs, conventions of design, and symphonies can all absorb atmospheres and moods and later offer them up for experience in a new present.” (Gumbrecht, 16). How can something invisible, undetectable by any machine, carry so much social meaning for us? That question cannot be answered in an exhaustive way, but I believe that these vibrations are imbued with meaning by virtue of our art-conscious consciousness. That is to say, as people are capable of creating, experiencing and appreciating art in its different forms, the physical medium through which that art makes its way from artist to beholder (which, in the case of music and audible poetry, is vibrations in the air) takes on the burden of carrying that meaning without being itself the material of that meaning. As ones and zeros can transmit a picture of a face with an indescribable expression, so too can vibrations in the air, enveloping our bodies, allow us to experience feelings in a more profound way than prosaic description may allow.

So, what tools allow artists to do this work of shaping *Stimmung*? To be sure, there are many, perhaps countless tools at one’s disposal, and the nuance and creativity is in their combination and juxtaposition. One tool that is written about as critically important, though, for both music and poetry, is the connotative and image-inducing power of the word.

When we read poetry, the words form images… it is akin to a miniature chain reaction—one so blazingly fast that we might not realize it is happening. Our minds, writes Frances Mayes, are naturally associative, and one thing brings to mind another, without logical connection. This is one way—perhaps the most important way—our imagination creates pleasure as we read poetry.” (Kimball, 43).

Mayes ties her point to poetry, but it is also pertinent for prosaic and musical forms. Imagination is key in the appreciation of art, and also in considering why art
affects people in different ways. Imagination and connotation are inherently individual things. When personality, life experience, and personal philosophy are taken into account, of course the “chain reaction” of formed images, emotions, and other responses is different for different people. However, as we are different, so are we similar.

Mayes continues: “No other choices the poet makes—subject, structure, speaker—are more important than the quality of individual words.” (Kimball, 52). Her choice to elevate the quality of individual words above all else strikes me as strange, because I believe all of these types of choices earn their keep, so to speak, from the ways they interact and draw power from the other techniques at work in the poem. However, few poets would disagree that the quality of words is hugely important. Quality is a complex word here, and her use of it puts to work the phenomenon that she is describing. The deliberate use of several connotations of the same word (in this case, “quality” in the sense of caliber but also in the sense of trait) allows meaning to be conveyed and complex atmosphere to be conjured while maintaining economic usage of words—an accomplishment often applauded in both poetry and lyricism. The sense of the word “quality” that pertains most to Stimmung is texture.

In Carol Kimball’s book Art Song, she defines texture, among other poetic terms, as follows: “The quality created by the combination of all the elements of a work of literature or music. In a poem: the words, word sounds (consonants and vowels), rhythm, stress, etc.” (Kimball, 96). It is difficult to define the texture of a word beyond what Kimball gives here. However descriptively evasive a concept,
texture is of utmost importance to *Stimmung*. Why else would word choice matter? In many languages, there are many ways of saying the same thing. However, texture informs differing connotations of otherwise similar words. If one hears that a task is difficult, one knows it may be challenging, but one hears the sweat and pain in that task if one is told it will be grueling. There is a heave embedded in the first drawn-out syllable of that word. If a slow lurch up a half-step accompanies the word, all of a sudden there is an atmosphere heavy with strained effort.

Poet, novelist, anthologist and professor Nathaniel Mackey explains his consideration of the phenomenon with an example from one of his poems, cited by Jones.

The literal meaning of ‘strick’ is found in strands, in ‘pieces of fiber or hemp before they are made into rope’…For Mackey, however, strick’s significance lies less in its denotation and more in its aural connotation. He explains ‘…I hear more in the word than that. I hear the word stick, I hear the word strike, I hear the word struck, and I hear the word strict. I hear those words which are not really pronounced in that word, but there are overtones or undertones of those words, harmonics of those words. The word strick, then, is like a musical chord in which those words which are otherwise not present are present.’ (Jones 100-101).

The presence of these harmonics or overtones in the dimension of *Stimmung* concretely affects our interpretation of the word in its denotative sense, raising the question of the relationship between *Stimmung* and representation. Is it the job of *Stimmung* to represent in detail that which brings it into being? Can it represent its source at all? Gumbrecht weighs in on the matter:

Reading for *Stimmung* cannot mean ‘deciphering’ atmospheres or moods, for they have no fixed signification. Equally little does reading for *Stimmungen* mean reconstructing or analyzing their historical or cultural genesis. Instead, it means discovering sources of energy in artifacts and giving oneself over to them affectively and bodily—yielding to them and gesturing toward them. (Gumbrecht,18)

I read Gumbrecht as arguing here that traditional analytic techniques (deciphering, examining historical context, etc.) will not allow the “close reader” to
apprehend any certain instance of *Stimmung*, nor will it allow any fastidious account of history to be found within the *Stimmung*. Because it has no “fixed signification,” *Stimmung* cannot speak for or represent its source in a detailed way. I agree with this wholeheartedly—this is not a type of entity that can be picked apart under a microscope. However, I read Gumbrecht as leaving open the question of whether a person’s intimate knowledge of that historical genesis and cultural relevance would allow an instance of *Stimmung* that is carved from that history to resonate more deeply with that person. While the *Stimmung* of Billie Holiday’s *Strange Fruit* cannot, on its own, teach the violence of Black history in America to one who doesn’t know it, it has a devastatingly profound effect upon one who has even some knowledge that history.

Hip-hop DJ’s use a similar technique: through sampling, DJ’s invoke the *Stimmung* of past Black musics to shape hip-hop as a music of Black empowerment. “Rap techniques integrated the selective extension, modification, and massive archiving of black sounds. African drums, Ellingtonian riffs, bebop melodies, James Brown shouts, blues innuendoes, jazz improvisations, doo-wop croons, calypso rhythms, reggae dubs… were woven by DJs into intriguing tapestries of sound.” (Dorsey, 333-334). Bringing that history into the room produces *Stimmung* that allows the listener (or concertgoer) to physically inhabit a space of Black musical greatness that spans genres, generations, and nationalities. This technique, among others, will be revisited in the chapter on music as a megaphone.

Still, though, the tapestry woven by the DJ does not so much tell history in a representative way as much as paint compelling pictures of snapshots along its
course. In an interview with Graham Lock, poet and activist Jayne Cortez talks about the relationship between direct representation and *Stimmung* in her work, although she does not name them as such.

GL: “You’ve talked before of the blues as ‘instinct and relief,’ that it’s about ‘being real and surreal.’ Can you explain that a little?”

JC: “Instinct, intuition, it all plays a part in the writing. The work is emotional, intellectual—everything is there. It’s natural, supernatural, surreal, in dreams. It’s associations, juxtapositions of images and words, based on a real situation, on inventions. I put it all together. That’s the way I think.”

GL: “When you write about real people, like the musicians you’ve known, is there ever a tension between the surreal and fantasy elements in your writing and a need for historical accuracy, historical truth?”

JC: “I don’t think so. I think it’s all about imagination, invention, and transformation. I think the combination is the truth.” (Lock & Murray, 133).

Upon initial consideration, it would seem as though the tension Lock mentions, between the surreal and the historically accurate, would exist in a way that would block both parts from doing their work if the parts were to be combined. It seems contradictory that something can transcend reality while remaining accurate enough to be called truth, or that something can represent reality in a cohesive way while drawing its power from the surreal. Cortez’ first response is prevalent here: “Instinct, intuition.” If the “chain reaction” of response to poetry is formed from these things, then instinct and intuition should be well qualified as the impetus for the creation of art as well. If, in the mind of a poet, a historical or otherwise “grounded” idea springs forth other ideas, images, or worlds that are less grounded in reality, those things are the truth of that idea for the poet in that moment. Thus, sharing that perceived truth in poetic form, as infused with the surreal as it may be, is not a lie of any kind. It is not an invention of something that is not there. It is an acknowledgment of a momentary and innately human truth that is not otherwise offered a legitimimized place to exist.
Gumbrecht’s work on *Stimmung* draws from Martin Heidegger. In a brave foray into the deeply existential, Heidegger proclaims the profundity of such moments, and links them to the very basis of what makes human existence meaningful.

What we call a ‘feeling’ is neither a transitory epiphenomenon of our thinking and willing behavior nor simply an impulse that provokes such behavior nor merely a present condition we have to put up with somehow or other… the founding mode of attunement (*die Befindlichkeit der Stimmung*) not only reveals beings as a whole in various ways, but this revealing—far from being merely incidental—is also the basic occurrence of our *Da-sein* [existence as humans]. (Heidegger, 102).

Heidegger goes as far as to say that when we connect with *Stimmung*, we are connecting with something far greater than ourselves, which he calls Being. He names other examples of times we connect with Being through *Stimmung*, such as taking in the breadth of nature, or being in love: “…this “as a whole” overcomes us…another possibility of such revelation is concealed in our joy in the present existence—and not simply in the person—of a human being whom we love.” (Heidegger, 101). Importantly, Heidegger (or rather Krell, the translator) uses the word attunement. The word attunement suggests the act of tapping into something that is already there. Many improvisers, myself included, relate to this idea.

In the reading that I have done on group improvisation and on *Stimmung*, I have not yet found literature that pursues this particular intersection. It is this particular place where *Stimmung* blends at its edges with the idea of the flow state. However, while analyses of flow offer ideas that pertain to the experience of the person in flow, the idea of connecting to an external *Stimmung* that is in the process of developing and being shaped gives another lens to the intersection of improvisation and its associated altered states of consciousness. As such, I feel compelled to share
my ideas (shaped also by numerous musicians I have talked to over the years) on the subject. I believe firmly that these ideas pertain to many, if not all, areas and mediums of improvisation. I use the example of group musical improvisation to explore these ideas only because it is a field in which I have experience, so that these ideas are not only conjecture.

“Often, we are alerted to a potential mood in a text by the irritation and fascination provoked by a single word or small detail—the hint of a different tone or rhythm.” (Gumbrecht, 17). Though he is describing the reaction of a reader to a text, Gumbrecht highlights an aspect of group improvisation that is of paramount importance to its successful execution. There is a phenomenal ability of one small detail to change the course of the “ship” (where the improvisation is “going”). It can be a change as small as a variation in the degree of swing, a recurrence of emphasis, or a briefly implied harmonic shift. It could be a melodic fragment, a rhythmic motif, or a timbral texture. Additionally, in the moment, those involved in the improvisation are privy to a heightened understanding of the profundity of this phenomenon. Being involved, in some capacity, primes one’s sensitivity to such a degree that a miniscule force can influence one’s improvisational direction.

Anyone in the ensemble can provide this impetus, and it is not always intentional. An idea that gets picked up can come from a soloist, someone comping, someone keeping rhythm, playing a background figure—the jump of an idea from one improviser to another transcends their different roles in the ensemble. Any member in an ensemble plays numerous ideas over the course of an improvisation, and not all of them are picked up. The reason certain pieces are picked up over others
is difficult to determine, but the effect is that these ideas shape the *Stimmung* of the improvisation. Whether the idea in question is copied exactly, transposed, rephrased, harmonized, otherwise transformed, or, alternatively, reacted to with contrapuntal sensibility, that idea and the reactions it draws from the other musicians shapes the atmosphere and mood in the space of the improvisation.

The idea that comes from this premise is the central one organizing this section of the chapter: by nurturing the *Stimmung* of a developing improvisation, one can attune to something greater, and by doing so, draw people in and compel them. Not by blazing ahead, bleeding great new ideas as one goes, leaving behind a wake of beautiful music, but by listening, hard, to the *Stimmung* coming together in the space of improvisation, and *playing not what one knows to be hip, but what one judges in that moment would best help the Stimmung develop and blossom*, does one connect with and show to others something bigger, something outside of themselves. This is an exercise not only in deep, perhaps spiritual listening, but in patience, knowing that this growth takes time and cannot be hurried; in confidence, believing without doubt or hesitation that the musical choices one is making in the moment will allow for beauty or satisfaction either in that moment or down the road; and in trust, both of the self and of one’s fellow musicians, to listen, pay attention, and react deftly and tastefully to each other’s perceptions and ideas of where the *Stimmung* wants to go.

It is in the midst of this deep and overwhelming way of experiencing the world that one can testify to the “attunement” Heidegger speaks of. When one gives oneself over wholly to the *Stimmung* (which does not happen every time), one achieves, momentarily, many things associated with religious experiences or
enlightenment—complete involvement, where the moment-to-moment “doing” occupies the entirety of the mind; a sense of ecstasy, knowing, in that moment, the sensation of complete contentment; inner clarity, where self-doubt and hesitation are shed to leave zero space between impulse and execution; a loss of the self outside of the “doing,” where one’s entire existence is, for that moment, in that one act; and an altered perception of time, where one’s thoughts can reach countless places in the span of a second and yet pass an hour without realizing ten minutes have gone by. It would be difficult to experience something like this and not believe that there is something greater at work, something that we, in some moments across our lives, can tune into, but never own or take back with us into ordinary life, save in the form of memory.

_Stimmung_ comes in many shapes and forms, and we engage with it in different ways, both consciously and unconsciously. We engage with it as performers, listeners, and composers; as passers-by, as witnesses, and as tribute; through words, through movement, and through art its countless forms. As much as we use art to engage with _Stimmung_, so too is _Stimmung_ an integral part of how we engage with and relate to any and all forms of art, and perhaps any and all experiences of our lives. Many people begin their path towards making art, consciously or unconsciously, because of their fascination and their experiences with _Stimmung_. As one’s relationship and appreciation for _Stimmung_ deepens (whether or not one considers it in the same terms as I have described here), one may find that however virtuosic or masterful one is at one’s craft, that the _Stimmung_ that one can summon or tap into with that craft can always be augmented, changed, or deepened by another.
This, I believe, is why so many artists become interdisciplinary—and why different forms of art are so interconnected intrinsically, as well as in their scenes and cannons. With this idea in mind, I begin the next chapter with an exploration of some of these intersections as they manifested in Black American artistic communities in the last 100-some years.
5. In Practice: Music in and Around Poetry

In their book *Thriving on a Riff*, Graham Lock and David Murray provide a list of prominent figures in the African-American tradition who traverse the worlds of music and poetry. These artists are celebrated because they each brought experimented with and championed exciting new ideas, aesthetics, and modes of thought. This chapter explores some of the common threads that unite the work of prominent artists in the musical and poetic African-American traditions, while a later chapter will focus more on specific techniques.

Many who write on the topic of commonalities throughout these traditions seem to agree that while the spirit itself is difficult, perhaps impossible, to pinpoint, there are characteristics that act as markers of the Black musical and poetic tradition. Poet and novelist Arna Bontemps writes in the introduction to *American Negro Poetry*:

> “…poets engaged with jazz and blues as subject matter and formal constituent (Wanda Coleman, Frank Marshall Davis, Henry Dumas, Cornelius Eady, Robert Hayden, David Henderson, Ted Joans, Stephen Jonas, Bob Kaufman, Harryette Mullen, Myron O’Higgins, Raymond Patterson, Sterling Plumpp, Melvin Tolson, Shirley Anne Williams, Al Young, Kevin Young); performed their work with musicians (Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, Michael S. Harper, Langston Hughes, Yusef Komunyakaa, K. Curtis Lyle, Nathaniel Mackey, Amus Mor, Eugene Redmond, Ishmael Reed; and even, in a few cases (Jayne Cortex, Gil Scott-Heron), fronted their own bands… Conversely, there are many musicians who have set, or have been inspired by, texts by black authors: Marion Brown and Andrew Hill have composed pieces in response to Jean Toomer’s *Cane*; Bill Dixon has dedicated pieces to Henry Dumas, Larry Neal, Allen Polite, and N. H. Pritchard; Taj Mahal has set lyrics by Langston Hughes, Ronald Shannon Jackson has performed poems by Sterling Brown; Max Roach has adapted texts by Bruce Wright. And many musicians are themselves writers and poets, who have set or performed their own texts to music: examples include Duke Ellington, Joseph Jarman, Oliver Lake, George E. Lewis, Charles Mingus, Archie Shepp, Sun Ra, and Cecil Taylor.” (Lock & Murray, 3)

The poetry of the American Negro sometimes seems hard to pin down. Like his music, from spirituals, and gospel songs to blues, jazz and bebop, it is likely to be marked by a certain, special riff, and extra glide, a kick where none is expected, and a beat for which there is no notation. It follows the literary traditions of the language it uses, but it does not hold them sacred. (Bontemps, xv).

Bontemps uses the same words to talk about Black aesthetics in both music and poetry. Samuel Floyd, a musician and academic, gives a similar dual description in his book *The Power of Black Music*: “(African-American poetry, like African-American music), has its off-beat accents; its call-and-response phrasings; its riffs, licks, cries, and hollers; its multimetric configurations. And, like music, African-American poetry is driven by myths, rituals, and tropes of the culture.” (Floyd, 276).

The characteristics Floyd describes here are present in many works in the African-American musical and poetic canons, and often in the prosaic one as well. This set of signatures engages with the sonic and rhythmic nature of their mediums in a way that highlights the limits of either extreme—that is to say, neither in a language devoid of music or a music devoid of language could these signature techniques be achieved. Artists in this tradition necessarily draw upon both worlds at once. It is as if they are saying, “watch me—I’m talking, but it’s music. I’m playing music, but you hear what I’m saying.” It is this act of *worrying the line* that gives this tradition its grit, its distortion, and its humanness. I use this term to address the blurring of speech and song—I choose the term “worrying” over “blurring” even though both occur because of the push and pull that happens between the language and the music. The human voice is where this phenomenon centers, but instrumentalists render the act in their

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5 A clear example of this phenomenon is the arc of Anderson .Paak’s vocal performance throughout his song *The Waters* from his album *Malibu*. Found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2R2ticmolk
own way. Slurs, rasps, exclamatory sounds, pitched speech—there are many ways to worry the line, and none of them are unfamiliar to the human experience.

Worrying the line in this way is an act of defiance to form, in a wider sense than one usually conceives of that act. Form is of absolute importance in crafting art. It need not always be obeyed, and indeed often does more important and lasting work through disobedience. However, that disobedience is not an ignorant act—it is a deliberate breaking with, addressing the existing form with intentioned defiance rather than missing it in uninformed ignorance. In her book The Muse Is Music, academic and poet Meta DuEwa Jones analyzes ideas on poetic and musical form by the American poet and writer Annie Finch. Finch argues that in both poetry and music, form is important to artistic excellence, and that the page is the white space beyond, between and around the poem is what grounds that poem and informs its pace. She argues that “poetic structure thrives on the artful balance between discipline and freedom, silence and noise, and the presence and absence of notation,” and that jazz poems specifically “blur the boundaries between what is seen and what is heard,” which “enables aesthetic, mystical and even spiritual qualities to emerge.” (Finch 27-33). Jones concurs, and deepens the ideas with her own analysis:

Arranging and rearranging sound, stress, linguistic, syllabic and typographic units all influence the working of poetry’s internal logic and external aural and visual performance. It is form that not only shapes the poem but also makes the poem. The same holds true with great musicians. Whether working with major or minor chord progressions, tonal centers, or harmonic, melodic, or modal complexity, an intimate knowledge—and practice—of musical structure and instrumental technique buttresses virtuoso exploration and innovation. Musical form frames poets’ and musicians’ ‘workings of the spirit’—even or especially when they depart from its conventions… Poetic forms that are influenced by music… seek to transcend the boundaries of both speech and music to inhabit the intangible realms of the spiritual, the emotional, and the soulful. (Jones, 88).
My argument is that by “seeking to transcend the boundaries of both speech and music,” these artists are critiquing these forms as we conceive of them, and, in doing so, are creating new forms. They are doing this in the same way as art has always evolved in reference to forms, but in a wider sense—a deliberate questioning, sometimes through direct disavowal, of the forms (usually not considered as such) of music and speech. Dorsey addresses this point directly: “Music had become not only the model but the actual goal of black poetry. Seeking to go beyond the hypostatization of music as the perfect metaphor for black life, the new black poets collapsed the distinctions between musical and other black expressions…” (Dorsey, 5). Much of this collapse happens through the voice, which I will discuss in the context of music and poetry in the following section.

II.

The second half of this chapter aims to show how the voice specifically mediates music and language. An in-depth analysis of how the human voice relates to the span of either or both of these mediums would be the subject of a book, or several. So, I limit my discussion of the voice to how it relates to the topic at hand—the worrying of the line between these two mediums.

In his book *Spirituality, Sensuality, Literality*, Brian Dorsey brings up Samuel Floyd’s observations on how the voice blurs the line of music and speech.

One of the fundamental characteristics of all African-derived American music is ‘sung speech’…this so-called ‘bluing’ of the voice has its roots in Africa, and was first heard in the United States in shouts, field ‘hollers,’ and in the moans of work songs. Musically, Floyd argues, the blues took its most significant features from the ‘calls, cries and hollers of field slaves…’ (Dorsey, 53)
The use of the word “bluing” is particularly apt because of the connotation of the “blue” as the “between.” In the blues scale, the tritone is commonly called the “blue” note. It is also the “between” note, a chromatic wedge between the fourth and the fifth. What is also important about the blue note in this role is that it cannot be sharp or flat—it occupies the entirety of the space between the fourth and the fifth. A slightly sharp fourth is a blue note, as is a slightly flat fifth, as is everything in between. The blue note is neither here nor there. It is also noteworthy that although the main denotation of “the blue note” is the space between the fourth and the fifth, other blue notes exist—for example, the space between the minor and major thirds, as well as between the flat and natural sevenths. These unsure, imprecise harmonic spaces cannot be perfectly tuned, nor can they be exactly replicated.

This mirrors the nature of the “bluing” of the voice that Dorsey mentions. The voice is capable of playing in the “blue” space between the fourth of speaking and the fifth of singing. This phenomenon is illustrated well in the act of repetition. In his reading on Robert Glasper’s track I Stand Alone, author and academic Michael Eric Dyson describes the potential of repetition as a general technique.

…it is true that the genius of African culture is surely its repetition, but the key to such repetition was that new elements were added each go-round. Every round goes higher and higher. Something fresh popped off the page or jumped from a rhythm that had been recycled through the imagination of a writer or a musician. Each new installation bore the imprint of our unquenchable thirst to say something of our own, in our own way, in our own voice as best we could. (Dyson, cited in Glasper, 3:47)

Higher and higher, in this case, means more and more nuance—creating depth by flushing out the different angles at which one can vocally approach a word or sound. Like an instrument repeatedly playing in that space where microtonal
differences translate expressive shades, the voice, in its bluing mode, can draw out a
different meaning from the words or sounds with each repetition. Meta DuEwa Jones
thoroughly analyzes this phenomenon at work in Langston Hughes’ reading of his
poem Bad Man for his Weary Blues record. I quote at length to emphasize the depths
of sonic analysis necessary to fully understand what is at work in Hughes’
performance.

The attentive listener might notice the poetics of repetition and
excess… in Hughes’ ‘creaking of the word’ in his performance [on the record
Weary Blues] of ‘Bad Man.’ He growls—attacks—the initial ‘I’m’ and slurs
the initial a in the poem’s first line: ‘Ahhm ah bad, bad man.’ He also
protracts his utterance of ‘bad’ in the third line of the third stanza, saying, ‘I’m
so baaaaaad, baaaaad, baaaaaad, —ah—don’t even wanna be good.’…One
can also hear the nuances in the altered timbre of Hughes’s vocalization when
he concludes the lines to particular verses with a rising inflection. For
instance, he varies his pitch, reaching a high register when pronouncing ‘wife’
as ‘why-eye-eef’ and again raising his pitch when protracting ‘too’ into two
syllables, as in ‘too-ooh’ in the lines ‘beats ma wife an’ / beats my side gal
too.’ A sardonic tone emanates from his performance of the poem. The
cadence and well-timed modulation of his reading make him sound as if he is
perched on the brink of laughter. Hughes’s projection underscores the
possibility that the poem masks the nature of the male persona’s human
complexity and, more to the point, the male poet’s sexual performativity.
Here, we hear Hughes, who rarely performed with a stage accent, deliberately
accenting—that is, staging, slanting, stretching and countouring—his pitch
with particular affect. (Jones, 55).

While one might not describe Hughes’ reading as singing, it is undoubtedly
the musical aspects of his voice that inject the expressivity and nuance into his words.
As Jones illustrates, Hughes’ musical choices (pitch, timbral shift, rhythmic variation,
etc.) are much of what shape the meaning of the poem, as they construct character,
poem and poet in a new, rich way. Especially noteworthy is her point about
unmasking meaning: “Hughes’s projection underscores the possibility that the poem
masks the nature of the male persona’s human complexity and, more to the point, the
male poet’s sexual performativity.” There is a magnificent ability of the voice, by
ing of its musicality, to uncover or produce meanings in a poem that are otherwise
either unintelligible or altogether absent.

So, the finer shades of meaning in Hughes’ performance are produced through
musical aspects of his voice. The worried line returns here—performances of music
or poetry so commonly make use of elements that span the two mediums. The word
poetry provides a set of connotations for Hughes’ performance, which can then be
qualified with further description. “He does straightforward, story-like poetry, but he
uses his voice musically.” Similarly, one could say of Anderson .Paak that “he is a
rapper and a singer, but he uses poetic language, lyrical forms and vocal delivery.”

When it comes to slam poetry, some pieces are only identifiable as poetry (as
opposed to A Cappella rap) because of social context. The terms music and poetry
inform our expectations to help us gauge our interest in an artist or scene, and provide
context for discourse, but they do not rule each other out, or impart understanding of
an artist or scene’s signature pattern of use of poetic and musical techniques, which
intersect at the crossroads of the voice.

The previous chapter engaged with poets who draw upon musicality as part of their poetic form and upon music as subject matter for their poetry, studied musicians who engage with poetry in a similar way, and examined how the voice allows these artists to traverse these worlds. This chapter approaches this crossing from a complementary angle—considering musicians who affirm their influence by poets or poetry, as well as poets who acknowledge their influence by music or musicians. There are many ways this influence or guidance manifests, and in this chapter I explore three of these ways through the testimony of artists: practice, form and deconstruction.

Musical practice methods translate to honing the poetic craft, and vice versa. Jones quotes American poet A. Van Jordan:

…if you don’t practice, you can’t play. I move between forms—sonnets, sestinas, haiku, blues, etc.—because I practice my forms like a musician practices scales and arpeggios, daily. Reading and writing, even if I’m just editing, is practice. It all builds muscle memory, even when I write bad poems; it all comes back to me when I allow myself to listen to the poem. (Jones, 90)

Practicing and listening back is a common mode of self-improvement for musicians. Muscle memory, as Jordan implies, is not limited to one’s hands; the phenomenon applies to any type of creative activity. Practicing builds fluency with the medium, and leaves one’s impulse-to-execution pathways smooth and unobstructed. Spending time in one’s medium in a non-pressurized situation also helps to spark ideas. Listening back to what one has played or written gives one feedback, and allows one to analyze in a more thoughtful way than is possible in the mode of creation. One can then make the alterations one desires and repeat the process, achieving a deliberately constructed sound through such distillation.
Another type of influence is taking aesthetics or techniques from artists working in different medium and translating them into one’s own. Lock and Murray quote poet and academic Michael S. Harper:

> It’s not only cadences; it’s also delay. When I say periodic sentence, I mean a sentence that waits until the end to give you the predicate and the subject. It’s like a solo that gives you a certain kind of suspense but is also building toward something, and what the building is, is the theme, the thematic of it. Sometimes it has to be discovered. (Lock & Murray, 99)

Harper’s quote touches on two ideas: 1) suspense and the act of building can itself be the theme of a solo or sentence (which is an observation that translates techniques across mediums); and 2) that this act of building is sometimes the only way to “discover” what lies at the end. The atmosphere of escalation is itself a type of *Stimmung*, cultivated by the artist’s dedication to the motif of suspense (bring back gumbrecht if u can). It is then through the giving over of the self to this *Stimmung* that brings the endpoint of that build out of the artist. Put another way, the content of the “arrival” (the substance that presents euphoria at the culmination of the build) is brought out of the artist by the *Stimmung* that the artist nurtured throughout the course of the build. This phenomenon happens (among other art forms) in the act of playing music⁶ and, as Harper describes, in writing poetry. It is perhaps through thinking about how musicians solo that Harper engages with this method of writing.

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⁶ A tangible occurrence of this phenomenon is Corey Henry’s solo in Snarky Puppy’s *GroundUp* performance of *Lingus*. (Snarky Puppy, 4:20-8:20). The section from 7:30-8:20 is high-intensity in terms of dynamics, density of notes, and complexity of harmonic ideas. Henry’s virtuosity is such that he could certainly play at that level having just sat down at the keyboard. However, the place he reaches/they reach together at around 7:56 is informed, perhaps even completely created, by the build itself. Arriving at such a set of ideas is necessarily that: an arrival. Those ideas are not the type that one can find without an arc—it is the momentum itself, the movement of the *Stimmung* to which he and the other bandmembers collectively contribute, that leads him to that place.
Another visible type of two-way influence between music and poetry is in the domain of form. Jones observes:

Many jazz tunes are built upon the structure of twelve-bar or thirty-two-bar blues. Can we witness a parallel development of jazz poems from the tight arrangements of blues lyrics themselves, especially the blues poems of Langston Hughes? Not quite. Though many poets who write jazz-inflected verses also compose poems carved from a blues ethos, a correspondent analogy cannot easily be made concerning the evolutions from blues to jazz poem. (Jones, 105)

Although Jones makes an argument against a direct analogy between blues-to-jazz evolutions in music and blues poem to jazz poem, she operates under the assumption that there is a formal tie between blues music and the blues poem, from which both mediums’ approach to jazz evolved in different ways. There are certainly many parallels between blues music and blues poetry. They mirror each other in form, subject matter, verbal aesthetics, and vocal performance, to name a few. In both poetry and music, jazz took what existed in blues and presented it with more room to move. Jones’ point is that these new possibilities took different forms in each medium. Jazz music kept the twelve-, sixteen-, or thirty-two-bar form of the blues, and presented that previous form with new harmonic, and thus melodic, possibilities. Jazz poetry, however, did away with the strict bar-count format in favor of phrasing that emulated the unrestrained nature of a jazz improvisation.

In jazz music, rhythmic markers and cues almost always provide a canvas for an improviser. Without this canvas, syncopated accents and other jazz rhythms would not have any ground from which to push off, so to speak. This is exactly the case with jazz poetry, which is what makes it such a unique art form. A jazz poem is the a capella voice of an improviser without their accompanist. Thus, the grid upon which
the cadences dance is an invisible one, creating ambiguity of meter, which (if skillfully executed) gives a mysterious and playful air to the poem. As Jones says, the ethos of blues poetry is still visible in jazz poetry, but its evolution took a different form than that of blues music to jazz music. However, as discussed above, jazz poetry is not blind to the aesthetics and principles of jazz music; it simply evolved from its blues predecessor in a different fashion.

The final form of influence that I will discuss is the spirit of deconstruction. John Coltrane is revered for many musical feats, notably among them his ability deconstruct many musical things we take for granted—from song forms to triads and everything in between. Celebrated poet and writer Amiri Baraka spoke of the influence Coltrane had on the poetry community. Dorsey engages with his ideas on Coltrane:

One of Coltrane’s most vociferous admirers is Amiri Baraka. In many ways, Coltrane expressed in music what Baraka was articulating in poetry. The poet was transposing Coltrane’s tonal and modal ideas into verse, attempting at—and succeeding in—upending white poetic forms. Baraka also intended to destroy weak Western forms in order to create something new out of the debris… This ‘beautiful philosopher’ epitomizes the jazz aesthetic process by showing us how to murder the popular song and do away with Western forms. Describing Trane’s destructive art, Baraka says: ‘He’d play sometimes chorus after chorus, taking the music apart before our ears, splintering the chords and sounding each note, resounding it, playing it backwards and upside down trying to get to something else. And we heard our own search and travails, our own reaching for new definition. Trane was our flag.’” (Dorsey, 218)

As Baraka notes, Coltrane was a champion of the act of reiterating a note, chord, or phrase until its ultimate disintegration. He wore at it until it hung in tatters, until the rags meant something new. This act of rebirth was just that, a genesis, one that inspired and drove forward artists across mediums. The act of deconstruction is often a political one: shattering oppressive forms, whether they are forms created by oppressors or forms that are oppressive in and of themselves, is a powerful
demonstration of freedom. The method through which Coltrane and other artists accomplished this deconstruction is itself an important symbol: diligent, determined repetition was the central technique. In music, poetry, and the civil rights movement, deconstruction of unwanted rules and conventions was achieved by relentlessly wearing upon the target, again and again, until, exhausted and overwhelmed, “new definition” was reached. This repetition never stopped—it continues today in many forms of art and protest, and it is likely to continue as long as there are forms of oppression that remain to be deconstructed.

However, different artists have different ideas about how best to accomplish this deconstruction, or the other social, political, or artistic goals that they share. Sometimes these differences of aesthetic, direction, or artistic domain can amplify the power of the art by allowing its more numerous shades to appeal to different beholders. Sometimes, however, these differences can hinder the creative process and can impinge on the harmony of the art itself. The following chapter deals with these uncertainties and frictional moments in communication and process.
7. Navigating Unsure Boundaries in Collaborative Composition and Improvisation

As close as poetry and music are to one another, as powerful as they can be together, and as much as their borders blur, interaction between even the most celebrated artists can be hindered by the distance between certain aspects of music and poetry when it comes to collaboration. This tension in collaboration and combination is especially visible in improvisation, due to a varied range of improvisatory orientations and capabilities.

Hughes described his performances with jazz musicians as collaboratively improvised endeavors, yet this did not mean his blues and jazz text combinations consisted of the continual alteration or reshuffling of verses or choruses evident in the blues and jazz performances of virtuoso musicians. Indeed, he rarely changed the wording, syntax, or structure of individual poems when reading them, nor did his spoken modulations typically entail hyper-expressive or dramatic articulation. (Jones, 51).

What exactly is improvised, then, about Hughes’ performance? The timing of his delivery, certainly, as well as the intonation of it—the accents, pitching, slurring, and other such dynamic choices. However, one could list the same performance-based changes for a classical piano performance—which is rarely considered improvisation, usually instead described as expression or interpretation. This seems to be a somewhat arbitrary line for what does and does not count as improvisation, but it is also true that there is an intuitive difference between the changes Hughes makes performance-to-performance and a substantial rearrangement or even spontaneous creation of text.

I do not aim to take a stand against Hughes’ brilliance with this point—of course his work is both masterful and innovative. It is probable, in fact, that truly
improvising the poem in a performance setting would make the work of the musicians much harder and a cohesive product less attainable.

…Hughes told jazz critic Nat Hentoff: ‘the music should not only be a background to the poetry, but should comment on it. I tell the musicians—and I’ve worked with several different modern and traditional groups—to improvise as much as they care around what I read. Whatever they bring of themselves to the poetry is welcome to me. I merely suggest the mood of each piece as a general orientation. Then I listen to what they say in their playing, and that affects my own rhythms when I read. We listen to each other.’ (49)

In this sense, giving the musicians a first read on the poem is exactly like giving them a first read on a lead sheet at rehearsal—it allows them to consider what they want to play; to form ideas in reaction to the word-sounds and ideas of the poem. This is not to say that what they play in the concert is not improvised—these ideas and considerations are simply fuel and guiding directions for their improvisations. Poet and academic Charles Hartman contributes: “…the jazz improviser's art, though instantaneous, is not in any simple way immediate. The solo is unplanned, but not entirely unprepared. Some of the mediating influences on it favor a highly organized, even rigorously architectonic sense of structure.” (Hartman, 21). Knowing where the poem makes its turns and jumps allows a musician to craft their improvisation around a framework, just like chord changes or metric shifts.

Thus, it is important to have a text from which to work, if indeed the goal of the piece is to have a deliberately crafted anchor, from which one is free to express whatever one feels in the moment in relationship to that anchor. Again, chord changes or a lead melody come to mind as a musical analogy to the poem’s role in the piece. However, why could the poem not take the role of an improvised solo? Freestyle rap immediately surfaces as an option, which brings up a series of puzzling intersections.
Freestyle poetry not is a significant field, either in academia or popular culture, which is especially strange because freestyle rap is such a popular form. Freestyle poetry does exist, but not in a markedly recognized way. Compared to other forms of improvisation in performance (acting, comedy, instrumental music, sung vocals, rap, dance), which are widespread geographically and given popular and critical attention, improvised poetry is missing from the catalogue. There are artists who attempt this, but they are both rare and largely unrecognized in the public eye. One potential reason for this is that there is a historical suspicion of improvisation. Another, which I believe to be closer to the truth, is that to improvise good poetry is an extremely difficult feat. Poetry, in both popular and artists’ discourse, is thought of as an art form that requires extensive crafting. Poets often speak of the patience necessary to arrive at the right word or phrase, of reworking draft after draft, of arriving at one line that demands a shift of the entirety of the poem. Poetry, again, is also a remarkably dense form. That density is antithetical to filler words, or impulsive ideas executed without deliberation.

Freestyle rap is important to discuss at this juncture. Freestyle rap as a form, and more clearly, the work of expert freestyle rappers, refutes many of the claims I previously mentioned about not being able to improvise a dense verbal form with many difficult and varied criteria. It is true that different aspects of rap are prized among different freestyling circles—for example, some prize dense rhyme schemes, 

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To be sure, some of the discourse around improvisation in various contexts includes disapproval, but improvisation is nonetheless part of the conversation when it comes to discussion of the forms in question.

like those demonstrated in Mos Def’s legendary park freestyle\(^9\); some prize creative cadence, which Biggie Smalls was known for pioneering prolifically\(^10\); and others prize clever lines (double entendres, references, imagery—any literary technique is fair game), for which Kendrick Lamar is known and championed\(^11\). However, none of these aspects are ever completely ignored, and usually (as is true with the examples footnoted, especially the last) all of these aspects are present in a balanced way. At the professional level, freestyle rap does not contain filler words. Every phrase is deliberately crafted—musically satisfying, lyrically creative, and cohesive in and across both areas.

However, even at the professional level, there is a rarity of poetic devices in freestyle rap when compared to the written work of the same artists. This is a key distinction in understanding why freestyle poetry is so hard to come by. Mos Def’s famous track *Hip-Hop*, from his album *Black on Both Sides*, is full to the brim with poetic imagery. In the freestyle I cited, however, while he maintains a breathtakingly similar level of musicality and rhyme density, he does not attempt to implement poetic language or devices. In Kendrick Lamar’s BET freestyle, also cited above, he asserts, “I spilled blood on my apron cooking this shit up.” That line stands out from its surroundings because of its combination of imagery with two visual metaphors: the violently sharp quality of his rap, and literal interpretation of “cooking” as a metaphor for premeditation. It would be an almost unthinkable feat to link line after

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\(^9\) Entire clip: “Mos Def Freestyling” found at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmqXKbxDoJ0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmqXKbxDoJ0)

\(^10\) 1:41-1:54 “Eminem and Notorious BIG RARE Freestyle” found at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOcupaxgQmk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOcupaxgQmk)

\(^11\) 4:00-6:15 “TDE Cypher-BET Hip Hop Awards 2013” found at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XviKz0R7IYc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XviKz0R7IYc)
line of imagery of that caliber while maintaining narrative continuity as well as tasteful cadence and rhyme in an improvisation. The relationship explored in this study of improvised lyric/poetry reveals that while a rhythmically dense, high-speed musical-lingual improvisational form is achievable (with great practice and talent), it is the nature of poetry as deliberately crafted, mulled over, and patiently reworked that prevents it from being an improvised form.

The main advantage a freestyle rapper has here is adaptation, in more than one sense of the word. The most obvious adaptive advantage is content: a freestyle rapper can use words, phrases or ideas that mirror, build, or intentionally shift the Stimmung of the “beat,” or musical canvas. In addition, though, upon hearing a beat for the first time, a freestyler has a myriad of “flows¹²” at their fingertips to choose from. They know, consciously or not, which flows are apt for the given tempo and feel of the piece.

A freestyle rapper’s process of adaptive listening is almost exactly the same that of other improvising musicians. “As [Singer-Songwriter] Ingrid Monson attests, ‘musicians often say that the most important thing is to listen. They mean it in a very active sense: they must listen closely because they are continually called upon to respond to and participate in an ongoing flow of musical action.’” (Jones, 49). A poet with a set poem (or a rapper with a set verse) does not have this same ability to adapt.

¹² Flows, in the context of rap, refer to rhythmic motifs invoked in delivery. This is related to a particular MC’s flow, which refers to that individual’s sensibilities of rhythmic delivery. Thus, one can recognize and speak of a particular “flow” (rhythmic phrase or set of phrases) as, for example “a Biggie flow,” (referring to the particular MC deemed the originator of that particular rhythmic delivery), or, as a contrasting example, a “punch line flow” (referring to the style of the rhythmic delivery, where the originator is either unknown or unimportant, as the flow has become, in a sense, public domain).
They cannot, in the moment, restructure their poem to fit better metrically with the music. The only tool at their disposal in this situation is the pacing of their delivery—stretching out words, speeding them up, extending or cutting space. However, a poem or verse has a heart rate; an innate tempo. While some fluctuation from the central tempo may not stress the piece, substantial variance from that tempo changes the meaning and/or feeling of the poem or verse, and few would argue such forced alteration of delivery to be welcome.

With this in mind, let us continue where we left off with Jones. “Alternatively, Mingus’ and Hughes’ performance of jazz sound and jazz text has sounded less like collaborative flow and seemed more ‘like a strange and paradoxical wrestling match’ for some listeners.” (Jones, 49.) Part of the “wrestling” is exactly the phenomenon I describe in this paragraph—the twelve bars of Hughes’ poems don’t always line up with the twelve bar form of the music. On the *Weary Blues* record, this is true of many of the pieces. A notable example is the group’s performance of *Note on Commercial Theatre*, which starts at 3:12 on the record. Mingus’ band plays a chorus (12 bars) before Hughes’ entrance. Hughes’ poem is largely about exploitation and whitewashing of Black art; art that is innately tied with Black pain. A line that stands out in reference to my argument is “…you fixed them so they don’t sound like me.” This “fixing” could refer not only to whitewashing but also to the realignment of an expression to fit it better in context. In this way, his refusal, lack of incentive, or whatever it may be, to line up with the music could be an act of protest in and of itself. I transcribe here the delivery of the first stanza (6 lines) of his poem juxtaposed with the music.
1. You’ve taken my blues

| Eb | Ab |

and gone

| Eb | Eb |

2. You

| Eb | Eb |

sing them on Broadway

| Ab | Ab |

3. and you sing them em in Hollywood

| Ab | Ab |

| Bowl |

4. You mixed them up with symphonies

| Eb | Eb |

| Ab |

5. and you fixed them so they don’t sound

| Bb | Ab |

| Ab |

6. Yup,

| Eb | Eb | Bb |

CHORUS 2

you done taken my blues and gone

| Eb | Ab |

1. You

| Eb | Eb |

also took my spirituals and gone

| Ab | Ab |
There is nothing abnormal or distasteful about leaving a bar of rest at the beginning of the form. This is a common technique of both singers and instrumentalists. However, doing so means that that space must be made up for—which is where Hughes departs from convention. Instead of reworking his pace to make up for the lost time, he gets further and further behind where the bars would line up, and ends up a full two bars (or one of his lines) late. Spilling over into the next chorus in such a way is also a viable technique in the blues and jazz traditions, but the artist almost always leads into the next stanza in a deliberate way that gets the lines back on track. Hughes does not seem to attempt this—instead, he leaves even more space between the end of the first stanza and the beginning of the second one, which makes sense for him, as it is the convention in reading poetry. As a result, he begins his second stanza almost a full four bars into the second chorus of the music, a hole from which one cannot expect to be able to escape, especially if the tempo has already proven faster than the heart rate of the poem. That disparity is exactly the “problem”—Hughes’ poem has an innate tempo (again, variable only to a degree), which is outrun, slowly but surely, by the tempo of the music.

It is this kind of alienation that can highlight the inconvenience of collaborative composition between poets and musicians. It is not implausible that such a disparity was completely deliberate, though it is perplexing. Perhaps I am putting too much weight on the congruence of the poem’s meter and the meter of the music. It is entirely possible that Mingus and Hughes deliberately mismatched the metrics as an artistic statement, showing that two different meters can sound simultaneously, and that the content of each can still affect the other in a constructive
way. It is also possible that metric synchrony did not strike the artists as a priority in this endeavor. Nonetheless, it is important to note that in one of the earliest and most venerated collaborations between poets and musicians in the 20th century African-American tradition, a tradition steeped in rhythmic richness and virtuosity, sometimes the meters of the poetry and the music do not quite add up.

This metric divergence of language and music presents an opportune moment to mention an important way in which the two work together socially, in the same space, without being performed simultaneously.
8. Interlude: The Language that Frames Music

Every cultural scene has a lexicon. This is true for many types of art, and most certainly for music. The set of terms that surrounds a music scene or genre contributes to shaping the audience’s analysis of and relationship to that scene. It is also related to the *Stimmung* of the scene: the words and sounds uttered have great effect on the atmosphere of the space in question.

This is clearly evident in jazz (although the funk scenes of the 70’s present compelling examples as well). “Once the language of a subculture, jazz talk has since become an integral part of the global idiom…the triumph of jazz talk is analogous to jazz music itself.” (Dorsey, 14). There is a tangible link between the “flavor” of a genre of music and the words that go accompany and describe it. If this flavor is dark, mysterious, and necessarily cool, these words become all the more important. “Players tended to guard their jargon zealously. When expressions began to catch on generally…musicians invented new words to keep their lingo from becoming ‘mainstreamed.’” (Dorsey, 14). Fresh words for fresh music. The vernacular acts as the lens and the context for the scene. In this setting, if the words were to become stale, they would no longer be compelling, and the music would lose credibility in the eyes of the scenegoers, regardless of the quality of the music itself. These scenegoers, familiar with and expectant of originality, creativity, and cool, would not have been easy to trick. Thus, these jazz musicians had to keep their slang closely tucked and constantly moving.

The energy from this endeavor of freshness is culturally residual. When jazz terms are used today, even in a nonmusical context, jazz, or perhaps the wider culture
of the jazz scene, is invoked. If someone says that a record really swings, and that this new cat is real bad; or asks if someone can really blow, and if you dig; the history of the New York jazz scene from the 50’s through the 60’s is brought into the space. The lexicon becomes part of the music’s legacy.

Use of particular vernacular can also be a political statement in and of itself. Lock and Murray address this point via the work of American poet Paul Beatty. “Beatty’s use of the black vernacular undergirds his implicit argument for an expansive sense of blackness, as he pokes holes in the ideology of those who would reduce essential blackness to such signifiers as revolutionary poetry, John Coltrane, and the jazz aesthetic.” (Lock & Murray, 108). As a poet, a member of a craft in which linguistic grace is championed, Beatty’s use of the Black vernacular is a defiant move in the face of the ever-Eurocentric academy. In our academic world where “proper” English is held in high esteem and all other dialects are eschewed, such a choice is brave and effective in demonstrating that other ways of representing the language are not at all inferior in the realm of poesis, where gilded language reigns.

Many rappers of the last several decades have used similar techniques to accomplish a feat that combines a continuing cultural resonance (of the Jazz example) and resistance to Eurocentrism (of the Beatty example). “Those urban griots … create a social and cultural critique that fights against cultural amnesia. Hip-hop culture has generated a lexicon of life that expresses a particular worldview which undermines ‘correct’ English usage while celebrating the culturally encoded phrases that communicate in rap’s idiom.” (Dorsey, 330). By using time-stamped slang, as well as
temporally pervasive Black American expressions, hip-hop artists ensure a lasting record of an oral tradition that is otherwise prone to being lost or overwritten. Using these expressions in the context of art is also a proclamation of their legitimacy—in the moment of composition or performance, there was no expression that these artists felt could greater serve them or their art. This resistance to a Eurocentric view of the language is both political and visible, and is one of many forms of visible political resistance for which music offers an otherwise unlikely platform.
9. Music, the Megaphone for the Poet//The State of Hip-Hop

Today

*It is only in his music... that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story. It is a story which otherwise has yet to be told, and which no American is prepared to hear.* (Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 24).

Music has an unparalleled ability to amplify marginalized voices. Black people never had a hand in writing the mainstream narrative of American history—until the arrival of recorded music, radio, and distribution. Disenfranchisement and being taken advantage of did not stop upon this arrival, as copyright law and deceitful contracts allowed White record company executives to continue to exploit Black artists\(^\text{13}\). However, even though these artists were being financially swindled, the microphone was in their hands for the first time. The untold stories and narratives of their own lives were broadcast—not because it was intrinsically right to do so (which it was, and well beyond overdue), but because the format of music made these narratives digestible to people otherwise unwilling to accept them. Not only can music open people to new ideas or experiences, it can also soften them—we listen differently with our emotions. Poetry can accomplish this as well, because it can be so intimate. When exposed to the baring of a person’s soul through poetry or music, one is unlikely to be closed or dogmatically combative.

Music is thus a potent ideological tool. As Dorsey notes, “...music is a form of ideological expression, not only in terms of how it is played and received, but also

\(^\text{13}\) Literature on Black disenfranchisement through copyright (and specifically sampling) law is sadly scarce in the academic cannon. However, a few titles touch on this issue, such as *The Big Payback* by Dan Charnas, and *Creative License* by Kembrew Mcleod.
aesthetically through the expressive dependence of the organizing principle of the
music as a structure of willed sounds on the organizing principle of society as a
structure of power.” (Dorsey, 62-3). Music has long been credited with fueling energy
for social movements, as well as recruiting members who otherwise might not have
been moved to join the cause. There are two different ways music can do this, and
these ways can overlap. Songs like Kendrick Lamar’s Alright, considered by many to
be an anthem for the Black Lives Matter movement, or Public Enemy’s Fight the
Power, one of the more popular protest songs in modern American history, act almost
like sermons. They stoke the fire of the movement, describe problems and discontent,
and center around a rallying cry. However, these songs would be difficult to sing as a
crowd without a performance or recording—they are simply too complex to be
replicated easily by a gathering of people. On the other hand, songs like We Shall
Overcome, an anthem of the Civil Rights Movement, exist mainly in the world of
gatherings, not as standalone recordings (although culturally important recordings of
these songs do exist). These songs do not aim to exhaustively describe the misgivings
of the protesting group—instead, they offer a single, unifying statement that most any
member of the group can get behind despite individual differences on the finer points
of the intended outcome of the protest. Music can offer powerful and detailed
critiques and explanations, and, in a different mode, it can bind and move a people.
Both are politically potent.

In shaping these songs, poet-musicians find themselves in a place of power
and responsibility. Pertinent to this discussion, Dorsey writes on the ideas of 18th and
19th century English Romantic Poet Percy Bysshe Shelley:
In his *Defense of Poetry*... Percy Bysshe Shelley envisions poets, “or those who imagine and express this indestructible order,” not only as the authors of language, music, dance, architecture, statuary, and painting, but as the institutors of laws, the founders of civil society, the inventors of the arts of life...Moreover, a poet “participates in the eternal, the infinite and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not...A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth.” (Dorsey, 25)

Such a portrayal is a far cry from the image of a poet in the bedroom writing, or at a small reading in a library or at a university. Ironically, though Shelley did not live in a globalized era, Shelly’s description fits the poet whose voice carries across the airwaves to ears around the globe, whose words ride the music that delivers them into the emotional bloodstream of the people. A romantic image, yes, but not an unfamiliar one. The broadcast voice of a single poet-musician can threaten a government to the point of violent retaliation¹⁴—quite a feat for an individual uninterested in traditional political platforms. However, the message of such music-poetry cannot exist in a vacuum. To have this effect, it must resonate widely with feelings that many people already hold in some form.

Hughes was a master at this, and perhaps regarded it as one of the central aims of his poetry. His poem-stories are all politically pertinent while remaining thoroughly relatable.

First published in May 1925, ‘The Weary Blues’ is one of the earliest representations of blues performance in literature. The poet consciously attempts to transpose blues into poetic form by borrowing blues rhythms and including complete blues phrases for emphasis and definition... For Hughes, the use of blues themes in poetry were a part of his goal of achieving true Negro art by capturing the common black man’s experience in art forms. (Dorsey, 140).

Capturing common experience while highlighting (subtly or overtly) the institutional injustices that afflict that experience is one of Hughes’ strengths. It is

¹⁴ As detailed in *Fela Kuti: Music is the Weapon*, directed and produced by Jean Jacques Flori and Stephen Tchal-Gadjieff.
also a technique that has been used pervasively throughout history to rouse support and garner momentum for movements. However, though Hughes’ poetry was both musical in its delivery and accessible in diction, the framing of his art as poetry shaped its reception and dissemination.

The reality is that there is an elitist cultural history in the canonization of and discourse around the medium of poetry. In the dominant narrative, there has been an erasure of non-white, non-academically-acclaimed poetry, as well as a propagation of the idea that poetry is Art with a capital A—and thus not useful to, able to be appreciated by, or even part of the sphere of living for people of lower classes, which, in America’s history, are always racialized. Even now that Hughes and other Black poets have been accepted into the American canon, that elitism has a residual effect. Thus, not every demographic of society is provided access or exposed to poetry, regardless of how pertinent that poetry may be to their lives and experiences. This is why music is so important—it disseminates remarkably widely and quickly.

Dorsey draws on music’s ease of dissemination to explain the role rap music plays in carrying and distributing subversive ideas.

Contemporary American popular culture is, for the most part, electronically mass-mediated, facilitating the ready absorption of hidden or resistant transcripts into the public domain. Cultural expressions of discontent, therefore, are no longer protected by the insulated social sites that have historically encouraged the refinement of resistive transcripts. Particularly when it subverts or contradicts dominant ideological positions, mass-mediated cultural production is under increased scrutiny and is especially vulnerable to incorporation. At the same time, these mass-mediated and mass-distributed alternative codes and camouflaged meanings become more accessible to oppressed and sympathetic groups around the world, bridging the cultural and geographical gaps between them. These attacks on institutional power have the capacity to destabilize the appearance of unanimity among powerholders by openly challenging public transcripts and cultivating the contradictions between commodity interests and the desire for social control. Rap’s subversive messages are articulated and acted out in both hidden and public domains, making them both highly visible and difficult to keep in check. (Dorsey, 341).
Music has the ability to spread the subversive messages and amplify the emotional appeals that poetry holds. Now, the digital age has allowed artists to bypass institutions that long held the power of determining the broadcast and shaping the audience. While these institutions still exist and affect the sounds of pop music, many independent artists are making their way to the top of the charts, often rejecting those institutional sounds in favor of new possibilities. Paradoxically, as a result, it is becoming more and more difficult to discern whose voices are independent and whose are co-opted by industry. Perhaps, though, that ambiguity is itself part of an accurate rendition of America today.

This complex relationship opens another set of difficult questions about popularity and voice in rap music, to which the remainder of this chapter is dedicated.

“Tapping the available resources of African-American culture, history, tradition, and community, rap artists fashion musical personae who literally voice their hopes, fears, and fantasies. Rappers can be self-styled griots, feminists, educators or prophets of black nationalism. On the other hand, they can also be materialistically-oriented consumers, misogynists, violent criminals, and sexual athletes. This ever-expanding repertoire of created selves invites us to interrogate the values and visions of rap culture, to perceive its force as a critic of racism, historical amnesia, and classism, and to gauge the American traditions of sexism, consumerism, and violence.” (Dorsey, 329).

Misogyny is an awful thing, and ubiquitous in this country. So are gun violence (among other types of violence), drug addiction, greed, homophobia, xenophobia, and prioritization of the self above others. Many people from many different backgrounds (including Black people from the communities this music comes from) critique rap music for perpetuating these cultural afflictions. They are not without reason—many have cited musical artists (as well as movies, video games, and other pop culture icons) as inspiration for their crimes. Many people of all ages and races feel their prejudices (or the prejudices of others) to be validated when they
hear these depictions in popular music. It is not a good sign for life in low-income Black neighborhoods in Chicago or for perceptions of Black people by members of other races that Chief Keef, one of the most popular contemporary young hip-hop artists from those neighborhoods, gained his popularity by glorifying guns and gun violence. However, in analyzing this phenomenon, it is essential to understand that the art form of hip-hop has historically provided a platform for a gritty, realistic portrait of life. Ugly and damaging as it may be, this is real life for some, and the visibility provided by the musical platform may force a dialogue on these issues. As Dorsey says, “this repertoire of created selves us invites us to…gauge the American traditions of sexism, consumerism, and violence.” An artist’s achievement of popular recognition through promotion of misogyny or violence is a political statement unto itself about consumer taste in America, regardless of how their music seems to contradict that politics.

That political statement is one of an adaption to patterns of consumption. On his song *Ronnie Drake*, Isaiah Rashad\(^\text{15}\) raps: “Ain’t getting no money on that conscious\(^\text{16}\) shit//I’ma just load my gat on some survival shit.” The first line is more

\(^{15}\text{Isaiah Rashad is a rapper signed to Top Dawg Entertainment (TDE), an exclusive label whose artists consist of the “Black Hippy Crew,” comprised of Rashad, Kendrick Lamar, Schoolboy Q, Ab-Soul, and Jay Rock. In the past five years, the label/group of artists have made a reputation for themselves as west-coast-wide trendsetters and standard-setters of lyricism and flows (see chapter 8, footnote 5), as well as overall song and album quality.}\)

\(^{16}\text{“Conscious rap” is a loaded term. It came about in the 90’s to distinguish rap that carried a socially conscious meaning from rap that seemed not to do so. However, many (myself included) argue that the distinction, intentionally or not, devalues rap that is indeed socially conscious and/or poignant only in a less overt way. There is much discourse about this term, but this article is a good place to start: Smith, Spencer. Conscious Rap is a Farce. Thought Catalog, December 4, 2012. http://thoughtcatalog.com/spencer-smith/2012/12/why-conscious-rap-is-a-farce/}\)
or less straightforward, and the second is a relatively legible double entendre—Rashad (or his invented persona—for purposes of analysis, it is not important which one) must keep a loaded weapon on him to ensure his safety, but he also must rap about guns and potential violence in order to sell records and make ends meet. This raises a question that is paramount to understanding the perpetuation of these values—where is this money coming from? Who is buying these records and concert tickets? The hip-hop audience is immensely diverse, and the digital era that allows for vinyl, CD’s, paid downloads, filesharing, legal and illegal streams as ways of procuring music makes it extremely difficult to track meaningful demographics on listeners. However, while the exact percentage is debated, it is widely recognized that White people account for a significant portion of hip-hop consumption, and a much higher portion of paid consumption\textsuperscript{17}. In a musical “democracy” that votes with dollars, this means that White people have a serious impact on what music becomes popular.

Understanding this dynamic of compositional content dictated by consumption is crucial to comprehending why the lyrics in these songs are what they are. As James Baldwin said, music provides a platform to tell a story. Who are we to demand that that story be beautiful and empowering? This is the moment when people in the margins get to tell the world how about their experiences. Sometimes the story is a dangerous or an unethical one—desperation does not breed a high-minded sense of virtue. These stories appeal to White audiences in the same way a movie does: they are exciting and edgy, and are told over a beat that sounds equally

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{When It Comes to Rap Music, Are White Boys Really Doing All thebuying?} On Atlanta Black Star. Found at http://atlantablackstar.com/2014/11/06/really-listening/
dangerous and violent as the story itself. This pornography of Black endangerment, villainy and suffering has proven marketable. It allows the White suburban listener the double escape of tasting the precarious nature of such a life while simultaneously shifting their notions of villainy away from their own life and onto Black people.

Many academics who have a condescending attitude for certain types of rap overlook this crucial dynamic that intersects market demand and honest expression of experience. While Michael Eric Dyson revised his opinion in his 2010 release Know What I Mean?: Reflections on Hip-Hop, he originally wrote in his 1993 article The Culture of Hip-Hop:

(Rap) projects a style of self into the world that generates forms of cultural resistance and transforms the ugly terrain of ghetto existence into a searing portrait of life as it must be lived by millions of voiceless people. For that reason alone, rap deserves attention and should be taken seriously; and for its productive and healthy moments, it should be promoted as a worthy form of artistic expression and cultural projection and an enabling source of black juvenile and communal solidarity. (Dyson, The Culture of Hip-Hop, 15).

Yes, it is crucial to have artists like Mos Def, Common, Talib Kweli, Lupe Fiasco, Dead Prez and KRS-One, who overtly oppose violence, misogyny and greed rampant in America (including in their own communities) as well as opposing the institutional racism that their communities face and navigate. But calling those the “healthy moments” of rap and denying those other moments recognition as “a worthy form of artistic expression” is condescending and counter-productive. For two important reasons, we cannot ask, nor should we, for these “healthy moments” to be the political standard of hip-hop or any other type of art in this country as it exists today.

First, that transformation would not be an accurate representation of the current state of the communities that birthed and developed the genre. The portraits of
life would no longer be firsthand and unfiltered. The existence of the secondhand portrayal with firsthand analysis\(^\text{18}\) (provided by artists like the ones listed in the previous paragraph) is crucial in making these issues understandable and accessible to people unfamiliar with these conditions, as well as people who would rush to judge without full comprehension. However, if every hip-hop artist promoted this radical change, the genre would be completely alienated from its current roots\(^\text{19}\). It would be a lie—one that would appease white minds while perpetuating marginalization of Black suffering. The mainstream perception (read: interpretation by white-run media) of Black art would become one of “elevated thought” and “self-improvement,” narratives that, despite good intentions, imply access to unavailable tools and resources. The reality that the line of sight from the ghetto does not extend far beyond the ghetto would be erased\(^\text{20}\).

\(^{18}\) For an example of secondhand portrayal, take the song *Got*, by Mos Def. He raps about foolishness he sees around him that leads to demise: “You're out on the block hustling at the spot//Got, this is how you get got//At the gamblin' spot and your hand is mad hot//Got, this is how you get got//Out in Brooklyn late night flashing all of your rocks//Got, this is how you get got//Some girl from pink house said ‘I like you a lot’//Got, this is how you get got.” Although he witnesses it first hand, Mos Def is not the person in question making dangerous decisions. However, much of the rap that academics (and many other people) denounce is from the point of view of people proudly making such decisions.

\(^{19}\) It is important to recognize that the origin of hip-hop music propagated empowerment and anti-violence. It was in the mid-90’s that consumerism took hold in mainstream hip hop, and that that trend was exacerbated through the mid-2000’s until it became the standard of the mainstream form of the genre.

\(^{20}\) The artists that choose to make overtly political social commentary in their music should absolutely applauded for using their talents to make subversive music when alternative routes could have given them the chance to make themselves much richer. They are heroes and heroines for this, and the world needs them. It must be highlighted, though, that many of these artists have had opportunities of education, and/or the time or guidance of parents or other figures to read for themselves and learn about the world and how it has come up short for them and their communities.
Second, demanding socially constructive music would be asking the artists to bear a financial burden that should not belong to them. As long as consumerist culture reigns, both of these types of hip-hop will be on the marketing table. Listeners (some of whom are directly affected by these issues, some of whom are not) will continue to vote with their dollars. As long as consumers choose to literally buy into glorification of violence, misogyny, etc. over messages of empowerment, it makes no sense to demand that artists give up their chance at livelihood through art (or, for that matter, chance at a livelihood outside of crime) for ethical activism that currently does not have nearly as much audience as its counterpart.

I do not deny the cyclical violence at work here. But should the responsibility of interrupting it fall only or even substantially on the backs of Black artists trying to make it out of poverty? Recall Dorsey’s description of Langston Hughes’ ability to “capture the common Black man’s experience”—if the experience is so, because of the conditions that this country has formed for many of its young Black people, then that is what the artists of such communities will capture. There are many factors at work in this feedback loop, and many things must change before the music and poetry can move away from their current role as chief of alarm, raising red flags high and in plenty so that no one can miss them. Much must happen before music and poetry can inspire in a way that is honest, reflective, and triumphant become the music and poetry of the people.

However, even in that role of raising the alarm by calling out problems and highlighting injustice and hypocrisy, artists must work diligently and wisely to be

Many of their peers were and are not so lucky, and thus do not have access to the tools to create such commentary.
heard. In our world of instant access and flooded supply of art, poets and musicians must use every tool at their disposal to cut through the din. The musical and poetic history of America provides a detailed and enlightening textbook of techniques to those willing to study. Most every revered artist of the last hundred-some years brought something new and engaging to the table—and many of these techniques are translatable across genres and mediums, meaning that artists who learn these techniques can apply them in new combinations and situations. By doing so, they produce new sounds and new Stimmung, distinguishing their art from the surrounding competition. It is those artists who do this consistently, who skillfully apply their vast knowledge of musical and poetic history (as well as the history of other mediums) to their own artistic processes in new and creative ways, that seem to inevitably encounter and dazzle the public eye. This may seem like a reductive formula, and it is important to my argument that my use of the word “technique” is vastly inclusive.

Techniques, in the sense that I intend the word to be heard, range from the technical to the spiritual, from the finishing touches on a master to the ways that a vocal phrase relates to the human experience of that phrase’s context in terms of the connotations it triggers, from a key change to a surprise recurrence of a motif, from a bar with an extra beat to a use of a sample that changes the significance of a lyric—the tools that a poet-musician can employ lie in countless domains in and around music and poetry, each of them with their own connection to the human experience. It is the artist who not only uses these techniques effectively in the scope of their craft, but who understands the connection of these techniques to the human experience and deploys them in a way that makes use of that connection to amplify the Stimmung of
their art, that will reach ears, change minds, and break expectations of how much power artists can truly have.
Part II

1. Introduction

Part II of this paper applies the ideas explored in part I of this paper to analysis of three specific pieces of art: Langston Hughes’ performance of *The Weary Blues* on the 1959 record of the same name, which is a collaborative record between Hughes and a jazz combo led by Charles Mingus; Kendrick Lamar’s *The Art of Peer Pressure*, from his 2012 album *Good Kid, m.A.A.d. City*; and Kendrick Lamar’s *m.A.A.d. City*, from the same album. In part II, I focus on each artist’s use of techniques that draw from both musical and poetic domains, in an effort to show that the brilliance of these two cultural giants lies in their ability to create powerful *Stimmung* and to close the distance and worry the line between the musical and the poetic. I choose these artists because they are temporally and geographically distant, as well as far apart in the way they package, label, and present their art.

Kendrick Lamar’s major label debut *Good Kid, m.A.A.d City* was released on Aftermath Entertainment and Top Dawg Entertainment in 2012, and was a landmark record for the form of the concept rap album. The album’s cover labels it “a short film by Kendrick Lamar,” and the allusion to the film genre is not unwarranted—it is, in Lamar’s words, “a dark movie album.” (Complex, Insanul). While not every piece of the album is completely chronological, it is cohesive as a picture, a set of feelings, and in its *Stimmung*. Lamar says of the album: “I wanted to tap into that space where I was at in my teenage years. Everybody knows Kendrick Lamar, but he had to come from a certain place, a certain time, and certain experiences.” (Complex, Insanul).
Having propelled himself into the spotlight with earlier mixtapes such as *Overly Dedicated* (2010) and *Section 80* (2011), which feature material that is (largely, not ubiquitously) less personal, Lamar used that self-built stage to broadcast a story that is often told and rarely listened to: the story of life in Black urban poverty, and the gang violence, alcohol/drug use, prostitution, survival tactics, paralysis of indecision, love, hate and fear that come with it. Track-to-track walkthroughs of the album’s narrative are available on the internet\(^\text{21}\), but as I stated above, I focus my analysis on two songs in which Kendrick Lamar makes overt use of the concepts discussed in part I of this paper: *The Art of Peer Pressure* and *m.A.A.d City*. I do not aim to privilege these songs above the rest of the album in any way; I chose these songs only because they present the most clear usage of techniques that draw directly on those aforementioned concepts. I will provide an introduction for Langston Hughes’ piece after the analysis of *The Art of Peer Pressure* before moving to *m.A.A.d City*. I structure this in ABA form to highlight the intertextuality of the two artists, as well as the techniques with which both artists engage.

\(^{21}\)Genius.com: *GKMC Storyline Breakdown* [https://genius.com/2873989](https://genius.com/2873989)
2. The Art of Peer Pressure

_The Art of Peer Pressure_ is the fourth track on _Good Kid, m.A.A.d. City_. Like much of Lamar’s work, the form of the song is not a standard one. It consists of two major sections, the first with form ABC, and the second with form ABA’B’A’’C. I have transcribed the lyrics of the sections I engage with (full transcription provided in appendix) using font and format to highlight what I find to be important vocal dynamic shifts. In my analysis, I refer to the author of the song as “Lamar,” and to his character in the song as “Kendrick.” While the line between artist and narrator is often blurred, it is important distinguish the two, and I believe that these two people are both iterations of the artist himself. See Figures 1-3 (provided in color separately).

**Key:**
- Black: 1 voice
- Blue: 2 voices
- Red: 3 voices
- Pink: 4 or more voices
- Italics: pitch shift
- Bold: Sung
- Normal font: Rap
- In quotes: dialogue with no music

**Figure 1.**

Part 1

**Everybody, everybody, everybody**
Everybody sit your bitch ass down and listen
To this true mothafuckin' story told by Kendrick Lamar on Rosecrans
Ya bitch

Smoking on the finest dope, ai ai ai ai
Drank until I can't no more, ai ai ai ai
Really I'm a sober soul but I'm with the homies right now
And we ain't asking for no favors
Rush a nigga quick then laugh about it later, aye aye aye aye
Really I'm a peacemaker but I'm with the homies right now
And momma used to say
One day, it's gon' burn you out
One day, it's gon' burn you out, out
One day, it's gon' burn you out
One day, it's gon' burn you
But I'm with the homies right now
Figure 2.

Part 2
Me and my niggas four deep in a white Toyota
A quarter tank of gas, one pistol, and orange soda
Janky stash box when the federales roll up
Basketball shorts with the Gonzales Park odor
We on the mission for bad bitches and trouble
I hope the universe love you today
‘Cause the energy we bringing sure to carry away
A flock of positive activists and fill the body with hate
If it’s necessary
Bumping Jeezy first album looking distracted
Speaking language only we know, you think is an accent
The windows roll down all I see is a hand pass it
Hotboxing like George Foreman grilling the masses
Of the working world, we pulled up on a bunch of working girls
And asked them what they working with – look at me
I got the blunt in my mouth
Usually I’m drug-free, but shit I’m with the homies

Figure 3.

Yea nigga, we off a pill and Remy Red
Come through and bust ya head nigga
Me and the homies
Sag all the way to the liquor store
Where my niggas pour up 4 and get twisted some more
Me and the homies
I ride for my mothafuckin’ niggas
Hop out, do my stuff, then hop back in
Me and the homies
Matter fact, I hop out that mothafucka and be like
Doo! Doo! Doo! Doo!...Doo! Doo! Doo! Doo! Doo!

The reason I highlight the shifts in vocal density and texture is to demonstrate how much variety Lamar uses in his vocal presentation. This variety keeps the listener engaged, and also produces a sense of dialogue between or around several characters, making the song feel more like a scene from a play—or a film. However, constant shifts have the potential to distract the listener from the lyrical content,
especially if that content is delivered quickly. The heavy use of these shifts in the first section of the song gets the listener excited and captures their attention so that Lamar can deliver the lyrically substantive part of the song in an auditorily legible way without worrying about maintaining the listener’s attention.

In what I have labeled section A of Part 1 (see Figure 1), Lamar begins the song with a spoken/sung call to “everybody” to listen to his story. This overt outreach to an audience, whether it is aimed directly at the listener or at a group of people “on set (to engage the short film metaphor),” both hooks the listener’s attention and sets the expectation that the song will convey a narrative. As well as being a call, this is a subtle direction to his audience: it clues the listener in to listen to overall narrative rather than getting lost in the poesis, musicality, or other intricacy of any particular line. The musicality of this section also hints at the rest of the song to come. By starting by outlining a major triad, a stable and familiar harmonic figure, Lamar sets up the sudden subsequent harmonic disintegration to have the effect of a melting world.

What I have labeled the B section of Part 1 (see Figure 2) establishes the theme of the content hinted at by the title, gives contextual insight into and foreshadows events of the narrative ahead, and alerts the listener to the self-conflict Kendrick is experiencing during these events. Importantly for this essay, it does so in both musical and overtly verbal ways, and worries the line between them.

In examining Figure 4, consider the juxtaposition of the lyrics and the non-word syllables in the melody and how they each contribute to motivic development.
Even before digging into what is limitingly transcribed as “ai ai ai ai,” it is clear that Kendrick feels conflicted about this double life. He lays out his values (sobriety, peacefulness) and contrasts them with “but I’m with the homies right now.” From the lyrics alone, it would be possible to see him as a person who is easily pushed around, or who quickly strays from what he claims are his values. However, it is the cries, and where those cries are situated in the lyrics, that lets the listener know how much this dynamic troubles him. Jacques Derrida has a pertinent thought on the nature of the cry.

“(Speech’s) system requires that it be heard and understood immediately by whoever emits it…. Within so-called “living” speech, the spatial exteriority of the signifier seems absolutely reduced. It is in the context of this possibility that one must pose the problem of the cry—of that which one has always excluded, pushing it into the area of animality or of madness, like the myth of the inarticulate cry—and the problem of speech (voice) within the history of life.” (Emphasis within text). (Derrida, 166).
Derrida’s description, though perhaps extreme for this example, fits Lamar’s cry well. In lifting his voice, Lamar puts forth a sound into which one can read pride, conflict, shame and trauma, letting those contradicting things exist together in a way that words could not. He makes a motif of the cry, first rhythmically and then melodically. The first iteration sits in with the melody, masquerading as a chant of celebration, but the listener retroactively understands the cry as a conflicted emission upon hearing its second iteration. The first two iterations of the motif are in the first and second bars of the 8-bar section. The next two bars go by without reoccurrence of the motif, as does the fifth bar, which parallels the first bar (where the motif was introduced) in terms of phrasing. The motif in its third iteration appears in the sixth bar. The third iteration mirrors the second in melody and delivery, but its meaning is reconfigured because of the proclaimed casual attitude towards violence in the line that proceeds it. The cry deftly and expressively illustrates, in a manner that words could not, the cognitive and emotional dissonance that Kendrick experiences in these moments of peer pressure.

After building melodically upon repetitions of a warning, “one day it’s gon burn you out,” the introduction comes to a close, replaced by a lonesome grinding synth bass whose syncopation has no backbeat upon which to find reference. The pulse is reestablished with a cross-stick on the snare, drenched in reverb that sets the surreal tone for the story that then begins. Refer to Figure 2 for the lyrics of this section.
This verse, save the end, could be a proclamation of villainy if delivered differently to a different musical accompaniment. This beat, however, in its somber, reflective repetition, allows Kendrick’s clear, prideless voice to portray the history without taking an immediate stance on the ethics of it. How steady his voice his here (in the sense of pitch) further smooths the already subtle transitions between his narration and his observational ponderings. For example, Lamar’s comparison of hotboxing, a slang term for filling a car with marijuana smoke, to a George Foreman grill is creative in and of itself, but by naming “the masses of the working world” as what is in the grill, Kendrick’s poetic digression goes beyond illustration of the scene to hint at a bigger picture, one that is full of literal and metaphorical reflections of this car. That bigger social picture of the m.A.A.d. City, grilling in its own fear, is visible throughout the album, and in fact is painted in depth, facet by facet, by the entirety of the record, but is hinted at directly by lines like this one. In the whole of Good Kid, m.A.A.d City, Lamar is very careful to not overtly state his politics and to instead let his stories talk for him. So, a line like this one, at least one step removed from his experience, could potentially stick out—but, he makes sure it stays bedded in the woven cadences, with “masses” finishing the “distracted, accent, pass it” rhyme and spilling over the barline with “working world” opening up room for “working girls” in the next line. The combination of this interlaced yet sparse rhyme scheme, his steady 16th note flow, and his unwavering vocal timbre allow him to interject powerful, political poetics into what nonetheless feels like a continuous narrative picture without breaking the flow of the listening experience.
As the first full verse comes to an end, what I have labeled the B section of part 2 (refer to Figure 3) presents an inspiring use of the studio as an instrument. As the drums cut out, Lamar pitch-shifts his vocal to create a second character, one whose modulated, left-and right-panning, strangely-spaced voice is removed from the immediacy of the storyteller’s conversational tone and produced vocal sound. The Kendrick who is telling us the story, who in this section repeats, “me and the homies,” sounds like he is in front of and speaking directly to the listener, as opposed to this second voice, who sounds more like a character on a grainy, and white security TV screen. It’s not clear whether this character is meant as a portrayal or a caricature of himself when he’s under peer pressure, a portrayal or caricature of his friends, or a portrayal or caricature of an archetypal young Black male in the type of environment that breeds this particular brand of pressure. There need not be only one answer.

Taking a step back for the purposes of this essay’s argument, it is creative and carefully intentioned use of vocal manipulation that allows Lamar to play two distinct characters in such a clear, convincing and cinematic way. The specific techniques of vocal manipulation used are not technologically groundbreaking, nor is that the point—they are used in a way that serves the song without being distracting, conveying the messages and Stimmung of the song to the listener in layers; simultaneously acting from different angles towards the same overall picture.

Returning to the narrative of the song, one thing is clear: Kendrick is not proud of this figure—although, again, this does not come through in the lyrics alone. Again, with different delivery and a different beat, these lyrics could, to an end, be a celebration of drugs, alcohol and violence; an exercise in bravado. It is only the music
and the delivery (which is inherently musical) that clues the listener in to how Kendrick feels about this dynamic. Each time he repeats “me and the homies,” his inflection implies conflict, shame, exasperation, frustration, and/or hopelessness, but subtly, in a hidden way, which acts as a metaphor that reflects his lack of agency in expressing these feelings in the situations that he recounts in the story. The subtle metaphor adds another layer, deepening the picture from another musicopoetic angle without distracting from it.

These undertones of emotion relate to another striking thing about this section: the jarring juxtaposition of two sides of our narrator. Hearing this man tell this story so poetically, perform this artistry in vocal expression, and present this social insight, and then hearing this proclamation of recreational violence from the same mouth—it’s not simple, and it calls into question both the artist and audience. Who is the real Kendrick Lamar, if either? Which character, if either, would one encounter at a grocery store? Which audience is judging him for which parts of both characters? He doesn’t say, explicitly, and part of the point, I believe, is that the listener doesn’t know—in the privacy of the recording booth, Lamar is free to share these scenes, but putting them in recorded form doesn’t make them less ubiquitous in real life. He may recognize these dynamics, and be able to articulate them in a poetic way, but he is still subject to them, as may be anyone who runs into him while he is under the thinly metaphorical gun. This lack of certainty exemplifies his message of the consequences of this kind of peer pressure. The listener gets this message not overtly, but through the detailed portrait that Lamar conjures through a spiraling, ubiquitous blend of direct description, vocal affectation and manipulation, interaction
with his musical canvas, interruption of that canvas, metaphor, curated connotative
direction, and lack of emotional transparency from the voice of the narrator, as well
as countless other techniques. Each of these techniques draws from a different place
in the spectrum of music and poetry, and each works simultaneously in tandem with
the other elements towards the realization of a representation of a human experience.
As I explore in the next section, Langston Hughes uses similar techniques to achieve
a similar goal.
3. The Weary Blues

The title track of the 1958 album, *Weary Blues* is perhaps Langston Hughes’ most well-known poem. Hughes wrote the original poem in 1925, and it was his first poem to win an award, achieving first place in the literary contest of Opportunity Magazine (Hughes, 2002, 0:00). Thirty-three years later, he recorded the poem set to music arranged by Charles Mingus specifically for the piece. I choose this particular recording (Hughes, 1990, 4:48-7:57) because of the ways that the musical aspects of Hughes’ performance animate the poem into performing its own subject matter, and how the musical arrangement and performance by Mingus and his ensemble augment and layer that animation. First, I will briefly analyze the poem as it appears on the page, and then I will incorporate musical analysis, first from the sounds of the ensemble, and then from Hughes’ vocal performance.

The original poem, printed in Opportunity Magazine, appears as follows:

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
    I heard a Negro play.
Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light
    He did a lazy sway . . .
    He did a lazy sway . . .
To the tune o’ those Weary Blues.
With his ebony hands on each ivory key
He made that poor piano moan with melody.
    O Blues!
Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.
    Sweet Blues!
Coming from a black man’s soul.
    O Blues!
In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—
    “Ain’t got nobody in all this world,
    Ain’t got nobody but ma self.
Hughes’ poem, on the surface, describes a man playing the blues for a long time, and then going to sleep. In his own words, it is about “a working man in Harlem, coming home late at night, very tired, and sitting down at the battered old piano, and playing the blues.” (Hughes, 2002, 0:08-0:18). However, this poem is also somewhat self-referential. The poem invokes blues forms and tendencies, in both meter and imagery. It is also a storytelling piece. The poem’s subject matter is a man and his blues, and it is itself blues. By doubling form and content in this way, Hughes becomes the man singing the blues. To know and retell this story, in the way this story is told, is to be part of the story itself. However, the way Hughes vocalizes the poem, as well as the approach Mingus and his ensemble took in arranging the accompaniment, add nuance to the recreation of the poem’s subject matter. All timestamps throughout the rest of this chapter refer to the Weary Blues record (1990).

A full minute of instrumental introduction opens the piece before Hughes begins to read. This minute is one very long chorus, sixteen bars long. The first eight bars (4:48-5:19) feature chromatically descending half-notes voiced on horns and saxes, lazily descending as the brushed drums sway in the background. The motion of
these first 8 bars its provided by the piano, which plays bluesy licks up and down its register. After eight measures, there is a four-bar trumpet solo (5:19-5:34), and then the chromatic half-notes return (5:34-5:48) for the end of the introduction. The descending half-notes could almost be a lullaby if the chords weren’t so dissonant—but this is exactly the ethos of the poem. The man in the poem is not tired from a satisfying session of rewarding work. He is weary, and so are his blues. It is a fatigue of generations, daily but also lifelong, relentless and without an end in sight. The arrangement is Sisyphean: each time the voicing rises, it slowly tumbles down again. The ensemble, in this way, establishes the first layer of the *Stimmung* and the message of the piece well before Hughes makes his entrance.

The instrumental texture dries up when the trumpet solo begins. The trumpet plays lines that imitate vocal gestures. Exasperated but playful, this is certainly the lighthearted moment of the intro. I interpret this section as parallel to the section of the poem that features the man’s blues lyrics—out of the weariness, the trumpet comes in singing with energy, creativity, and humor. As soon as it is finished singing, though, the weariness takes back over, and keeps trudging on, just as the weary blues keep echoing through the man’s head after he is done singing. Once Hughes enters, the horns lay out, and the rhythm section maintains the same heavy plod throughout the poem. The steadiness of the piano’s presence, despite its ornate runs that traverse its register, allows Hughes to be the directing voice.

From the very beginning of the poem, Hughes’ reading matches the content. He, as well as the character in the poem, is “droning a drowsy, syncopated tune.” By emphasizing and elongating the “o” sound in “droning” and “drowsy,” as well as
putting more bass in his voice, Hughes performs the lull of which he speaks. With reference to the musical accompaniment, “droning” lands on a downbeat, while “drowsy” hits the anticipation of the next beat (the “a” of beat 1, if using the counting system 1-e-and-a-2-e-and-a-etc).

The attack of the S in “syncopated” lands just in front of beat 3, and “tune” mirrors the anticipation of “drowsy.” Hughes’ tune, droning and drowsy, is syncopated as well. Hughes’ vocalization thus enacts the “rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,” layering the pathways through which the listener can connect to his performance. However, when speaking of a droning, drowsy, syncopated tune that rocks back and forth to a mellow croon, one would not necessarily think of a poet.

One might think of a lullaby, or a blues or jazz ballad, or any other number of musical examples, but Hughes proves without even overtly addressing the argument that a poet is also capable of such a feat—and he does so simply by describing the act itself.

The first true syncopation, though, is “I heard a Negro play.” As suggested by the poem’s layout on the page, this line disrupts the rhythm established by the first two lines. Instead of the extra space suggested by the indentation, though, Hughes brings the line in earlier than the previous ones, so much so that when combined with the brevity of the line itself, it acts, in a musical sense, almost more like an extension of the previous line than its own. The first two lines begin on beat 1 of their respective measures, but the second line comes in so early that the end of it barely spills into the third measure. The phrasing technique here is common and appreciated in blues and jazz melodies and improvisations. By using the words “I heard a Negro play” in conjunction with his blues/jazz phrasing, Hughes invokes these Black art
forms—the two parts, musical and verbal, combine to bring the reference to life.

Hughes’ pitch, as well, is important here. It is the first time in the poem that he departs from the even “back-and-forth mellow croon.” Utilizing the upper part of his voice opens up that register as a potential locale for thematic development.

In this particular performance, Hughes changes the next line slightly from “Down on Lenox avenue the other night, by the pale, dull pallor of an old gas light” to “...by the pale, dull pallor of a one bulb light.” (emphasis mine). It is a subtle difference that serves to highlight the thirty-three years that elapsed between the poem’s birth and its recitation that day. While mentioning Lenox Avenue is key to the spirit of the poem, as it invokes Harlem and thus marks itself as part of the Harlem Renaissance, the lines act musically as more of a continuation of the pattern set up by the first two lines of the poem. The “down” sinks the listener further into the droning, drowsy mood. The rhythm is then broken again, in a parallel way, by “He did a lazy sway.”

The first “He did a lazy sway” breaks the rhythmic and pitched figures in the same way that “I heard a Negro play” does several lines before. He uses his upper register (at least compared to the rest of his reading), and makes a quick ascent and descent, mirroring the pitching of the line’s preceding counterpart. In this way, Hughes is making the breaking of a pattern into a pattern in and of itself. The break becoming part of the pattern is a classic example of the “extra glide… a kick where none is expected… for which there is no notation.” (Bontemps, xv). The expectation of broken expectation becomes part of the form, and the challenge becomes breaking expectation in artful ways. Hughes does that here, using the break as a musical tag,
repeating the departure from established form to lead into the ending cadence of the first chorus. “He did a lazy sway… He did a lazy sway… to the tune o’ those Weary Blues.” These blues are indeed weary. Drowsy, syncopated, and tired from work and enduring oppression, blues and the Black people that sing them blur at the line here. The man in Hughes’ poem, the man’s blues, Hughes himself, Hughes’ blues, Black American traditions of art, and Black people in America are all present in Hughes’ description.

The next chorus begins, “With his ebony hands on each ivory key, he made that poor piano moan with melody.” Musically, he is returning to the established rhythmic and pitched back-and-forth that began the first chorus. This is the first line, though, that directly addresses the music-making that is happening in the story. That the piano “moans” highlights the blurring of the musician and the instrument; the voice and the music. To moan is a human or animal action, a vocalization that cannot be transcribed accurately into words or notes. Describing the piano’s sound as a moan is thus to say that the man is speaking, or rather emoting, directly through the piano without translation—that the sounds coming from the piano are vocal ones, innately animal and not mechanical. The fusion of instrument and instrumentalist here augments the Stimmung of the piece. Hughes also elongates the “o” sound in moan, in keeping with the droning/drowsy motif. This elongation also serves to turn “moan” itself into a moan, further bringing the poem to life and widening the gap through which Hughes steps into his own poem. Artist and character blur here, similar to how Lamar blurs with his character in The Art of Peer Pressure, as I discussed in the
previous chapter. The ebony hands could be his, with the ivory keys being a metaphor for the words he employs to make his own poem “moan with melody.”

“O Blues!” takes over where “I heard a Negro play” and “He did a lazy sway” leave off. It plays the role of the short line that breaks up the rhythm of the longer lines, although “O Blues” and “Sweet Blues” are even shorter than “He did a lazy sway.” This heightened brevity accentuates the rising and falling of Hughes’ pitch in his delivery. The three iterations of this motif form their own sway: from a low, slow “O Blues” to a faster, higher “Sweet Blues” and back to an even lower, slower “O Blues.” While it is his deliberately crafted delivery that makes the arc so tangible, that arc would not be possible without it already being written into the poem. That is to say, the idea is already on the page, but it is dormant, lying in wait to be brought to life by the reader. Who exactly is making this apostrophe to the blues is ambiguous: it could be the character in the poem or Hughes himself. Hughes’ bluesy performance cements that ambiguity, which has threaded in it a strain of ubiquity. A poet at a reading, or a tired man at a piano after a hard day’s work—by raising the possibility that the blues in question could be coming from either of these people, Hughes implies that it could be coming from any number of Black souls, experiencing the same weariness at enduring the repetition, day after day, of what it means to be Black in America.

The poem’s rhythm changes at this point (contrast with steady background). The short lines are replaced with the man’s blues lyrics, which still do the work of breaking up the longer narrated lines, but instead of being brief, the lyrics form their own sizable sections of the poem. Hughes and the character in his poem have a back-
and-forth: Hughes narrates two lines, the man sings a verse, Hughes narrates two more lines, and the man sings another verse.

In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—
“Ain’t got nobody in all this world,
Ain’t got nobody but ma self.
I’s gwine to quit ma frownin’
And put ma troubles on the shelf.”
Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
He played a few chords then he sang some more—
“I got the Weary Blues
And I can’t be satisfied.
Got the Weary Blues
And can’t be satisfied—
I ain’t happy no mo’
And I wish that I had died.”

Both on the page and in the recording, it seems as though Hughes and the man in his poem are trading fours\(^\text{22}\), bringing them even closer together in spite of the different dimensions in which they exist. Hughes’ vocal approach accentuates this even further, shifting his timbre each time he switches from narrator to character and back. The juxtaposition that hints at a musical partnership between Hughes and his character thus puts the two in the same continuum, furthering Hughes’ implicit argument that the blues, in both the musical and emotional sense, are enduring in Black life. In this section of the poem, the narration is such that the listener is in the room with the man, close enough to see and hear his foot “thump, thump, thump” on the floor, and to make out every word he sings, as he sings.

However, the final lines of the poem zoom out both visually and temporally. The night speeds by, and the listener sees the sky change from bright to dark.

\(^{22}\) A common occurrence in a blues or jazz combo, trading fours is when two or more musicians solo for four bars apiece, trading back and forth.
And far into the night he crooned that tune.  
The stars went out and so did the moon.  
The singer stopped playing and went to bed  
While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.  
He slept like a rock or a man that’s dead.

The blues are a remedy for their own source—one plays the blues to stave off one’s blues. When the music stops, though, one is left with one’s previous condition. This is what happens to Hughes’ character. What does it mean to sleep like “a man that’s dead?” The man is so tired that to properly rest, he may need to never wake up again. Hughes’ voice cements this line as the judgment that it is. When he delivers the line “the stars went out, and so did the moon,” he could easily be reading a children’s book, but his timbre changes drastically for the last line, as does his pacing. He takes a pause before “that’s dead,” and his voice hollows out for the delivery of the phrase. The blues kept the man going, but they did not and cannot save him.

There are many threads in this piece that become recognizable by the end of the reading, but the beginnings of these threads are tucked away such that one must reread and re-listen to uncover their whole shapes. For example, there are lazy sways all over, with different widths and arcs, longitudes and latitudes. Hughes performs each line, or pair of lines, with its own up and down, so the poem sways side to side throughout. There is the breaking of rhythm that turns into its own sway, between long lines and short ones. These oscillations have a longer period, and come to light as the poem progresses. This sway also changes pace in the second half of the poem. As the character’s blues lyrics take over the role of the shorter lines, the balance between long and short lines changes, and the shorter lines abandon their position as breaks and instead form their own substantial sections, which sway differently with
the longer, narrated lines. The way Hughes delivers “O blues,” “Sweet blues,” and “O blues” forms another sway, one that arcs vertically through that section of the poem. There is the sway of the piano up and down its register. Finally, there is the sway toward and away from the character: the poem starts out far from him, with Hughes telling the reader about “the other night,” “down on Lenox Avenue,” but then gets close enough to hear the chords the man plays, the blues he sings, and the “thump, thump, thump” of his foot on the floor, before zooming back out “far into the night.”

The artistry in this poem all works towards the same common goal; none of it is distracted, or “for art’s sake.” All of the devices, imagery and timbres of the song contribute to its Stimmung, which is one of inescapable weariness, and the beauty that a person can make in spite of and in direct response to that weariness. Langston Hughes’ performance allows listeners not just to hear him tell it, but to feel the exhaustion weighing on them. The performance has the profound effect it does on the listener precisely because of its subtlety and unity. People can dispute a directly presented argument—but how can one argue against an experienced feeling, especially if that feeling is being evoked simultaneously bodily and mentally by different cues on different musical-poetic fronts? By enveloping the listener in meaning-feeling instead of trying to pierce their hide directly, Hughes’ message peacefully and quietly passes through the semi-permeable membrane of a person’s emotional exterior. Through this multi-frontal saturation, poetic and musical, Hughes communicates in a visceral way that could not be achieved with words alone, and communicates a message too detailed and nuanced to be delivered solely through music. It is the combination of the mediums, sewn to each other in character and
intention, that allows him both to deliver his message and to bury it in his listeners below the surface of disputability. In *M.A.A.D. City*, Lamar brings new techniques to the same approach of combined angles of *Stimmung*-communication.
4. M.A.A.D. City

The eighth track on Kendrick Lamar’s album *Good Kid, M.A.A.d City*, and the latter of the twin title tracks, *M.A.A.D City* is largely about the daily dangers Kendrick and his companions faced and were a part of during their adolescence in Compton, Los Angeles. The lyrical content is delivered largely in the form of a story-narrative interspersed with curated connotations and separate memories. Towards the end of the song (section D of part 2), Lamar engages in a reflection of what it means to trust the artist, highlighting the cognitive dissonance of the listener’s experience of hearing refined, artistic representation of such violent actions with which the artist is professing to be complicit.

The form of the song, like *The Art of Peer Pressure*, as well as much of Lamar’s work, is atypical compared to conventional pop models. The form falls into two major parts, subdivided as follows:

Part 1: ABCBA

Part 2: ABCB’DEF

Because of the length and density of the texts in this song, I confine my consideration to part 1 and section D of part 2, offering analysis that is significant to the ideas addressed in previous chapters of this paper. Following this paragraph is a lyrical transcription of the sections of the song that I analyze (full transcription provided in appendix), with timestamps of when the sections occur. In the C section of Part 1 and the D section of Part 2, I have notated the changes in the texture of the
instrumental as it fits with the rap, and highlighted in color the different rhyme sounds with which Lamar weaves his rap. The colors serve to distinguish the different rhyme sounds, and to make the subtle rhymes more apparent. In a similar way, I have used underlining, italics, and bolding to highlight assonance and alliteration. I do not claim my analysis to be the single correct, complete coding of rhymes or syllabic work at play in these verses—the spectrum of syllabic relation does not have clear lines between “true” rhyme, “slant” rhyme or lack of rhyme, nor between what is and what is not assonant, alliterative, etc. Similarly, my notation of the changes in the instrumental is not an exhaustive one. I have highlighted what stands out to me so that I can reference it in arguments for musical, lingual and lyrical techniques working in tandem.
Figure 5.
Part 1

A: Intro to part 1, 0:00-0:13

If Pirus\textsuperscript{23} and Crips all got along
They’d probably gun me down by the end of the song
Seems like the whole city go against me
Every time I’m in the street, I hear
YAWK YAWK YAWK YAWK

Figure 6.

B: Chorus 1, 0:13-0:25

Man down
Where you from, nigga?
Fuck who you know, where you from, my nigga?
Where your grandma stay, huh, my nigga?
This M.A.A.D. City, now run, my nigga

Figure 7.

C: Verse 1, 0:25-2:10

\textbf{Brace} yourself, I'll \textbf{take} you on a trip down memory \textbf{lane}
This is not a \textbf{rap} on how I'm slingin \textbf{crack} or move \textbf{cocaine}
This is cul-de-sac\textsuperscript{24} and plenty \textbf{Cognac} and major \textbf{pain}
Not the drill sergeant, but the stress that \textbf{weighing} on your \textbf{brain}
It was Me, O-Boog, and \textbf{Yanyan}, YG Lucky, ride down \textbf{Rosecrans}\textsuperscript{25}
It got ugly, waving your \textbf{hand} out the window. Check yourself
Uh, \textbf{warriors} and \textbf{Conans}, hope euphoria can \textbf{slow} dance
with \textbf{society}, the \textbf{driver seat} the first one to get killed
Seen a light-skinned nigga with his \textbf{brains} blown out
At the same burger stand where (bleep) \textbf{hang} out
Now this is not a \textbf{tape} recording saying that he \textbf{did} it
But ever since that \textbf{day}, I was lookin at him \textbf{different}
That was \textbf{back} when I was \textbf{nine}
Joey packed the \textbf{nine}
Pakistan on every \textbf{porch} is \textbf{fine}
We adapt to crime, pack a \textbf{van} with four guns at a \textbf{time}
With the sliding door, \textbf{fuck} is up?
\textbf{Fuck} you shootin' for if you ain't walkin up you \textbf{fuckin'} punk?
\textbf{Pickin'} up the \textbf{fuckin'} pump
\textbf{Pickin'} off you \textbf{stickers}, \textbf{suck} a \textbf{dick} or die or \textbf{sucker punch}

\textsuperscript{23} BG’s stands for Baby Gangster, as opposed to OG’s (original gangsters).
This refers to levels of seniority.
Angel dust is a slang term for Phencyclidine (PCP). It is a strongly dissociative drug that often leads to psychotic and violent behavior. It is common to find marijuana laced with PCP. Lamar recounts accidentally smoking a blunt (marijuana cigar) laced with PCP, which led him to stop smoking completely (LA Leakers, 1:23)
The A Capella introduction to part 1 is the sing-song tune of a man who, driven to madness by constant danger, has resigned to his fate. “If Pirus and crips//all got along//they’d probably gun me down by the end of the song.” No matter what colors he wears, or with whom he chooses to affiliate, Kendrick will be in mortal danger every time he steps outside. He vocalizes these lines in a style somewhere between singing and speaking, engaging with the tradition of that particular worried line. In this song, the use of the worried line between singing and speaking works to invoke the idea of song through implied melodic cadence, but destabilizes that idea because there is not a veritable tonal center to his tune. Behind his layered vocals, dissonant vocal cries from a woman further destabilize the sound. “Seems like the whole city go against me//Every time I’m in the street, I hear *YAWK YAWK YAWK YAWK*” The vocal gunshots clear the sonic palate before the sounds of Part 1 land all at once.

Musically, Part 1 is colossal and sinister. Loud bass, agitated and rhythmically driving strings, quick-shifting drums, and a recurring sample of an ambiguous vocal utterance combine to make the Stimmung one of fear, danger and urgency. The instrumental is a sonic rendering of a city that can’t be trusted, a city that is chasing Lamar in a twisted cat-and-mouse game. The crown jewel of this tyrant of an instrumental is the 808 cymbal that rides the quarter note—it has been manipulated to sound like something between a cymbal, a snare, a chain and a whip. The way it rides the quarter note invokes the oldest Black American musics: slave songs, chain gang songs and spirituals, where the downbeat of the step was the fundamental rhythm. Lamar chooses to invoke this sound in connection with the themes of chase,
persecution, and constant danger, to a petrifying effect. My analysis is that this sound in this context is also is a metaphor and political statement in and of itself—invoking the sounds of slavery in a modern context suggests a connection between the sets of perils, parallel sonically and socially in their different temporal positions.

The lyrics in the chorus of Part 1 (see Figure 5), while few in number, work quickly to invoke panic-inducing villainy. “Man down,” right away, describes death or serious injury, and paired with the next line, “Where you from, nigga?” describes a calmness, or at least casualness, in the face of violence and danger. The next line, “Fuck who you know, where you from, my nigga?” implies that an unsatisfactory answer was given to the first question, thus allowing the listener to infer that if the person being addressed by this character was not in the crosshairs before, they certainly are now. “Where your grandma stay, huh, my nigga?” Bringing family into a place of threat, especially a member of the family associated with tenderness, vulnerability, and wisdom, is a chilling thing to do. The situation becomes bigger than just the threat to one’s own life. Adding to this terror is the flip on the term of endearment, “my nigga.” Using a pronoun that connotes friendship, or at least familiarity, while exuding violent intentions and asking for the whereabouts of a family member is as villainous as four short lines can be. “This M.A.A.D. City, now run, my nigga,” announces itself, much in the style of a rapper’s vocal signature on a track, and tells the beholder to run before the city, or something worse, catches up. While these lyrics could be uttered by any number of characters in Lamar’s story, they are delivered in a monstrous, pitched down, spatially omnipresent voice. This sound combines with the lyrics and the instrumental to produce a vivid sonic
representation of the malevolent, mad city that Lamar describes throughout the song and album.

Cementing the implication that he is the one being threatened, Kendrick begins his verse sounding panicked and out of breath, as if he is literally running from something as he tells the story (see Figure 6). He starts with a downbeat-based flow that lands its main rhyme on beat four of each measure; a simple flow by his standards, and one that he could accomplish while in such a frenzied state, and one from which he can build and diversify. By telling the listener to brace themselves, he is preparing them for a brutal recounting, but also transporting the listener into Kendrick’s own story: “brace yourself,” this is going to be dangerous. The next two lines make up a topic sentence for the song: “This is not a rap on how I'm slingin crack or move cocaine//This is cul-de-sac and plenty Cognac and major pain.” Introducing the first internal rhyme, Lamar is revving his engine while letting the listener know directly what this song will and will not be about. Kendrick’s distinction clues the listener in to the fact that while this song, akin to the “rap on how I’m slinging crack or move cocaine,” deals with drugs and violence, this song will not make those things easy or full of glory—it will show the terror and consequences of those actions.

After the first four bars, as Lamar begins telling the actual story, his flow becomes more dense, still riding the quarter note, but now also putting equal stress on the “e” of each beat (me O-, YanYan, Lucky, Rosecrans, ugly, your hand, window, etc, see Figure 7). The steadiness of this flow, which both completely fills in the 16th note grid and rhymes on every backbeat, makes the broken expectation at the end of
the second bar (bar 6 of the verse) that much more surprising. “Check yourself, uh.”

The expectation is broken in the domains of both rhythm and rhyme. The flow Kendrick uses in these two bars, while filled with fear, still lulls the listener into an expectation of continued texture via repetition. The lyric with which he chooses to break the pattern accomplishes three things: 1) it is part of the story, so it doesn’t break the narrative, in that he could be telling his companion to check himself before starting a fight, 2) he is telling the listener to check themselves and not miss what happens next, and 3) he is showing the listener, by snapping them out of the musical spell he has cast, exactly how quickly things can turn south in the life he is describing.

The next two bars do similar work. As the hi-hat returns, having been gone for four bars, the listener is tricked into thinking the song is moving on. However, the same filled-in grid, downbeat and “e” heavy (warri-, Conans, -phori-, slow dance, etc) flow continues, albeit with a substitute rhyme scheme in the second bar—but the expectation of where and what the rhyme should be does not change. The expectation is broken in the same place in the grid (the end of bar 8 parallels the end of bar 6). The idea of turning a broken expectation into a motif in and of itself recalls the last chapter, specifically the analysis of Langston Hughes’ performance of *The Weary Blues*, in which I explored his usage of the same technique. While the two performers and the two pieces in question are worlds apart in many ways, they draw on the same specific technique of broken rhythmic and lingually tonal expectations that, with repetition, transform into expectations themselves. This is evidence that the two
artists are working from the same African-American tradition and musical-poetic continuum, using the same toolbox for their art.

Returning to the verse at hand, there are several factors in this second broken expectation that contribute to the Stimmung of panic. The first, I have already mentioned: the expectation of rhyme and rhythm is broken, which destabilizes the listener. The second is the content of the lyrics: someone is killed for the first time in the story, and that person was in the process of driving a car full of people. The third is the skidding out of the drums, which parallels the loss of controlled movement of the car. The fourth is the addition of the unintelligible but urgent-sounding ad lib vocal track (0:50), with heavy delay that makes it sound like several voices instead of one, which are all in a frenzy about this suddenly lethal situation. The domains of these four techniques all lay in different places in and around music and poetry, and all four of them work together to shape the Stimmung of this song.

The flow Lamar chooses for the following four bars (9-12, :50-1:05) also contributes to the panic. The flow effectively slows to half-time—it becomes 8th note-based instead of 16th note-based. It does use parts of the 16th note grid, but it is not nearly as filled in, and the pace of the accents is what determines the perceived speed. He is slowing because he cannot believe what he is seeing. He’s just seen a man’s “brains blown out,” and Kendrick recognizes the person who shot at the car. This puts him in a predicament: whom can he tell, if anyone? This is a moment for which cultural relativism is important before judgment. The stigma around snitching, as well as the disdain and disregard the LAPD show for Black people, means that he would be both betraying his community and placing himself in danger were he to report
what happened to the police. The shooter could also have been a friend of his, or someone that for some reason he did not want to hurt or endanger. Lamar takes an approach that keeps the shooter’s anonymity intact, while at the same time drawing the public eye to the problem of fear-based, impulsive violence. By including the burger stand in the portrait, he paints the killer not as a psychotic, pre-meditating murderer, but a person, like many others, caught up in gang-related violence.

Kendrick says that “this is not a tape recording saying that he did it,” which excuses him from accusations of being a snitch, but then acknowledges, that “ever since that day, I was looking at him different.” He lets the listener know that this kind of disregard for the value of life, while commonplace, does not go unnoticed. He communicates all of this to the listener in the space of four bars, without addressing any of it head-on.

Kendrick then drops the bomb: he witnessed this killing when he was nine years old. Leading with this image of shattered innocence, he unleashes a rhythmic frenzy: the drums and strings come back in, both instruments pushing the 16th note grid back into the spotlight, and Lamar begins his real dance. Up until this point, his flow had set up clear, predictable expectations of where the main rhyme would land, and, with two notable exceptions, completed those rhyme templates. The flow he shifts to here (beginning at bar 13, 1:05) has a different premise: any eighth note is fair game for the end of a line. This shift parallels the shift from blues to jazz poetry. It is a significant shift of directive: Lamar goes from A) fitting a line within parameters, and using internal rhyme as well as literary devices to make up the meat of the art, to B) using those same devices and rhyme markers to give structure to a
cadentially free style. Lamar is by no means the first rapper to rap through bar lines, or end phrases in unconventional places, but his patience, his willingness to keep his rhythms simple for 12 bars before deploying this technique, makes the rhythmic shift profound indeed.

In addition to the shift of rhythmic texture, Lamar simultaneously densifies his rhyme scheme and introduces alliteration as a motif. He picks up new sounds and juggles them so deftly that it becomes difficult to keep track of what syllables rhyme and what consonants ring with each other (see Figure 7, bars 13-18). He begins with two sounds, which become the main threads of the first several bars: the “a” of “back” and “packed”, and the “i” of “nine.” The transformation from the first line to the second is a collapse of space between the rhymed sounds: the sounds go from being spaced a quarter note to an eighth note apart. With “Pakistan,” Lamar does three things in the sonic realm alone: continues to rhyme with “pack,” a main thread; introduces the “tan” sound, with which he rhymes in the next line; and hints that “p” will become an alliterative theme, which “porch” confirms three words later—while also introducing “or,” its own new rhyme sound. This density is mirrored by the lyrical content—we are flashed images of nine year olds seeing death, nine year olds with guns, and guns on every porch, indicating even further ubiquity of firearm ownership.

While delivering these vivid urban warzone pictures, Lamar continues to oscillate the amount of distance between his main two rhymes: “Pakistan” is spaced far from “fine,” “adapt” is close to “crime,” and the following “pack” is again far away from “time”—but in this iteration, Lamar adds “at a” directly preceding “time,”
augmenting the expected rhyme cadence. Somehow, while maintaining the alliterative “p” theme, he also manages to work in “van” to rhyme with “Pakistan” and “four” to rhyme with “porch” before concluding the line. The economy of words in these lines is somewhat astounding, for not only is it an impressive feat in isolation, the density itself is yet another device contributing to the *Stimmung* of the song. By packing four different rhyme sounds into one line, he draws a subtle parallel between his own line and the loaded van he describes. This technique serves as a subtle doubling of his lyrical content; doing work closer to that of a layer on a vocal track than of a metaphor designed to elicit direct comparison. The parallels are tangible, though: both the gun-packed van and the rhyme-filled line sound chaotic, dangerous, and unsustainable. The energy is not containable. It must go somewhere, and it’s unlikely that it will go calmly.

Indeed, it does not. The intensity transfers from deft rhymes to an angry swarm of hard consonants. P’s, Ck’s, and D’s bounce around like bullets spraying from different guns—which is exactly the lyrical content of the lines. Lamar synchronizes the content and the sounds of his words to resonate and amplify their meaning—much like Hughes does in *The Weary Blues* with the droning/drowsy motif, albeit towards building substantially different *Stimmung*. This is another example drawing from the poet-musician’s toolbox, accessible across generations and genres.

As the alliterative shootout comes to a close (bar 19, 1:25), Lamar slows down his flow, first rhythmically, then in rhyme. The line “AK’s, AR’s, ‘Aye y’all. Duck,’” slows the pace, but remains dense in assonance. In the following line, Lamar again
brings family uncomfortably close to violence by mentioning his mother’s advice. “That’s what momma said when we was eating that free lunch.” To layer this uneasy juxtaposition, he crafts the line to be rhythmically busy, but also to be the only line in the entire verse without an internal rhyme. The line is rhythmically filled in, but Kendrick delivers it much more loosely, drifting behind the beat, which serves to distinguish this approach from the tight, on-top-of-the-beat delivery of the previous section. The content and delivery, along with the single rhyme at the end of the line, which, even as the only rhyme, is a stretch, bring childhood and vulnerability to the surface. Again, Lamar uses musical (loose/behind-the-beat delivery, vocal affectation) and poetic (rhyme density, rhyme fidelity, lyrical content) techniques simultaneously to achieve the effect he envisions.

Lamar uses similar techniques in the rest of this verse (see figure 8). He continues to weave new rhymes in before dropping the old ones (the “oo” of “loose” continues through the “eh” of “head” and “dead” to the “ee” of “peace” and “treaty,” making a last stand in “approve,” before the “ee” finds a new counterpart in the “ah” of “top,” “body,” etc.), and continues to use the effects of his word-sounds and rhymes to echo his lyrical content. By stacking the rhymes “bodies,” “top,” and “bodies,” and repeating that structure for “IV’s”, Lamar fuses the auditory pile with the visual image of the line. He reintroduces alliteration in the last four bars of the verse, but this time with the “s” sound. He uses the sound to accentuate the slipperiness of the different things he mentions: the slipperiness of the government, mentioning the subtle form of taxation without representation in that the protection of the police, funded by tax dollars, does not extend fully to Black people; the
slipperiness of a dangerous city in which one is unprotected without a firearm, but seen as a threat and/or a provocateur with one; the slipperiness of sleep, both in the literal sense (the vulnerability of the actual state of sleep) and in the metaphorical sense (mindfulness and awareness, or lack thereof); the slipperiness of having a doctor (a metonymical stand-in for a hospital and healthcare system) who may or may not be accessible when needed; the slipperiness of not knowing, with any real certainty, what is the best way to navigate these situations; and, above all, the slipperiness of the m.A.A.d. City itself. By ending the verse on the theme of uncertainty, he underscores the problem: the city is being driven mad by not knowing what to do with its own fear. Here, Lamar gives visibility to and makes a compelling case for a thoroughly detailed point, one that many potential members of his audience have historically overlooked, or failed to understand. It is a political (in addition to career) victory for him that an album filled with nuanced, thought-provoking representations of these issues debuted at number two on the billboard chart. It is a testament to his artistry, both musical and poetic, that art this far from popular forms (of both structure and content) became a mainstay of the mainstream cannon.

Moving to the second verse in question, section D of part 2 (4:44-5:27) (see Figure 9), Lamar raises the question of trusting the artist, which I briefly explored in my analysis of *The Art of Peer Pressure*. This time, though, he asks the question head-on. “If I told you I killed a nigga at sixteen, would you believe me?//Or see me to be innocent Kendrick that you seen in the street, with a basketball and some Now & Laters to eat?” Kendrick’s direct question to the listener begs a larger question: how do we, as consumers, reconcile the mainstream American narrative that good art
comes from good people, who work hard to refine their art for the sake of others, with the reality that much of popular rap music comes from artists who claim, often truthfully, to be drug dealers, thieves or murderers? It is a blatant hypocrisy of the consumer, who is often not from the artist’s environment, to assume that every artist is an exception to that environment. “If I mentioned all of my skeletons, would you jump in the seat?” When Kendrick asks this question, he is not claiming to be a murderer; he is only asking the question that will make his listeners reflect on why it would feel like such a deep violation of their trust if he were one. He continues to pull the thread, with the lines “Would you say my intelligence now is great relief?//And it's safe to say that our next generation maybe can sleep//With dreams of being a lawyer or doctor,” painting a picture of a serene world where Good Kids make smart art that dispels demons and secures futures.

Suddenly, the unruffled dream turns into a nightmare. Without so much as a period, Lamar’s lyrics turn violent and his voice begins to slide down in pitch to match the voice of the m.A.A.d. City in Part One. As the voice begins to fall, dramatic strings enter, compounding the shift from bliss to terror. From the dreams of safety to “…instead of boy with a chopper that hold the cul-de-sac hostage, kill them all if they gossip,” Lamar illustrates just how different the two worlds, unreconcilable by the listener, truly are. “…the Children of the Corn” refers to the 1984 thriller in which a cult of children decide that everyone over the age of 18 must die—a startling image that resonates with the rarity of young Black males in his neighborhood to make it to their mid-twenties alive and free. Kendrick’s surreal, monstrous voice then gives a diagnosis which may as well be a death sentence: he starts with cognitive
dissonance, “…realizing the option of living a lie,” which leads to substance abuse, “…drown their body with toxins,” which compounds reckless behavior, “…constantly drinking and drive,” leading to harder drugs that cause mental instability, “…hit the powder then watch this flame that arrive in his eye,” which facilitates violence, “…this a coward, the concept is aim,” as well as thievery, “…and they bang it and slide//out that bitch with deposits,” in addition to feuds, “…the price on his head,” which stimulate a twisted economy, “…the tithes//probably go to the projects.” While all this is happening, the voice bottoms out and then begins to rise again, panning left and right the whole time. It does not stop when it reaches Lamar’s original register—the voice passes that marker and rises above into the vocal range of a child, which hints again on the ubiquity of this violence that has no regard for age or innocence. Anyone in this m.A.A.d. City, of any age, could have any intention, and any capability. The “innocent Kendrick” that started this verse and this song has been swallowed: “I live inside the belly of the rough.” He has become one with the city. This image of transformation through inescapable envelopment is compounded by the manipulation of his voice; all the voices of the city, in the end, are his: both high and low as well as his own. In the last lyric of the song, as he returns to his own register, he acknowledges the transformation directly: “Compton, U.S.A. made me an angel on angel dust, what.” As noted earlier in this chapter, Lamar accidentally smoked angel dust, or PCP, when his friend handed him a laced marijuana cigar. PCP is so dissociative that, while on it, Lamar would be as mad as the city. The laced blunt is referenced in the cinematic outro of *The Art of Peer Pressure*:
“‘K. Dot, you faded, hood?’
‘Yea we finally got that nigga faded. I think he hit the wrong blunt though’
‘Ooh, which one?’
‘Well which one he talking ’bout? I was finna hit the one with the shenanigans in it’
‘I pray he ain’t hit that’”

This episode takes place directly after Kendrick and his friends finish evading the police after a robbery. Whether or not Lamar’s traumatic experience with the drug was truthfully in such a high-stakes situation doesn’t matter—that is the narrative of the album. At hand is a vivid depiction of a young man hallucinating in the back seat of a swerving car filled with stolen goods while sirens and lights go off around him, causing his sense of identity to twist and break, making him lose sight of whether he is the Good Kid or if he has been Made an Angel on Angel Dust; made into an iteration, agent, and perpetuator of the M.A.A.D. City.

At the heart of all of this analysis lies the following: through his multi-frontal artistry, Lamar makes the ultimate humanizing argument explaining the perpetuation of gang culture without ever making any kind of direct argument, thus avoiding any possibility of refutability. Instead, he uses layers upon layers of techniques from different domains in and around music and poetry to craft a more complete representation of a human experience than words or music could ever achieve alone. Lamar never tells the listener that his future is inescapable, that it is fear that drives him and others around him mad, or that it is this cycle of being raised in desperation and drug-violence that begets violent members of society—because a listener can use logics, if false ones, to argue against these statements. Instead, he makes the listener know his experience, on many levels—emotional, reactive, intellectual, visceral,

25 Lamar explains in an interview that the acronym m.A.A.d. stands for My Angels on Angel Dust (LA Leakers, 1:11).
physical, geographical, familial, and many more. He achieves the same effect through his art as Hughes does: by bringing his truth from every direction, he envelops the listener, steeping them in his own human experience. The listener, also a human, cannot help but connect to that experience, and be taken in by the world Lamar presents. When they return, their own worldview is affected—not by arguments, but by shared experience.

In their performances, both live and on record, Kendrick Lamar and Langston Hughes worry the line between song and speech—but they also worry the lines between music and poetry by employing techniques that draw from both domains in numerous ways. Each technique brings into play different phenomena from both the musical and poetic worlds, weaving a web of intersection that both transcends boundaries between music and poetry and goes further than simply letting the musical and poetic aspects “work together.” The two intertwine in a way that makes them inseparable—though they are different, they cannot be pulled apart or considered on their own. This web begets Stimmung that is simultaneously ethereal yet grounded, expansive yet nuanced, and bigger than the human experience yet fundamental to it. This Stimmung, due to its seemingly contradictory and extraordinary qualities, is captivating and mesmerizing.

An artist who understands what speaks to people is an artist who can reach people. Music and poetry are two of the oldest, most fundamental practices that have, throughout history, proved themselves, time and again, as being reliable and potent avenues for human connection where other roads fail. It is precisely because of their
proximity to the fundamentals of human experience that music and poetry are so often indistinct—they are both at our core.

A person who can see the relationship of each of those crafts to the human experience, and who can use their understanding of those relationships to create art that closes the distance between the two crafts, as well as the distance between that music-poetry and the human experience, weilds a powerful tool—and the world will hear their sound.
Appendix

Recital Writeup

My recital explores different possibilities in combining music and poetry in a performance context. Each piece shifts the relationship between the poem/performing poet and the musicians. The recital is comprised of 10 pieces:

1. Intro
2. A Biography
3. Progression
4. Sentimental Mood//…For the Past
5. Life is Fine
6. Local
7. Distant Lover
8. Barter
9. Outro
10. (11.) Intro Reprise

1. Intro

The introduction aims to set the tone for the show, creating an intentionalized atmosphere and transporting the audience to the place where this show exists—definitively removed from where the audience was previously. I approached this goal by writing a motif with shifting tonality, mixing a steady texture in the piano with a changing texture in the drums, and giving the spotlight to the introduction by the MC character, played by Jonah Toussaint. Jonah and I, as well as other members of the
Wesleyan community, have been improvising rap music, both on instruments and in verse, for hours every Thursday night since we were freshmen. It would have felt unnatural to ask him to do anything but improvise. We discussed the goals of the improvisation at length, though, and decided that his introduction would consist of a reformatted, stylized interpretation of the classic “ladies & gentlemen, welcome to the show, exits are on your left, etc,” but use substitution and alternative language, in partnership with the musical canvas, to accomplish the aforementioned goal of transportive atmosphere.

2. A Biography

I wrote the music for *A Biography* long before I asked anyone about performing poetry with it—it was one of the first pieces I wrote for this performance, in the summer, while this thesis was still in its formative state. Despite that, the piece went through a drastic set of shifts in the last weeks before the performance—the original poet, Cameron Arkin, had to back out because of unforeseen scheduling conflicts. However, when I reached out to other members of the poetry community, Gwen Freudenheim, whom I had never met before, responded with enthusiasm. She wrote something that took the music in a different direction—instead of a poem about love (which is where Cam went with her poem), Gwen wrote a poem whose story spans a lifetime. The difference in the content and style of the poem shifted the music in a profound way that I had not anticipated—but that moment illustrated the ability of music adapt to different human experiences, or, perhaps, to draw out different memories and feelings from different people. A song may have its own innate truth,
but that truth may be different for different people, and however a person may connect to a song, that is truth for them.

3. Progression

The idea that sparked *Progression* was a question of genre—what would happen if I asked a poet to write a poem with the only cue being a genre of music? Jazz and blues poetry have been staples of the Black poetic tradition for almost a century, but one doesn’t hear about rock poetry, reggae poetry, R&B poetry, etc. So, I asked Christian Black, a good friend of mine, to write a funk poem. Separately, I wrote a funk-based instrumental. He sent me an A Capella recording of the poem, without a set tempo outside of his own delivery. Without adjusting any tempo, I dragged the audio file into the instrumental project—and it instantly sunk into the pocket. Whether this was luck, or just the malleability of words over a funk canvas, I couldn’t say—but, with few alterations, it’s the delivery we’ve stuck with since.

This anecdote aside, the relation of the words and the poetry in this piece is one of direct interplay. They make each other come alive. The instrumental, by itself, has energy, and it urges one to move, but it can’t talk about itself. If one didn’t know the history and lineage of funk music, one wouldn’t learn it just from the instrumental. The poem doesn’t outright explain this history—but it makes the listener feel it, which is an admirable accomplishment, because that’s usually something that people say music does for poetry. The poem gives the music a social depth that it doesn’t have otherwise. For the poem, the music lays a rhythmic and harmonic foundation upon which the poem’s rhythmic phrases can play. It gives
context and lays groundwork. This strikes me as much more akin the work a rhythm section would do for a horn player than what a composer would do to accentuate the affect of words. Such a dynamic brings the poet into the circle of musicians in a way that is conducive to creative interplay.

4. Sentimental Mood/For the Past…

The relation between the music (an arrangement of John Coltrane and Duke Ellington’s *In a Sentimental Mood*) and the poem (*For the Past…*, by Destiny Polk) is a more complex one than in the preceding pieces. The idea of this piece is to combine a piece of music and a poem that, separately, evoke significantly different things. *In a Sentimental Mood* is a sultry ballad that is a lovesong tinged with nostalgia. *For the Past…* is a poem that deals with the violence against Black people, and Black womxn especially, historic and present. The nostalgia and the call of and for love bring something out of the poem that is not otherwise perceptible, and the violence in the poem shifts the meaning of the music as well. The result of this combination is something more and different than the sum of its parts.

After the music ends, Destiny continues to deliver her poem. The aim of this change in sonic presence is to give the audience’s ears time to rest as well as to highlight the difference of experience between hearing the poem with and without the music.

5. Life is Fine
Life is Fine is a poem by Langston Hughes. On the record Langston Hughes: The Voice of The Poet, his reading of the poem worries the line between song and speech. I aim to highlight this phenomenon by playing on my guitar what I hear to be the pitches of his voice. Through repeated listening and transcription, I realized that his pitching and phrasing imitate blues licks and structures. Although Hughes claimed to have no musical training or talent, his pitch center remains clear throughout his reading of the poem. This piece aims to highlight the musicality of Hughes’ poetry and delivery by replicating and amplifying what is already there.

6. Local

Local features myself on guitar. The aim is to show the vocality and poesis that exist in and govern instrumental improvisations. The song is made up of a cyclical chord progression that is only changed through dynamic shifts to highlight the different approaches a soloist can take to “saying something” over a given harmonic canvas.

7. Distant Lover

Distant Lover is a piece I wrote specifically for Chef (a band I started and for which I have been writing, arranging, and playing for the last four years) to play in this thesis recital. I felt like Chef was too big a part of my Wesleyan musical experience to leave out of this concert. This piece explores different approaches to vocal delivery of words on the same subject. The first verse, which I wrote, is sung by Lydia Elmer and Annie Flom. The second verse is a poem written and read by David
Peck. The third verse is a rap written and delivered by Miles Mcleod. I told Miles and David to take the title of the song, as well as the lyrics to the chorus, and write about whatever those phrases meant to them, and I did the same. The three sections barely feel like they can fall under the same category of “verse”—partly because they consist of different vocal art forms (which blur at some points), but also because they come from different people with different experiences. Perhaps counterintuitively, I feel that this difference makes the song stronger because each section builds towards the ethos of the piece from a different place—cementing that ethos as a shared, relatable, even fundamental feeling.

8. Barter

*Barter* is the title of a poem written by Sara Teasdale. In the early stages of planning this concert, I had the idea to arrange a poem for an A Capella choir. I read over 100 poems over five days, and arrived at this one. I can’t really say why, besides that the natural rhythm of the poem reached out to me. The idea was to write the piece by finding the melody embedded in the poem. So, I read it out loud, again and again, recorded myself doing so, and listened back for where my voice tended to pitch up and down, and by how much. This process laid the fundamental arc for the melody. From there, I composed harmonic structures and textures that I felt complimented and amplified the *Stimmung*\(^{26}\) of the poem.

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\(^{26}\) Stimmung refers to mood and atmosphere. It is a term I explore at some length in my paper.
9. Outro

The music came first on this one. I wanted to include West African drums in my concert at some point, because studying with Abraham Adzenyah, John Dankwa and Atta Poku has been such an integral part of my musical education here. I played around with different ideas for music that would work with a Ghanaian drum arrangement, and found that cyclical harmony and ostinato felt to me like the most natural fit to the cyclical nature of the drumming traditions. After several drafts of arrangements, I began considering how to approach the poetic aspect of this piece. It felt too versatile as a poetic canvas to only have one contained poem with a beginning and end, or even to feature only one voice—so, I asked several of my collaborators (Christian, Destiny and Jonah) to write or compile short poems of theirs that they felt connected to the music. I asked them to compare their compilations, and, with each other’s poems in mind, to improvise a reading that bounced around between them, thus adding another cycle to the mix, and disregarding the concept of a defined start-to-finish approach to the poetry, mirroring the music of this piece. It naturally fit as the outro to the show—that was not a preconceived goal for this piece.

10. Intro (Reprise)

I had to have something to thank people over! I also felt that it was good to break the spell with the same sounds that began the show. Nothing profound past that. Thanks for reading!
The Art of Peer Pressure Lyrics

Everybody, everybody, everybody
Everybody sit your bitch ass down and listen
To this true mothafuckin' story told by Kendrick Lamar on Rosecrans
Ya bitch

Smoking on the finest dope, ai ai ai ai
Drank until I can't no more, ai ai ai ai
Really I'm a sober soul but I'm with the homies right now
And we ain't asking for no favors
Rush a nigga quick then laugh about it later, aye aye aye aye
Really I'm a peacemaker but I'm with the homies right now
And momma used to say
One day, it's gon' burn you out
One day, it's gon' burn you out, out
One day, it's gon' burn you out
One day, it's gon' burn you
But I'm with the homies right now

Me and my niggas four deep in a white Toyota
A quarter tank of gas, one pistol, and orange soda
Janky stash box when the federales roll up
Basketball shorts with the Gonzales Park odor
We on the mission for bad bitches and trouble
I hope the universe love you today
‘Cause the energy we bringing sure to carry away
A flock of positive activists and fill the body with hate
If it’s necessary
Bumping Jeezy first album looking distracted
Speaking language only we know, you think is an accent
The windows roll down all I see is a hand pass it
Hotboxing like George Foreman grilling the masses
Of the working world, we pulled up on a bunch of working girls
And asked them what they working with – look at me
I got the blunt in my mouth
Usually I’m drug-free, but shit I’m with the homies

Yea nigga, we off a pill and Remy Red
Come through and bust ya head nigga
Me and the homies
Sag all the way to the liquor store
Where my niggas pour up 4 and get twisted some more
Me and the homies
I ride for my mothafuckin’ niggas
Hop out, do my stuff, then hop back in
Me and the homies
Matter fact, I hop out that mothafucka and be like
Doo! Doo! Doo! Doo!...Doo! Doo! Doo! Doo! Doo!

It’s 2:30 and the sun is beaming
Air conditioner broke and I hear my stomach screaming
Hungry for anything unhealthy and if nutrition can help me
I’ll tell you to suck my dick then I’ll continue eating
We speeding on the 405 passing Westchester
You know the light skin girls in all the little dresses, good Lord
They knew we weren’t from ‘round there
‘Cause every time we down there we pulling out the Boost Mobile SIM cards
Bougie bitches with no extensions
Hood niggas with bad intentions, the perfect combination
Before we sparked a conversation
We seen three niggas in colors we didn’t like then started interrogating
I never was a gangbanger, I mean I was never stranger to the fonk neither
I really doubt it
Rush a nigga quick and then we laugh about it
That’s ironic ‘cause I’ve never been violent, until I’m with the homies

Just ridin’, just ridin’
Me and the homies
Bullshittin’, actin’ a fool
Me and the homies
Trippin’, really trippin’
Me and the homies
Just ridin’, just ridin’, just ridin’...

Bragging ‘bout the episode we just had
A shot of Hennessey didn’t make me feel that bad
I’m usually a true firm believer of bad karma
Consequences from evil will make your past haunt you
We tryna conquer the city with disobedience
Quick to turn it up, even if we ain’t got the CD in
But Jeezy still playing and our attitude is still “nigga, what is you saying”
Pull in front of the house that we been camping out for like two months
The sun is going down as we take whatever we want
   “Ay, ay, nigga jackpot nigga, pop the safe
Ay nigga, I think it’s somebody in this room
Wait, what?
   Nigga, it's somebody in this room!”
I hit the back window in search of any Nintendo
DVDs, plasma screen TVs in the trunk
We made a right, then made a left, then made a right
Then made a left, we was just circling life
My mama called – "Hello? What you doin'?" – Kicking it
I should've told her I’m probably ‘bout to catch my first offense with the homies
(siren)
But they made a right, they made a left then made a right
Then another right
One lucky night with the homies

“K. Dot, you faded, hood?
Yea we finally got that nigga faded. I think he hit the wrong blunt though
Ooh, which one?
Well which one he talking 'bout? I was finna hit the one with the shenanigans in it
I pray he ain't hit that
Nah, that nigga straight. He ain't hit that one
Got the shenanigans? Give that nigga the shenanigans
Nigga I think we should push back to the city, fo real doe Nigga, for what?
What that nigga, what's that Jeezy song say nigga?
"Last time I checked I was the man on these streets!"
Yea, yea, that shit right there. I'm tryna be the nigga in the street
There he go. Man you don't even know how the shit go
Look, here's the plan luv. We gon' use the kickback as a alibi.
Wait 'til the sun go down, roll out, complete the mission, drop K. Dot off at his mama
van, at the park,
cause I know he trying to fuck on Sherane tonight
That's what he’s not gon' do. Then we all gon' meet back at the block at about 10:30
That's straight but we should meet up around 12, I'm tryna fuck on something too
Nigga sit yo dumb ass back down, nigga you ain't doing shit tonight
Matter fact, nigga get in the mothafuckin' car. We finna get active”
If Piru and Crips all got along
They'd probably gun me down by the end of this song
Seem like the whole city go against me
Every time I'm in the street I hear

YAWK YAWK YAWK YAWK

"Man down
Where you from, nigga?
Fuck who you know, where you from, my nigga?
Where your grandma stay, huh, my nigga?
This m.A.A.d city I run, my nigga"

Brace yourself, I'll take you on a trip down memory lane
This is not a rap on how I'm slingin crack or move cocaine
This is cul-de-sac and plenty Cognac and major pain
Not the drill sergeant, but the stress that weighing on your brain
It was Me, O-Boog[?], and Yaya[?], YG Lucky ride down Rosecrans
It got ugly, waving your hand out the window. Check yo self
Uh, warriors and Conans
Hope euphoria can slow dance with society
The driver seat the first one to get killed
Seen a light-skinned nigga with his brains blown out
At the same burger stand where hang out
Now this is not a tape recording saying that he did it
But ever since that day, I was lookin at him different
That was back when I was nine
Joey packed the nine
Pakistan on every porch is fine
We adapt to crime, pack a van with four guns at a time
With the sliding door, fuck is up?
Fuck you shootin' for if you ain't walkin up you fuckin' punk?
Pickin' up the fuckin' pump
Pickin' off you suckers, suck a dick or die or sucker punch
A wall of bullets comin' from
AK's, AR's, "Aye y'all. Duck."
That's what momma said when we was eatin the free lunch
Aw man, God damn, all hell broke loose
You killed my cousin back in '94. Fuck yo truce
Now crawl yo head in that noose
You wind up dead on the news
Ain't no peace treaty, just pieces
BG's up to pre-approve, bodies on top of bodies
IV's on top of IV's
Obviously the coroner between the sheets like the Isleys
When you hop on that trolley
Make sure your colors correct
Make sure you're corporate, or they'll be calling your mother collect
They say the governor collect, all of our taxes except
When we in traffic and tragic happens, that shit ain't no threat
You movin backwards if you suggest that you sleep with a Tec
Go buy a chopper and have a doctor on speed dial, I guess
M.A.A.d city

"Man down
Where you from, nigga?
Fuck who you know, where you from, my nigga?
Where your grandma stay, huh, my nigga?
This m.A.A.d city I run, my nigga"

If Pirus and Crips all got along
They'd probably gun me down by the end of this song
Seem like the whole city go against me
Every time I'm in the street I hear

YAWK YAWK YAWK

(MC Eiht)

Wake yo punk ass up!
It ain't nothin but a Compton thang
Chyea
Real simple and plain
I'mma teach you some lessons about the street
It ain't nothin but a Compton thang
Chyea
How we do

(Lamar)

Fresh outta school cause I was a high school grad
Sleeping in the living room in my momma's pad
Reality struck I seen the white car crash
Hit the light pole two nigga's hopped out on foot and dashed
My Pops said I needed a job I thought I believed him
Security guard for a month and ended up leaving
In fact I got fired because I was inspired by all of my friends
To stage a robbery the third Saturday I clocked in
Projects tore up, gang signs get thrown up
Cocaine laced in marijuana
And they wonder why I rarely smoke now
Imagine if your first blunt had you foaming at the mouth
I was straight tweaking the next weekend we broke even
I made allegiance that made a promise to see you bleeding
You know the reasons but still won't ever know my life
Kendrick AKA Compton's human sacrifice

(MC Eiht)

Cocaine, weed
Nigga's been mixing shit since the 80's loc
Sherm sticks, butt naked
Make a nigga flip
Cluck heads all up and down the block and shit
One time's crooked and shit
Block a nigga in
Alondra, Rosecrans, Bullis
I'm still in the hood
Loc yeah that's cool
The hood took me under so I follow the rules
But yeah that's like me, I grew up in the hood where they bang
And niggas that rep colors is doing the same thing
Pass it to the left so I can smoke on me
A couple drive-by in the hood lately
Couple of IV's with the fucking spray can
Shots in the crowd when everybody ran
Crew I'm finna slay, the street life I crave
Shots hit the enemy, harsh turn brave
Mount up regulators in the whip
Down the boulevard with the pistol grip
Trip, we in the hood still
So loc, grab a strap cause yeah, it's so real
Deal with the outcome, a strap in the hand
And a bird and ten grand's where motherfuckers stand

(Lamar)

If I told you I killed a nigga at 16, would you believe me?
Or see me to be innocent Kendrick that you seen in the street
With a basketball and some Now & Laters to eat
If I mentioned all of my skeletons, would you jump in the seat?
Would you say my intelligence now is great relief?
And it's safe to say that our next generation maybe can sleep
With dreams of being a lawyer or doctor
Instead of boy with a chopper that hold the cul de sac hostage
Kill them all if they gossip, the Children of the Corn
They realizing the option of living a lie, drown their body with toxins
Constantly drinking and drive, hit the powder then watch this flame
That arrive in his eye; this a coward, the concept is aim and
They bang it and slide out that bitch with deposits
And the price on his head, the tithes probably go to the projects
I live inside the belly of the rough
Compton, U.S.A. made me an angel on angel dust, what
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