

Language Barrier: Identity Politics,  
Ownership, and The White Artist

by

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## Introduction

In November of 2010, Giacomo Gates, a Jazz vocalist and adjunct faculty member at Wesleyan University, arrived at Lincoln Center studios in New York, NY to record a tribute album to the revered poet, musician, and activist Gil Scott-Heron. Gates and the rest of his band had been contacted by producer Mark Ruffin a year prior to set up the engagement. Ruffin, an acclaimed Jazz journalist and program director of the Real Jazz channel on Sirius/XM Satellite Radio, had been listening to Heron's music throughout his childhood, and had been trying for years to get a project like this going. Led by musical director John DiMartino, the band of musicians had only rehearsed once prior to unloading their gear into the studio and recording the album. The session lasted twelve hours, and by the end of the day, they had what they hoped to be a fitting tribute to the great poet. After mixing and mastering, the album would be projected for release in July of the following year, after which Ruffin would hope to give Heron the album as a gift, since no other artist had done a tribute of this scale to him before. Just over a month before the release of the album, however, Heron, passed away at age 62, and never heard the recorded tribute. Ruffin and Gates would never know what the late poet thought of the project.

Gil Scott-Heron was a revolutionary poet whose influence on the spoken word community was so large that many have referred to him as the "godfather of rap."<sup>1</sup> But what is it about Heron's poetry or his music that allowed him to become such an influence? African American art is multi-faceted, yet there are several commonalities

that emerge within it that give it unique characteristics and separate it from the art of other groups. Heron's work has embodied all of those commonalities. In this essay, I will examine how artists and scholars have come to understand the qualities that help to characterize African American art by using authoritative texts from different time periods by scholars heavily involved in black art. I will attempt to reveal why Heron's music impacted and continues to impact people like Mark Ruffin in such a serious way. Subsequently, I will explore what it means to be a white artist like Giacomo Gates representing a message that is originally African American, and to what extent the white artist can be truthful to the original content. Part I of this essay will position Heron's poetry within the African American art tradition as it is characterized in texts by Richard Wright, Alice Walker, and Guthrie P. Ramsey. I will also place Heron's musical compositions within the same tradition, specifically the blues. Part II of the essay will interrogate Gate's representation of Heron's message and examine the process of a white man engaging in an African American tradition. I will explore the album's social ramifications and seek to conclude that while Gates' work is not co-optation or appropriation, Gates is limited by his background and experience in how truthful he can be to Heron's work. I will conclude by relating this album to a wider context and discussing the role of essentialism in art critique.

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<sup>1</sup> (Scott-Heron 2000, x)

## Part I: The African American Art Tradition

The “New Negro” a term coined by Harlem Renaissance writer Alain Locke, (Lock 1997) represented a social movement in the black community that gave rise to a new understanding of blackness around the time of the Great Migration, and with it a whole new body of art and critique.<sup>2</sup> Along with the idea of the New Negro came a “renewed self-respect and self-dependence” (Lock, 1997, 5) in the African American community. One of the preeminent authors of the New Negro movement was Richard Wright, a popular African American writer of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and author of *Native Son*, one of the first African American novels to achieve widespread success within both the white and black communities. Wright, who influenced generations of black writers who followed him, helped to set the tone for how black art would be viewed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, writing an essay titled *Blueprint for Negro Writing*, in which he details his conceptions for what African American art should look like at this historical moment.

“The Negro writer who seeks to function within his race as a purposeful agent has a serious responsibility. In order to do justice to his subject matter, in order to depict Negro life in all of its manifold and intricate relationships, a deep, informed, and complex consciousness is necessary; a consciousness which draws for its strength upon the fluid lore of a great people, and moulds [sic] this lore with the concepts that move and direct the forces of history today.” (Wright 2007, 272)

Through this “complex consciousness,” Wright points out the necessity for a substantial awareness of the tradition of African American art and theory. It follows,

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<sup>2</sup> See Lamothe 2008 and Lewis 1979 for further discussion on the literature and art produced by the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro movement; particularly Lamothe’s chapter “Ethnography and Imagination,” and Lewis’ chapter “City of Refuge”

then, that the influence of the work of others becomes one of the defining points of how we understand African American art. This is of course true for artists across other racial groups, but according to Wright, the degree to which it is true for African American artists must be very high. Even further, I would argue that Wright's definition here of African American art seeks to separate it from the mainstream tradition, particularly white literature, given literature as Wright's main outlet. This suggests two things for black art: One, that legitimate participation in the African American art tradition requires a higher level of immersion than does the mainstream artistic tradition; and two, that the commonalities between artists will be more common and apparent, such as reoccurring themes and subject matter. Though this does not necessarily result in a monolithic black art culture, the threads that tie black art together create a much more solidified experience for African Americans than for mainstream art.

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century wore on, a new generation of scholars and artists contributed their voices to the discussion of what makes African American art. Alice Walker explores the unique nature of black writers as compared to white writers in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*:

“For the most part, white American writers tended to end their books and their characters' lives as if there were no better existence for which to struggle... By comparison, black writers seem always involved in a moral and/or physical struggle, the result of which is expected to be some kind of larger freedom. Perhaps this is because our literary tradition is based on the slave narratives, where escape for the body and freedom for the soul went together, or perhaps this is because black people have never felt themselves guilty of global, cosmic sins.” (Walker 1983, 5)

This “larger freedom” Walker describes is rarely tangible, but often it is made manifest in a communal way, whether that be freedom for a family or a people from slavery, or reaching Heaven upon death. This continuous struggle is certainly a

common thread in African American stories, and the one that will be focused on here. She uses Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, but there are countless other examples of this throughout African American literature. The lyrics of Billie Holiday demonstrate this particularly well in her song *Don't Explain*. "Try to hear folks chatter/And I know you cheat/Right or wrong, don't matter/When you're with me, sweet/Hush now, don't explain/You're my love and pain/My life's your love/Don't explain."<sup>3</sup> Here, we can see how Holiday's lyrics demonstrate a short-term solution of asking her lover not to explain his faults or his wrongs to her. She understands he cheats, but doesn't wish to know for fear of losing his love. The eternal struggle that Alice Walker describes is manifest here as Holiday's struggle to be happy in a romantic relationship. But she cannot ever be truly happy, as she keeps settling for men who cheat and conceal the truth. Thus, she is left in her continuous struggle for a larger freedom.

Though many current scholars have posited their views on the African American art tradition, few have taken a comprehensive look at how our notions of identity formation influence our art. In his 2003 book *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop*, Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr. provides an excellent insight into art as an exploratory ground for definitions of ethnicity and identity. He also theorizes about the nature of black vernacular and how it relates to art.

"African Americans have continually (re)articulated, questioned, abandoned, played with, and reinforced their ethnic identities through vernacular musical practices and many other activities. Since the black vernacular has assumed the singular role as the black person's ultimate sign of difference, then black vernacular music has emerged as a most conspicuous mode of signification in this realm of activity. Black vernacular musical styles and the various cultural practices surrounding them have existed as historically important modalities

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<sup>3</sup> Lyrics transcribed by author

through which African Americans have expressed various conceptions of ‘ethnicity.’” (Ramsey 2003, 36)

Here we can see a contemporary view of African American art as a sort of exploratory ground, a means through which to confront or to discover different conceptions of self. For Ramsey, the black artist is one who uses his art to explore difference in identity, or what it means to be African American. The important thing to understand from Ramsey’s argument is the shifting conception of how African Americans have expressed themselves over time, and how that has come across in different styles of art. Black art’s role in expressing the self was very different during the blues era, for example, than during the Hip-Hop era. Though the function of both genres affected and served the black community in different ways, the main commonality between the two was that they were both modes of expression for a people in search of an identity. This is the key of black art for Ramsey.

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If we view African American art as these thinkers have characterized it, then we can see Gil Scott-Heron’s work as functioning within that framework. His poetry fits into the long legacy of black artists before him, embodying the qualities set out by Wright, Walker, and Ramsey. Here I will examine two of Heron’s poems, *Coming from a Broken Home*, and *Is That Jazz*, to show how Heron’s work fits into this mold of African American art established by our thinkers.

*Coming From a Broken Home*, Heron’s first poem in his 2000 collection of Poetry *Now and Then*, deals with conceptions of the family model and challenges the term “broken home” that has been assigned to households run by black women. The poem is an ode to his grandmother, Lily Scott, and uses the environment in which Heron was raised as a challenge to the conception that broken homes yield broken



children. We can see this in the final lines of the poem: “I come from WHAT THEY CALL A BROKEN HOME,/but if they had ever really called at our house/they would have known how wrong they were./We were working on our lives/and our homes and dealing with what we had,/not what we didn’t have./My life has been guided by women/but because of them I am a Man.” (Scott-Heron 2000, 6) The line “WHAT THEY CALL A BROKEN HOME” through its capital letters places strong emphasis on the labeling of their home “BROKEN” by a third party, presumably an unseen authority figure (most likely white) who villainizes Heron’s family. Through this emphasis, Heron challenges the accusation in question defiantly while also calling into question the authority of this racially constructed term. In this line and the lines following it, Heron is not only challenging traditional anti-black rhetoric; he is advocating the power of the black woman and their ability to raise children who are successful members of society: “My life has been guided by women/but because of them I am a man.” This combats Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s notion of the “Tangle of Pathology,” which positions the black matriarchal family structure as the downfall of African American society. (Moynihan 1965, IV) Part of Heron’s critique lies in the fact that the “broken home” is usually only a term referring to African American households, and not in the homes of “firemen, policemen, construction workers, seamen, railroad men, truckers, pilots who lost their lives.” (Scott-Heron 2000, 6) Including several professional careers juxtaposes the “welfare” house of Heron’s youth, thus associating them with whiteness, and contrasting his home with white homes. Heron’s argument then becomes that the “broken home” is a racialized indicator, and an unfair classification, especially given Heron’s description of his fight out of the ghetto, and his avoidance of the prison system as a young African

American male. “I lived in the projects without becoming one,/shot jumpers in the park/instead of people...read books without getting booked.” Here Heron challenges the traditionally conceived image of the African American Male.

Through this discourse, Heron exhibits the “complex consciousness” that Richard Wright calls for in the African American artist. In defending black women and their ability to raise successful families, and subsequently refuting (knowingly or unknowingly) Moynihan’s report on poverty and the African American family, Heron aligns himself with multiple feminist scholars of the 20th century who have done just that, like Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier of the Combahee River Collective. Their creed, “A Black Feminist Statement,” declared that radical black feminism was central to any sort of revolutionary ideology. “We might use our position at the bottom,” they stated, “to make a clear leap into revolutionary action. If black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all systems of oppression.” (The Combahee River Collective 1983, 264) As an artist then, Heron has made a part of his work the greater struggle of the African American community as outlined by other black thinkers. The feminist nature of his poem is evident in the support of his mother and grandmother, who he saw as the guiding factors that allowed him to succeed. Through championing a feminist cause, Heron works within that “complex consciousness” to strive for a greater freedom for all African Americans.<sup>4</sup>

Heron’s Poem *Is That Jazz* claims ownership of jazz as a piece of the African American identity at the same time that it questions Jazz’s extra-musical narrative. “I

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<sup>4</sup> In addition to championing a feminist cause, Heron also aligns himself with a group of black scholars who have directly critiqued popular sociology and cultural theory like Moynihan. See Kelley 1997 and Sugrue 1996 for examples of this scholarship.

take pride in what's mine – is that really a crime ... let me salvage a piece of myself.” (Scott-Heron 2000, 45) In this last line, we can see Heron claiming African American ownership over Jazz, referring to it as a “piece of [him]self.” Because Jazz is an art form that has been created by African Americans and has become known to many as “America’s Classical Music,” (Taylor 1985) it is easy to see how empowering it can be to claim it as a part of one’s self, as Heron does in the poem, to gain a closer connection to black culture. The part of the poem that aligns Heron within my framework, however, is how he then questions what Jazz means for African Americans. “We overanalyse we let others define/A thousand precious feelings from our past./When we express love and tenderness/Is that Jazz?” (Scott-Heron 2000, 44) Through his question, “Is that Jazz,” Heron interrogates the function of Jazz as a force for the solidification of identity. In the poem, he can fluently identify what Jazz is in the material through artists like Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, and Billie Holiday, but cannot come to an answer as to what Jazz means outside of the music itself, whether it be the memories from our past or the love and tenderness we express for one another. Here, we can see Ramsey’s work at play, as Heron uses an African American vernacular music to express his conception of ‘ethnicity.’ This conception revolves around Jazz as a powerful force that can provide a story for those who claim ownership of it. “Only millions of sounds to pick me up when I’m down;” These sounds that pick him up we can understand as the parts of his culture’s history that allow him to understand his present life. In doing this, Heron expresses his ethnicity, as Ramsey says, by allowing an understanding of the enduring history of African Americans (“what it has will surely last”). Through his desire for ownership and search for an extra-musical meaning in Jazz, Heron also indicates the struggle for a

larger freedom present in Walker's writing. His inability to articulate the extra-musical function of Jazz shows how he is engaged in this struggle. Though claiming ownership over Jazz can help him to understand his culture's history, he is continuously seeking further meaning in this construction of his identity as he asks his title question.

Another observable characteristic of *Is That Jazz* that places it within the African American tradition is the music itself. In addition to his poetry, Heron's compositional techniques are heavily grounded in the jazz and blues styles, particularly his pieces that feature him singing, rather than speaking his poetry. His compositions contain some aspects key to blues harmony as outlined by the *Encyclopedia of the Blues* (Komara, 2006) and most important to our discussion will be the *blues scale*.

“The blues scale is accorded its name because it contains the most active blue note, the flatted fifth. In actual blues performance the flatted fifth tone in a melody is frequently the result of a pitch bend or slur rising from the fourth step or dropping from the fifth step of the minor pentatonic scale or other scale of the moment. Vocalists and wind players “fall off” notes in performance to achieve the flatted effect...” (Marshal, 2006, 863)

Though multiple versions of the blues scale exist, as taken from ethnomusicologists' transcriptions of blues songs, the commonality within the collection is this idea of the “blue note.” The flatted fifth, seventh, or third scale degrees in particular give the blues its trademark sound, and provide the performer with the tools for expression that is so closely associated with blues music. Heron's usage of this harmonic device is clearly evident in *Is That Jazz?*

bas ie was ne ver rea lly com mon place he was uh al ways mea sures a head  
 and uh Ell ing ton was more than num ber one for the mu  
 sic and things that he said

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The transcription above shows the opening melody of *Is That Jazz?* from Heron’s 2010 album *I’m New Here* (though he recorded several versions of this composition). The very first note we hear is the flatted fifth scale degree, setting the tone of the composition immediately. In the first two measures, Heron’s melody employs the flatted fifth, third, and seventh scale degrees, heavily emphasizing this blues tonality, and indicating to the listener that this blues scale will be the central tonality of the vocal melody. The rest of the transcription demonstrates that this trend does not change, and the melody does in fact remain centered around the C blues scale for the entirety of the song. As Marshal’s article indicates, another key component to the blues scale is the motion that these blues notes create. The flatted fifth in Heron’s opening line (Gb) moves down by a half step to the natural fourth (F natural), providing this “dropping” motion, and as indicated by transcription, every other time the flatted fifth is used, it is leading into the natural fourth. This scalar move that permeates Heron’s work, as Marshal states, is emblematic of the blues.

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<sup>5</sup> Transcribed by Author

Another key aspect of the blues that Heron utilizes in his compositions is improvisation. This technique of spontaneous composition is commonplace in blues and Jazz, and one's ability to improvise is generally the main criteria for evaluating a musician within these traditions. It follows then, that the blues places a heavy emphasis on original performance, rather than notated music. The Encyclopedia states:

“Blues improvisation... involves the use of certain instruments available to the musician, the melodic pitches usually drawn from the “blues scale,” and chords from triadic harmony.” (Komara 2006, 107)

“The primary source of the blues is the performance, whether live in person or on sound recordings, and the secondary source is the transcription of the performance in words and music notation. The secondary source can never replace the primary source.” (Komara 2006, 107)

His version of *Is That Jazz?* transcribed above is only one of several that Heron recorded during his career, and each recording shows differences in the way the composition is played harmonically, rhythmically, and stylistically. In the recording from *I'm New Here*, Heron is only accompanied by a piano playing an almost McCoy Tyner-esque rhythm piano centered on a blues-like progression. The recording from the 2010 *Storm* compilation features a whole rhythm section of drums, bass, piano, and guitar, giving the song a very different feel. The recording is played slightly slower, and the bass plays a walking bass line, which places Heron's poem slightly closer to the subject matter of the title line, Jazz. In these two different recordings, while the basic structure of song's harmony and the melody remain close to the same, the playing of the ensemble and Heron's phrasing are quite different. Also striking, though not as relevant to the qualities of the blues, is the difference in the tone of the

poet's voice, as this is a much earlier recording of a younger Heron on the *Storm* compilation. The older, huskier tone from *I'm New Here* serves as a bit of an indication of the maturity of the speaker in re-interpreting his own work, and perhaps demonstrates a heightened sensibility of how to improvise and play with his own phrasing.

## Part II: The Revolution Will Be Jazz

Giacomo Gates' recording session at Lincoln Center resulted in the 2011 album *The Revolution Will Be Jazz: The Songs of Gil Scott-Heron*, which was released on Savant Records just over a month after Heron's death. Though the album was meant to be a tribute and a gift to an alive Gil Scott-Heron, the timing of the album's release unfortunately made it seem more of an "in memoriam" to the late poet. As it generally happens in the music industry, Heron's death prompted a significant spike in interest surrounding his work, and subsequently a huge amount of attention was drawn to Gates' new album, launching it to number one on the national Jazz radio charts for six weeks, an accomplishment nearly unheard of in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The album also received a large amount of critical praise, with one reviewer calling it "the Jazz equivalent of Orson Welles reciting Shakespeare," (Loudon 2011) and another calling Gates "the ideal singer to interpret Heron's compositions." (Fendel 2011) Though a significant number of practitioners and consumers of Jazz music are now white, questions are still prompted by the re-interpretation of Heron's music by a white artist. What kind of justice could a white man do to Gil Scott-Heron? How can somebody who is not African American honestly convey a message that so strongly embodies African American art?

*The Revolution Will Be Jazz* (Henceforth, *TRWBJ*) received critical acclaim in magazines, newspapers, and jazz blogs alike, and its six-week run on the top of the national Jazz charts positioned it as one of the most popular Jazz albums of the year. Common to many of the reviews of the album seems to be praise for Gate's style, and a general agreement that his voice fills the tribute quite fittingly. Ralph A Mireiello



from the *Huffington Post* wrote, “If anyone had trepidations about Ruffin's choice for this project, Mr. Gates grasp of the music and his performance here has certainly put all doubts to rest. Giacomo Gates is an authentic jazz vocalist and student of the jazz tradition... and... a master storyteller... It is precisely Mr. Gates' storytelling ability that makes him so well suited to the music of Mr. Scott-Heron.” (Miriello 2011)

Other articles offer similar praise of Gate’s ability and style, including one from the *Wall Street Journal*. “Mr. Gates... is a sonorous baritone who fully grasps Mr. Scott-Heron's soulful essence and hope-laced lyrics. A powerful jazz vocal stylist in the tradition of Eddie Jefferson and Mark Murphy, Mr. Gates sensitively navigates the album's 10 tracks with coffeehouse warmth, never trying to out-hip Mr. Scott-Heron.” (Myers 2011) Many of the other reviews available center around the same positive feedback, placing the album high in the regards of critics and Jazz fans.

Though the album is certainly worthy of praise, it is important to consider Gates’ subject matter when reading these reviews. Heron’s death was an enormous loss for (among countless others) the Jazz community, and to many, he was known as the “Godfather of Rap.”<sup>6</sup> Gates is dealing with a master whose work reached a broad audience across multiple genres, and the release of the album came right at the exact moment when a renewed interest was sparked in Heron’s work after his death. We must consider that any tribute album made for Gil Scott-Heron at this moment could have found a similar amount of attention in the music world, especially considering the recent examples of Whitney Houston and Michael Jackson, whose album sales skyrocketed after their deaths. (Sisario 2012) For the most part, the play-by-play

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<sup>6</sup> See Heron, 2000. Though Heron actually renounces this title, looking back to the countless poets who came before him whose work had an enormous impact that helped shape his own work. (xiv)

accounts of the album in particular offer reverence for Heron's work itself, and not as much for Gates'. Owen McNalley's review from the *Hartford Courant* in particular focuses mostly on the characteristics of Heron's poems and much less on Gates' performance. (McNally 2011) It is exactly this type of review that shows how the timing of this album is what brought it to the top of the record charts. While the performance on the album is at a very high level, the proximity to Heron's death allowed this project to grow from what could have been a no-name Jazz album into a nation-wide success. As Gates himself states, the focus on Heron's poetry was always the intended foreground of the project. (Gates, 2011) The fact that these reviews are focusing on Heron's poetry more than Gates' performance, then, should not be surprising.

With such a strong focus on the work of Gil Scott-Heron, very few of the articles actually discuss Gates' race. What could serve as a point of controversy over the album seems to be overlooked by most reviewers of the music. Especially considering the recent explosion of blogging and online discussion about the ownership and naming of Jazz, it is surprising to think that nobody wanted to tackle this issue when considering Gates' project. Nicholas Payton, a New Orleans trumpet player, famous Jazz musician,<sup>7</sup> and active blogger, recently wrote a blog post advocating a move away from the label of "Jazz" and towards his newly named "Black American Music," or "BAM" for short. His post attempts to remove the label "Jazz" which he claims has limited the music. "Jazz has nothing to do with music or being cool. It's a marketing idea. A glaring example of what's wrong with Jazz is how people fight over it. People are too afraid to let go of a name that is killing the

spirit of the music.” (Payton 2011) Payton’s main criticism of this label comes from the idea that the naming of “Jazz” was done by whites, and through this, the people who named the music were then the ones to take control of the music’s fate through discourse. In other words, the naming of “Jazz” was a form of colonization in the sense that whites were taking control of a specifically black space. “I am trying to fight for what Duke Ellington wanted to do for this music years ago, call it Black music. Why? Because he knew back then that if we didn’t label it in a way that spoke of its origins, that years later, white folks would try to lay claim to it like it was a collective invention.” (Payton 2011) To bring us back to Gate’s project, having a white singer perform the music of a black artist in an attempt to represent his message by this conception is certainly a form of cooptation. The proposed shift towards “Black American Music” as the new moniker for Jazz comes to us now as an answer to this type of musical colonization, but has there not been a similar line of white musicians doing this for years?

While Payton is certainly the first person from this wave of Jazz musicians to publicly propose this shift, he owes much of his thinking on this to the legacy of African American musicians who came before him, Particularly Max Roach, who held similar views as early as the 1960’s. Roach is quoted in Art Taylor’s book *Notes and Tones* as saying that the word “Jazz” is a mislabeling of a cultural tradition.

Roach:

"*Jazz* is a word that came from New Orleans. It came from the French. It was spelled j-a-s-s-. A jass house was a house of ill repute... When it moved up the Mississippi to Chicago, they made it into jazz. Louis Armstrong always referred to his music as New Orleans style. When someone decided to

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<sup>7</sup> According to his Blog (cited), He rejects the term “Jazz,” and prefers “Black American Music”

capitalize on it, they would call it Dixieland, presumably to take the taint of jazz off. There is a lot of truth in the saying that when you name something, you claim it... The proper name for it, if you want to speak about it historically, is music that has been created and developed by musicians of African descent who are in America... I would call it African-American music." (Roach 1970, 110)

As we can see, the idea that naming the music Jazz is some kind of colonization is not only present in today's music world, but has been discussed for decades. Especially for the more politically conscious and outspoken musicians like Max Roach (Roach's interview in this book is by far one of the longest), labels gaining meaning through discourse is a serious issue. If this is currently and has been such a serious issue for black musicians, then why is *TRWBJ* not drawing more attention for its potentially problematic if not colonial release?

For centuries we have seen the cooptation of African American art forms in various means, ranging from minstrelsy and blackface, to white blues performers like Elvis.<sup>8</sup> The first well-known example of this is Thomas Dartmouth Rice, an actor who took his character "Jim Crow," song, and dance from an old African American man. (Toll 1977, 28) Jim Crow was one of the most successful early minstrel characters, and he lies at the origins of the appropriation of African American art and personalities for white entertainment. Nearly a century later, during the Harlem Renaissance, black music venues like the Cotton Club were incredibly popular night-life destinations for white New Yorkers who wanted to experience African American culture in a safe zone without actually having to engage with African American people. The cotton club opened in Harlem in 1923 on the corner of 142<sup>nd</sup> street and Lenox Avenue. Run by the mob kingpin Owney Madden, the club was a high-society

theater that showcased black entertainers for white audiences, while African American audiences were kept out by high admission costs and racial segregation. With its two nightly shows and its ability to illegally supply alcohol under prohibition, the club attracted New York's nightlife scene: wealthy European Americans who would flock to Harlem from all over the city to experience what the cotton club had to offer. This type of entertainment became the new form of the minstrel show, and in fact there were still performers using blackface in these clubs alongside actual African Americans. (Haskins 1977, 29)

Given this history of appropriation, what is the modern state of this discourse? How can we look today at Caucasian participation in African American traditions, especially as it relates to *TRWBJ*? I will look to interviews with Giacomo Gates and band-mate Tony Lombardoizzi (guitar) for some insight into their understanding of how they fit into this conversation.

“We tried to represent it in the way Gil meant it,” said Gates. “If you notice, it's not a blowing session. Nobody's taking four choruses [soloing]. It's about the words. Gil's music is about the words... what he says is important.” (Gates 2011) This is certainly evident on the album. Throughout the 10-track record, very few solos are taken in comparison to other Jazz albums, which are often centered around the improvisation of the performers. Furthermore, Gates stresses the importance of Heron's work as text and displays a desire to present the music in a manner as close to how Heron originally wanted it to be performed as possible. Lombardoizzi agreed, saying that they were “doing the best we could in that moment as musicians and making the music bigger than us, which it always is... We really felt like we were

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<sup>8</sup> See Hale (2011) Ch. 2: “Rebel Music: Minstrelsy, Rock and Roll, and Beat Writing”

doing the best we could to put this amazing person's music into the spotlight.” (Lombardozi 2011) With a clear reverence for the poet, Lombardozi and Gates both understood their roles as participants in a tradition, and they viewed their priority to be making the representation of Heron's music as truthful as possible. That being said, how far can good intentions take them?

For a musician in the twenty-first century, especially a Jazz artist, often the selection of what jobs to take and what music to make can come from an economically motivated standpoint. It would be easy to view Gates' role in this project as a way to make money if we consider his position as a Jazz artist. In response, Gates had this to say: “it wasn't about the money... The record company has eyes to do another Gil record. I don't know if it's a good idea... I'm not comfortable with that. I'm not trying to cash in on somebody's artistry.” (Gates 2011) That he did not accept the second record deal shows a commitment to Heron's music and message. Had he been invested in the project for monetary reasons, the choice to do a second album would be clear. Unlike the long line of minstrel performers or other white artists co-opting African American traditions to make a living, Gates was not in it (entirely) for the money.

With the intent to represent the music honestly and carefully in a way that showcased Heron's message, Gates and Lombardozi seemed to be on their way to creating a tribute album of which Heron would approve. The last question remained: What business did a white person have conveying this African American message?

Lombardozi: “I'll be completely blunt. I was apprehensive with white musicians putting out a message that's African American. It just felt... I don't know if I feel comfortable doing this because we're not spokesmen for the

black community. There are plenty of spokesmen that are way more clear and articulate than us.” (Lombardozi 2011)

Lombardozi’s hesitation to participate in the project is understandable. A seasoned veteran of the Jazz scene having grown up mentored by African American Jazz musicians, Lombardozi is familiar with race relations in music culture. Through the interview, it seemed he became more comfortable with the prospect of performing on the album when he realized the intent with which it was being made. He described the vision of producer Mark Ruffin, who “was a big fan of Gil’s music, and wanted to record a whole a tribute album to him. He wanted to give it to him as a gift and say, ‘here you go. Thank you for getting me through my adolescent years.’” (Lombardozi 2011) The spirit of the album to him seemed more “to make Gil’s music able to be heard again, and by a new audience.” For Lombardozi then, race was never a part of it. He viewed his role in participating in this album as facilitating the exposure of Heron’s music to a new generation of listeners. Gates had a similar perspective, though a more complicated participation in the process of creating the album, being the one who was responsible for choosing the material recorded:

Gates: “I picked 10 songs from the 42 songs that I had. There’s a whole lot of other Gil’s material in that 42 songs that I liked but that I knew I had no business singing. I mean I can’t sing *Whitey on the Moon*. It wouldn’t be valid, it wouldn’t be correct. I mean, I grew up in Bridgeport Connecticut. I think I know about what it’s like to be around the projects. I went to schools that were more than mixed, but you know, what’s right is right. If I’m not going to sing *I Feel Pretty*, and I can’t do that, you know, I’m not going to sing *Whitey on the Moon*... I picked tunes that I could be truthful to, that I could relate to.” (Gates 2011)

The songs that Gates felt he had “no business singing” were some of Heron’s more racially charged pieces. *Whitey on the Moon*, for example, deals with the

marginalization of African Americans and the irresponsibility of white political leaders who turned a blind eye to the problems of the black community. Here, we can see an admitted limit to how much of Heron's message Gates can truthfully convey. He had no desire to sing Heron's music when it was about the plight of African Americans because he had no direct relationship with those problems. Choosing the songs to which he could "be truthful" was a process that unfortunately and necessarily eliminated a large portion of Heron's work from inclusion on the album, and those poems not included represented some of Heron's more controversial and thought-provoking work, such as *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, the poem that gives name to the album. If this portion of Heron's work was missing, how could the record be an authentic tribute? The questions of authenticity put Gates in a curious position. To return to the minstrel performer legacy, what was a white man doing fronting this project? What are some of the dangerous assumptions that could be made about the reality of a white man performing black music?

bell hooks in her book *Black Looks* discusses her notion of "eating the Other," a process which serves to alleviate white guilt by sharing experiences with groups of people deemed "exotic" or "different" from those of white ancestry. She says: "the desire to make contact with those bodies deemed Other, with no apparent will to dominate, assuages the guilt of the past, even takes the form of a defiant gesture where one desires accountability and historical connection." (hooks 1992, 25) hooks places this notion in a modern setting, and though the reasoning behind it may have shifted, white interest in the Other has been present for years. From sexual assault during slavery up through the Black Freedom Movement to the appropriation of black musical forms during the early 20th century (and one could argue, now), the legacy of



“eating the Other” dates back before this discourse even existed. It is the ways in which this idea has been made manifest that has changed over time.

One could make the argument that Gates, like the club-goers at the Cotton Club, or 19<sup>th</sup>-century minstrel performers, is a practitioner of hooks’ theory, as a white performer engaging in a tradition that can be seen as exotic, or different from that of his own background. One could argue that he is engaging in yet another manifestation of appropriation that has surrounded the dynamic between Caucasians and African Americans for years. As exhibited by his interview and the reception of the album within the broader community, Gates’ intentions and the performance of those intentions are not aligned with the typical cooptation act. His decisions regarding repertoire, his refusal to profit from another record, and the positive reception of the album among Jazz critics differentiate Gates’ project from these and show an honest commitment to the work, rather than a desire to gain access to something foreign or exotic as a means of deflecting white guilt. Furthermore, considering the amount of time Gates has spent in the study and appreciation of a black art form, it would be a hard argument to make that he was simply looking for a new “spice” to liven up his “mainstream whiteness.” In order to fully understand how Gate’s skin color plays into the creation of this album, we must turn to cultural theory.

In the recent documentary *Race, a Floating Signifier*, cultural theorist Stuart Hall outlines his idea that race is a discursive concept, given meaning by language, and not by biology. Here, Hall explains his theory:

“There are probably differences of all sorts in the world, that difference is a kind of anomalous existence out there, a kind of random series of all sorts of things in what you call the world, there’s no reason to deny this reality or this diversity. It’s only when these differences have been organized within

language, within discourse, within systems of meaning, that the differences can be said to acquire meaning and become a factor in human culture and regulate conduct, that is the nature of what I'm calling the discursive concept of race." (Hall 1997)

If we look at race as a discursive concept, a social construction, then we can begin to understand the relationship between artists and their art in a subtler, more complex way. Hall argues that how we conceive of "race" does not convey actual meaning until it is defined and organized within language. In terms of how we define ourselves and are defined by others, Hall is trying to shift the focus from biology to politics and articulated experience. Gates is not limited in conveying Heron's message because of his skin color—he is limited because of where he grew up, what privileges he was endowed with, where he went to school, how he was treated by his peers/elders, etc. His limitations have less to do with his skin color and more to do with the conditions that are traditionally assigned to that skin color, i.e. privilege.

The importance of this for the larger music community is quite significant. Whether or not Gates' portrayal of Heron's poetry makes for good listening, he should not be looked at as a passer-by to a music genre, merely "eating the Other," as bell hooks puts it. For any artist, not just Gates, who has devoted a significant portion of his or her life to the study of a tradition that is usually not affiliated with his or her background, the interest in their practice goes much deeper than the desire for an exotic experience, or the deflection of guilt. The racial makeup of Jazz has shifted in recent years in an increasingly Caucasian direction, with more and more albums being released by white Jazz musicians and an increased number of white professors in University music programs all over the United States. (Ramsey 2003, 19) Are we to dismiss Jazz as a genre if it is being overrun by white people?

Stuart Hall's conclusion to his discussion of race as a floating signifier can allow us to understand how we can move away from racial essentialist views and towards a more nuanced understanding of race relations in music. Hall finishes by showing how when we recognize that race is a floating signifier, that these differences represent a discursive notion defined by the system of organization that is language, we move into the realm of "politics without guarantees." (Hall 1997) The guarantee that because a work of art is produced by somebody who is black means it will be expressive and worthwhile, or similarly the guarantee that a certain kind of politics that defends African Americans and tries to protect them from discrimination will be the correct position because it is black—these guarantees will no longer exist in a discourse that does not rely on essentialism. In the world of art, this means that we must look at people's art as not as the result of (limited or expanded by) their skin color, but as the confluence of their experiences. In the case of Gates' representation of Gil Scott-Heron, his life experiences prevented him from accessing a significant part of Heron's poetry, which in turn created an album that is not entirely reflective of African American art as defined by the scholars we have examined. While this album may not reach a place where we can situate it within the tradition of African American art, it also does not reach appropriation: considering the history of minstrelsy and bell hooks' notion of "eating the Other," Gates does not display these qualities that would have made his work appropriation or co-optation. He is not capitalizing on somebody's art as a means to wealth and fame, nor is he seeking an exotic experience in order to assuage his white guilt. Gates' album then stands as a moment of honest tribute, frozen in the moment following Heron's death for listeners

to determine for themselves how much of his legacy lives on through these recordings.

## Conclusion

This past spring, I conducted a series of interviews with students and faculty at Wesleyan University about the ways in which musicians relate race and identity to music. One prevalent narrative in the participants' responses was the process of participating in traditions that are not usually associated with one's own background—for example, a white person playing Jazz. Another common thread important to the interviewees was the knowledge and appreciation of the history of a language. A respondent said:

“One thing is knowing the language—sure—but the other thing is having the appreciation for the history of the language, and I think for white musicians it's harder, because the context in which these musics are produced are many times removed from their experiences. And while white people's histories are usually in touch with the histories of blacks, because we've been together for a very long time now, and in many cases whites have caused many of the atrocities that blacks have suffered, they might not understand how exactly the unique experience of being African—being African American, being American, being enslaved, being freed without the rights and civil liberties of freedom— produced the particular musics that we play today. I don't think black people have that naturally, but I think it's easier for us to appreciate that context and connect with that context.” (Reid 2011)

My title, *Language Barrier*, comes from this process of trying to engage in a tradition whose roots are, as this respondent said, “many times removed” from one's own experience. When we try to place ourselves in a foreign tradition, there exists a certain disconnect between our own experiences and those of this new tradition, akin to the challenge of communicating with somebody who speaks a different language

than our own. When we lack this ability to speak fluently, we are the most vulnerable, and we are forced to attempt communication through our own inadequate means. This often results in a dissonance between us and our new environment, and this is what I am calling a *Language Barrier*. In Giacomo Gates' case, the contexts in which Jazz was produced were quite removed from his white, middle-class upbringing. He was very aware of the language barrier that separated him from being able to sing songs like "Whitey on the Moon" or "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," choosing instead to focus on the material that *was* relatable to him as a Jazz vocalist. While this may diminish the album's value as a representation of Heron's complete message, it should not diminish the album's honesty in an attempt at reverence for a legend.

As we move forward in contemporary criticism, it is important to keep in mind the dangers of essentialism. One could declare Gates' album complete heresy to Heron's legacy, but in doing so one would be using the essentialist practices from which Stuart Hall attempts to remove us. The music world has changed. Every time we see some great artist like Gil Scott-Heron die, we are reminded of the ephemeral nature of our current landscape and how quickly the conversation can shift from our present reality to the next. Nothing about this is fixed, just as nothing about the criticism surrounding our current art should be fixed. The real finesse in critique comes from a nuanced, holistic approach to dealing with the social ramifications of music, i.e., understanding that Gates' skin color is not what prevents the album from reaching a fitting tribute. Instead, it is the privileges that traditionally come along with that skin color that create the divide. We must be wary of using essentialism, and take background and the individual more seriously while understanding the often-arbitrary nature of biology.

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## Appendix

The Revolution Will Be Jazz: The Songs of Gil Scott-Heron

Giacomo Gates

©2011 Savant Records, Inc.

Released July 19, 2011

Recorded: Jazz at Lincoln Center, New York, NY (11/2010—01/2011)

Producer: Mark Ruffin

Audio Mixer: Rob Macomber

Photographer: Andrez Pilarczyk

Arrangers: John Di Martino, Giacomo Gates.

Personel:

Giacomo Gates, Vocals

Tony Lombardozi, Guitar

John Di Martino, Piano

Lonnie Plaxico, Bass

Vincent Ector, Drums

Track Listing:

1. Show Bizness
2. This is a Prayer For Everybody to be Free
3. Lady Day and John Coltrane
4. Legend in His Own Mind
5. Madison Avenue
6. Gun
7. Winter in America
8. Is That Jazz?
9. New York City
10. It's Your World

GIACOMO GATES ★ THE REVOLUTION  
WILL BE JAZZ ★

THE SONGS OF  
GIL SCOTT-HERON

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