

New Black Aesthetics: Contemporary African American Poetry and the Poetics of Form

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Introduction

Joseph Biden's inauguration as the forty-sixth president of the United States on January 20, 2021, symbolized a political change in light of a divided nation. His stand-in for democratic values accelerated Amanda Gorman's career as an African American¹ poet overnight. As his inaugural poet and the first Youth Poet Laureate of the U.S., Gorman complemented his appearance by representing American poetry as "the lens we use to interrogate the history we stand on and the future we stand for" (Gorman and Obama 63). Gorman's much-noticed public reading highlighted the political dimension of poetry in the context of a socially and interracially polarized America. As a young Black woman, Gorman's visionary words "The Hill We Climb" carried the promise of a future based on a poetics that refocuses American history through a Black lens.

Gorman's globally-read poem demonstrates the aim of contemporary Black poets. They recognize the legacy of Black peoples over the dominant White portrayals of American history and the equal role they play in it. Contemporary Black poetry thus fosters all races' awareness of slavery's impact on American history and society. This dissertation argues that African American writers of the New Black Aesthetics foster a dialogue between the past and the present by employing experimental and hybrid poetic forms to unravel and reassess the legacy of slavery. These forms further recover marginalized Black voices and illuminate the ongoing impact of historical racial injustices on contemporary American lifeworlds.

Focusing on the works of Terrance Hayes, Tracy K. Smith, Claudia Rankine, and Amanda Gorman, this dissertation demonstrates how New Black Aesthetic poetry transforms formal innovation into a tool for historical reclamation and social engagement. By merging lyricism with archival materials, visual experimentation, and polygeneric approaches, these poets position their work as a site of cultural memory and interracial dialogue. This study contends that through such formal and aesthetic strategies, New Black Aesthetic poetry not only challenges dominant historical narratives but also redefines Black identity. Thereby, my study asserts Black poetry's

¹ To clarify the use of race-specific terminology, this dissertation distinguishes among three categories of Blackness. The term "negro" is used only in its historical sense and appears exclusively within quotations from other sources, often as an archaic synonym for "African American," as in the writings of W. E. B. Du Bois or Langston Hughes. "African American" refers specifically to Black U.S. citizens who identify as descendants of enslaved Africans. By contrast, "Black" is used more broadly to encompass African Americans as well as other Americans who identify as not White.

centrality to American cultural consciousness and aims at emphasizing poetry as a medium for both artistic and political empowerment.

I examine how the overlap of lyrical form, social relationships, and power structures characterizes New Black Aesthetic poetry. It is “new,” because it provides a framework for understanding and explaining the contemporary interplay of racial identification and cultural production. Black poets employ forms of experimental poetry to comment on divisive moments in the nation’s past and present. In doing so, they use poetry as a tool to address social and racial issues. Hence, they maneuver themselves into a position of power to renegotiate the terms of racial co-existence in the United States. The unbound form of free verse allows the Black poet an eventually liberating and self-determined experience. This dissertation contends that New Black Aesthetic poets create a powerful poetic language connecting it to their work’s public engagement as Gorman’s role as Biden’s inaugural poet demonstrates. It highlights New Black Aesthetic poetry as a demonstrative attempt to move poetry into the center of democracy opposing a rising wave of populist, radical, and conservative ideologies.

New Black Aesthetic poets re-envision American history. They attempt to define the artistic space and character of the post-Black Arts generation, as this dissertation posits. In the context of writing poetry, I define the New Black Aesthetics as a form of experimental lyrics that affords new dialogues between the past and the present, recognizing poetry as a mediator of America’s racial legacies. As such, poets like Terrance Hayes or Amanda Gorman do not reiterate existing poetic conventions but rather transform them in retelling Black history.

The term *New Black Aesthetics* emerged in the late 20th century to describe a new generation of Black artistic expression that embraced complexity, hybridity, and cultural negotiation. Trey Ellis, in his influential 1989 essay “The New Black Aesthetic” outlined how post-civil rights Black artists were no longer bound to a singular definition of “authentic” Blackness. Instead, they drew freely from both African American traditions and broader, mainstream, or even global cultural influences. For Ellis, this blending produced works that were innovative precisely because they moved beyond fixed binaries of “Black” and “White” art.

In his 2021 essay “New Black Aesthetics: Post-Civil Rights African American Poetry,” Keith D. Leonard extends this understanding by highlighting the New Black Aesthetics’ deeper engagement with history and cultural memory. He emphasizes that New Black Aesthetic artists use hybridity not only to expand identity but also to

recover suppressed voices and to critique how race, history, and nationhood have been constructed. In this sense, the New Black Aesthetics are not just about stylistic experimentation but about redefining what counts as Black art within American culture.

Importantly, there is no single, fixed, or universal definition of the term *New Black Aesthetics*. Instead, it remains a set of approaches and critical perspectives that reflect the diversity of Black experiences. This openness is intentional: the New Black Aesthetics resist essentialist boundaries, rather affirming that Black identity and creativity are multiple, fluid, and always evolving. Therefore, my textual analyses in the context of the New Black Aesthetics are not based on a fixed definition but on my individual understanding of the term. I approach the New Black Aesthetics as a critical, interdisciplinary, multimedia framework. My use of the term offers an interpretative lens that foregrounds hybridity, political commentary, and artistic innovation as defining features of Black expressive culture.

In this respect, poets of the New Black Aesthetics see their mission in “confronting (and acting out) living histories of inequality and injustice,” as Michael Dowdy suggests (2). Hence, this dissertation challenges the concept of history as a mirror of the past and establishes the notion of history as a dynamic entity. Poets of the New Black Aesthetics apply history to operate as archivists and curators of African American history to propose a Black perspective on Black people’s part in the formation of U.S. history in general. Christopher Chen and Timothy Kreiner elaborate on the connection between poetic form and identity in their article “The Politics of Form and Poetics of Identity in Postwar American Poetry” (2018). Their approach ties in with the histories that form current poets’ identity, which this dissertation underscores by focusing on the expansive variety of poetic forms poets use to mirror a historical aspect in combination with specific emotional traits.

Determining Black identity through shared and embodied ancestral memories typically connects poets of the New Black Aesthetics. The common ground of their poetry includes self-definition as well as their emphasis on the omnipresence of racism in light of America’s troubled historical background. I reinforce the idea of the New Black Aesthetic archive as a historical compendium. On one hand, it sketches forms of Black identity shaped by history; on the other hand, it counteracts what Natasha Trethewey calls *historical erasure* (cf. Anderson 89). Providing voices from the past a platform to be (eventually) heard by assigning an archival depth to their poetry, New

Black Aesthetic poets revive Black voices and complement predominant versions of a White U.S. history and its norms of racial identifications.

This dissertation engages with four aspiring poets of the New Black Aesthetics: Terrance Hayes (1971–), Tracy K. Smith (1972–), Claudia Rankine (1963–), and Amanda Gorman (1998–). Each poet represents a critical perspective on current social and racial issues in the U.S. Specifically, they emphasize aesthetic approaches to reshaping current racial narratives. They also highlight the increasing political significance of Black poetry. As cultural mediators and as curators of historical records, they intend to create a dialogue between Black and White and specifically use poetry as the means to build an aesthetic, interracial bridge, as I will argue. Since each of the poets this dissertation examines creates poetry based on underrepresented archival materials, they resurface historical records to determine how current racial conflicts in the U.S. are related to past occurrences. They thereby present themselves as architects of a national history, which they portray as a dynamic and interracial fabric instead of a steady progression of Whiteness.

As poets of the New Black Aesthetics, they both echo the artistic movement and contemporary fellow poets. Typically, contemporary Black poets embrace hybridity and innovation in lyrical forms and voices. They explore identity as complex, intersectional, and evolving by offering multiple representations of Blackness. Hayes, Smith, Rankine, and Gorman share these approaches with current poets, such as Natasha Trethewey, Tyehimba Jess, and Natalie Diaz.

Works like Trethewey's *Native Guard* (2006) exemplify the New Black Aesthetics through their embrace of hybridity, historical reclamation, and layered identity. The New Black Aesthetics, as defined by Trey Ellis, rejects singular notions of "authentic" Blackness, instead highlighting cultural mixing and multiple forms of expression. Trethewey's poetry functions as both personal elegy and cultural excavation, expanding American poetry's scope by merging private grief with collective history. As a biracial poet, she embodies hybridity in her exploration of identity: the loss of her mother intertwines with the neglected story of the Louisiana Native Guard—Black soldiers largely erased from Civil War memory. Through this layering of the personal and the historical, her poems act as sites of witnessing, demanding that American history be revisited through the experiences of those who have been silenced.

Her influence rests equally in her mastery of form. Trethewey draws on sonnets, villanelles, and elegies—forms traditionally tied to European literary heritage—yet reimagines them as vessels for suppressed Black voices. By using both traditional structures and documentary-style verse, she blends “high art” with revisionist history, a stylistic signifier of New Black Aesthetic artists. This formal innovation complicates ideas of race, belonging, and national identity, resisting reductive categories and broadening the canon. *Native Guard* exemplifies the New Black Aesthetics’ central aim: to redefine Black identity as multiple, historical, and inseparable from America’s cultural memory. In doing so, Trethewey demonstrates how poetic form itself can be an act of reclamation, reshaping both history and the tradition of American poetry.

Another example of the New Black Aesthetic oeuvre is poet Tyehimba Jess with his book *Olio* (2016), which he wrote in the style of documentary poetics. *Olio* embodies the New Black Aesthetics through its innovation, hybridity, and recovery of forgotten histories. As characteristic of the art movement, Jess uses *Olio* to resurrect 19th- and 20th-century Black musicians, singers, and performers whose artistry shaped American culture but was overshadowed by racism. His inventive poetic structures—his sonnets, contrapuntal poems, and musical forms—merge high literary craft with vernacular traditions like ragtime, gospel, and minstrelsy. This fusion reflects the New Black Aesthetics’ commitment to crossing boundaries between “high” and “popular” art while insisting on the centrality of Black voices to American identity. By transforming silenced performers into living voices on the page, Jess creates a polyphonic history that challenges erasure.

Natalie Diaz’s *Postcolonial Love Poem* (2020) reflects the spirit of the New Black Aesthetics through its hybridity, reclamation of silenced histories, and refusal of singular identities like Jess, Trethewey, and the central poets considered in this dissertation. Diaz, a Mojave and Latina poet, embodies this hybridity by merging indigenous, Latinx, and American influences, crafting a voice that resists to be confined in categories. Her poems intertwine intimacy, desire, and the body with the legacies of colonization, environmental destruction, and cultural erasure. Like other writers of the New Black Aesthetics, she reclaims marginalized histories while employing both lyrical intensity and experimental form, crossing boundaries between the personal and the political. *Postcolonial Love Poem* thus resonates with the New

Black Aesthetics' ethos by affirming a multi-voiced, boundary-crossing identity that insists on inclusion in the broader American narrative.

In light of this circle of Black poets and their dedication to New Black Aesthetic art, this dissertation begins with Terrance Hayes and his role in shaping the movement. In *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* (2018), Hayes embodies the New Black Aesthetics by exposing the destructive effects of racial difference, as Trey Ellis argues, and by critiquing racism as a persistent element of American society. He focuses on how cultural and poetic traditions shape the contemporary Black poet and advances aesthetic innovation through the African American sonnet. Using formal camouflage, he merges the conventional sonnet with free verse to demand a racially equal social structure. The sonnets appear conventional and mask his innovation. In doing so, he challenges racial hierarchies and reframes U.S. race history through a New Black Aesthetic lens. By transposing the sonnet into an African American context and reviving it from a Black perspective, Hayes suggests a rebirth of both the genre and the racial identity of its poets.

Tracy K. Smith continues Hayes' use of historical resurfacing in *Wade in the Water* (2018). She links environmental crises to current racial conflicts in the United States and depicts racism as a cancer that eats away at American democracy. To show how ideology erases humanity, she turns to erasure poetry. Drawing on archival materials written by African Americans during and after the Civil War, she restores voices that were overlooked, obliterated, or deliberately erased from the national record. As a curator of Black history, Smith rewrites U.S. history from its foundation by acknowledging Black contributions that were denied recognition. Caroline Levine argues that forms are powerful because they can be repeated and adapted to new contexts (7). Smith adapts archival erasures as aesthetic bridges across time and race. In doing so, she embodies the New Black Aesthetics by merging archival recovery with experimental form and by framing her sociopolitical activism as an appeal to America's racial consciousness through an inclusive historical vision.

In *Just Us: An American Conversation* (2020), Claudia Rankine approaches the New Black Aesthetics by targeting the "living histories of inequality and injustice," as Dowdy explains (2). Instead of focusing on the historical roots of racism, she examines how contemporary groups perceive race and racism. Rankine seeks a dialogue with America as a racially equal interlocutor. To expose injustice, she critiques White privilege as the dominant paradigm of power and raises awareness of racial diversity

through everyday situations that reveal racial inequality. She distinguishes herself from other New Black Aesthetic poets by weaving these encounters into documentary poetry, a polygeneric and multimedia form. Rankine uses this form to negotiate interracial tensions and to challenge the material limits that reinforce race, as Levine suggests (cf. 9). By adopting a polygeneric approach, she mirrors America's multiracial society and makes her poetry political, since its form and content intersect with the social issues it addresses.

Amanda Gorman has emerged as an emblematic representative of the future of the New Black Aesthetics. In *Call Us What We Carry: Poems* (2021), she experiments with visual poetry to interrogate parallels between past and present narratives of African Americans in the context of race riots, epidemics, and social distancing as an allusion to the viral effects of racism. She adapts the visual form of her poems to mirror the crises they address, especially in global emergencies such as the Covid pandemic. Through this experimental style, Gorman critiques racial and social constraints and explores how hybrid poetic forms written in free verse can resist confining hierarchies. As an architect of form, she asserts control over her medium and demonstrates how Black poets can reshape America's racial consciousness.

The democratization of Black poetry is central to this dissertation's exploration of how poets challenge national history and reimagine the preservation of cultural memory. Hayes and Smith act as apprentices to U.S. history, listening to historical voices to investigate parallels between racial violence and the erasure of Black voices. Smith and Gorman emphasize the materiality of New Black Aesthetic poetry as a method for preserving cultural memory by incorporating archival materials. By integrating marginalized Black perspectives, they democratize the archive and transform the Black aesthetic into a dynamic, inclusive, and participatory space. Rankine extends Smith's approach by addressing silence and guilt as qualities she assigns to Whiteness in light of the racial dichotomy that continues to divide U.S. society. Gorman joins Rankine in using the Black aesthetic as an appeal for social and political change. Hayes and Rankine further develop a poetics of practice, raising awareness of racial injustice and resurfacing past struggles to foster interracial dialogue.

Apart from Hayes as the most radical approach to resurfacing historical similarities, Smith, Rankine, and Gorman also echo the heated racial climates of the 1920s and 1960s that converged after 1970. The motivations that fueled Black Arts

activism in the 1960s resurface in the present. Hayes and Smith most strongly articulate the cultural legacy and foundation of Black poetry. Hayes, in particular, echoes the New Negro Movement of the 1920s. By transforming the contemporary sonnet into a Black space, he revives the movement's legacy of manifesting Black creativity. His Black sonnets confront the challenges of identity formation in a hostile anti-Black society. As a result, the New Black Aesthetics revive the ideological approach of the New Negro, contextualizing poetry as a cultural foundation for racial pride, self-expression, and social critique.

In contrast to the 1920s' New Negro Movement, the revolutionary and activist climate of the 1960s' Black Arts Movement defines poetry as a weapon for racial liberation and emancipatory activism. Blending what the New Black Aesthetics call "high" and "low" art, poets such as Sonia Sanchez (1934–) introduce free verse and experimental lyricism, especially through visual form. The agitated racial atmosphere of the period is translated into scattered lyrical structures that mirror the emotional turmoil of racial violence and the palpable presence of Black radicalism (cf. Amini, Sanchez).

Specifically, fragmentary poetic forms have played a significant role in American literature, functioning as a means to express disruption, multiplicity, and the limits of representation. Early American poets, such as Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, experimented with fragmented lines, unconventional syntax, and abrupt shifts in the lyrical speaker's perspective to capture the heterogeneity of experience and the complexity of the self. In Modernist American poetry, T.S. Eliot employed fragmentation in works like *The Waste Land* (1922) to reflect social upheaval, cultural dislocation, and the fractured nature of contemporary consciousness. The aesthetics of the fragment—its openness, gaps, and juxtapositions—allow for multiple voices and meanings to coexist, resisting linear or totalizing narratives.

Within the framework of the New Black Aesthetics, fragmentary forms are particularly resonant because they mirror the multiplicity and hybridity central to the movement. By adopting fragmented structures, New Black Aesthetic writers can reflect the layered experiences of Black Americans, foregrounding histories that have been silenced or disrupted. Fragmentation in this context is both formal and political: it challenges dominant literary conventions while embodying the fluid, contested, and multifaceted nature of identity. In American literature, the fragment thus serves as a tool for experimentation and a means of representing cultural and historical

complexity, making it a natural aesthetic strategy for writers engaged with the New Black Aesthetic movement.

Since the Black Arts Movement emphasized the political relevance of poetry, it fused activism with formal experimentation. Smith, Rankine, and Gorman adopt this approach in their own work. Rejecting the conventional structural patterns of New Negro poetry, Black Arts poets embraced freedom in shaping form, often appearing random. This aesthetic liberty introduced a multifaceted approach to redefining Black identity through self-determination.

While the Black Arts Movement emphasized communal awareness and self-determination, the so-called poetry wars dominated the 1990s. The term itself cannot be attributed to a single critic or theorist but is tied to the “poetry war” that began in the 1970s between Peter Barry and Eric Mottram, editor of *The Poetry Review* (1971–77). In *Poetry Wars: British Poetry of the 1970s and the Battle of Earls Court* (2006), Barry distinguishes between traditional and progressive British poets, centering his account on Mottram’s journal. As a European counterpart to the American New Black Aesthetics, the British Poetry Revival pursued innovation by merging poetry with political motivations. Barry highlights the internal power struggles within the Poetry Society provoked by Mottram’s experimental approach and situates these disputes within broader ideological and political divides mirrored in the arts.

The British poetry conflict translates into an American context, as poets from both traditions show how poetry wars² weaponize aesthetics to demand power, archival access, and authorial recognition in literary canons. Chen and Kreiner argue that the wars between progress and tradition exposed the persistent marginalization of Black voices and contributed to shaping the New Black Aesthetics. While Barry portrays Great Britain as a precursor in liberating poetry from the confinement of tradition, Black poets in the United States increasingly challenge the Anglo-European dominance of the craft. Hayes exemplifies this by devoting an entire volume to “de-Europeanize” the sonnet. Black poets reject the idea that art must be grounded in established conventions and instead counteract racial marginalization in poetry. Their demand is aesthetic inclusivity and diversity in form.

Smith and Gorman, for instance, resurrect marginalized voices through an archival approach and grant them space as equal human beings. By focusing on individual Black voices through verbatim reproductions of preserved statements, poets

² Also mentioned in Sewell and Ali (cf. 1).

of the New Black Aesthetics use a collage of personal narratives to probe the hybrid structure of identity. Their collective incorporation of aesthetic strategies from the New Negro Movement, the Black Arts Movement, and the poetry wars enables a historical analysis of Black identity. At the same time, they express personal poetic motives while representing their racial minority.

The collective tone found its entry into central institutions of the New Black Aesthetics, like Cave Canem and the Dark Room Collective. These institutions and the history of their artistic background helped empower Black poetic expressions. Cave Canem, founded by Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady in 1996, address the cultural and aesthetic identity of Black Americans. It provides a professional space for Black poets to develop their craft under the guidance of established writers while also envisioning poetry as rooted in multiplicity of form and personal worldviews. This multiplicity makes each poet's perspective authentic to their social environment. As honorary director, Hayes acknowledges his close connection to Derricotte, who remains a key influence on his work. Beyond mentorship, Cave Canem also engages the public by reaching audiences and readers. In doing so, the institution promotes a democratization of the archive through poetry.

The Dark Room Collective establishes the foundation for the visibility of contemporary poets. In addition to nurturing new generations, it pays tribute to earlier renowned poets. Founded in 1987 by Thomas Ellis, Sharan Strange, and Janice Lowe, it predates Cave Canem by almost a decade. The institution provides a platform for Smith and fellow poets such as Natasha Trethewey and Kevin Young, all of whom commemorate aesthetic ancestors like James Baldwin (cf. "Dark Room Collective"). With its communal ethos, the collective creates mentoring spaces for poets while fostering reciprocal tribute. Trethewey, a Pulitzer Prize winner, former U.S. Poet Laureate, and prominent member of the collective, exemplifies this practice by honoring figures such as Rita Dove and Baldwin. Her tributes highlight the ongoing significance of U.S. history and the historical traumas that continue to shape Black American experience.

In light of what has been said, this dissertation defines the New Black Aesthetics through what I call a *poetics of recognition*. This concept serves as a key term to examine how leading representatives of the movement use recognition to respond to

African American history. Their approach highlights how poetry engages with history to address pressing sociopolitical issues tied to racial identity in contemporary Black poetry.

In existing scholarship, the term *poetics of recognition* often appears in political and social theory, such as Patchen Markell's *Bound by Recognition* (2003). Markell distinguishes between recognition and justice, arguing that the two are not synonymous. He emphasizes that injustice is deeply connected to the act of recognizing traits that determine identity. This dissertation aligns with Markell in rejecting a direct link between recognition and justice. Instead, the following chapters approach racial recognition as a tool to uncover the roots of contemporary racial disparities and to trace how these patterns have historically developed in connection to earlier forms of racism and oppression.

Recognizing the workings of racism in the U.S. and its historical background enables poets of the New Black Aesthetics to dismantle persistent social hierarchies by acting as cultural bridge builders and fostering a symbiotic process of social classes that rejects race as a social determiner. This dissertation is grounded in cultural materialism. As Greg A. Mullins argues in "Dionne Brand's Poetics of Recognition: Reframing Sexual Rights," recognition in literature, and especially poetry, is tied to cultural rather than purely political contexts. Political recognition, as this dissertation contends, emerges as a byproduct of recognizing social and racial conflict within the larger cultural picture the poet constructs of the U.S.

Scholarship on African American poetry and aesthetics has increasingly emphasized the interplay between form, identity, and cultural memory, providing a rich foundation for this dissertation's focus on the New Black Aesthetics and its formal experiments in the context of poetics of recognition. While Trey Ellis' foundational articulation of the New Black Aesthetics has shaped early discussions, later critics have expanded and deepened the concept by foregrounding its aesthetic, formal, and historical implications. In particular, Keith D. Leonard emphasizes the New Black Aesthetics' commitment to hybridity and historical reclamation, showing how Black poets use aesthetic innovation to resist limiting definitions of identity. Leonard's work situates the New Black Aesthetics as not merely a cultural or generational shift but as a sustained practice of formal experimentation that speaks to both historical absence and contemporary Black life. This reframing helps position New Black Aesthetic poetry as

part of a larger critical conversation about the politics of form and the multiplicity of Black artistic identity.

One important contribution to this discussion is Christopher Chen and Timothy Kreiner's article "The Politics of Form and Poetics of Identity in Postwar American Poetry," which I briefly mentioned above. It examines how poets in the postwar period turned to form as a site for negotiating personal and collective identities. Although their focus extends beyond African American poetry, their analysis provides a crucial framework for understanding how form operates politically. By arguing that poetic structures themselves can embody ideological positions, Chen and Kreiner illuminate why New Black Aesthetic poets' engagement with sonnets, erasure, or documentary poetry is not merely a formal experiment but a deeply political act. Their argument underscores this dissertation's claim that New Black Aesthetic poetry repurposes and reinvents form to challenge historical erasure and assert new models of Black identity.

The sonnet, in particular, has been a recurring site of critical inquiry within African American poetry. Scholars such as Hollis Robbins have traced the history of the Black sonnet tradition, demonstrating how poets from Claude McKay to Wanda Coleman and Terrance Hayes have appropriated the sonnet's Eurocentric origin to critique racial hierarchies and expand its expressive possibilities. In *Forms of Contention: Influence and the African American Sonnet Tradition* (2020), Robbins argues that the sonnet functions as both a constraint and an opportunity, allowing Black poets to both inhabit and subvert an inherited form. Hayes' *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* exemplifies this strategy, where the repetitive titles and improvisatory style break the sonnet's boundaries to reflect the fragmentation of contemporary Black experience. In the context of the New Black Aesthetics, the contemporary Black sonnet highlights the movement's broader mission: to use formal traditions not as limiting frameworks but as tools for asserting cultural critique, hybridity, and innovation.

Evie Shockley's *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (2011) further supports this dissertation by emphasizing how Black poets have persistently engaged in formal experimentation as a way of redefining aesthetic categories. Shockley challenges the notion that African American poetry must be read primarily through sociopolitical lenses, instead encouraging attention to its formal and aesthetic interventions. Her analysis of poets like Harryette Mullen and Nathaniel Mackey shows how formal innovation—through fragmentation,

hybridity, and linguistic experimentation—produces new ways of thinking about race, identity, and history. In the scholarly context of my dissertation, Shockley provides a crucial link between the historical roots of Black formal experimentation and the New Black Aesthetics’ ongoing commitment to merging art with cultural critique.

In *Soundworks: Race, Sound, and Poetry in Production* (2021), Anthony Reed’s offers another significant perspective by foregrounding the role of sound as both a formal and political dimension of Black poetry. Reed argues that sound itself functions as a mode of experimentation and challenges dominant literary forms while also enacting new ways of experiencing Black identity. His readings of contemporary poets demonstrate how sound destabilizes fixed categories of race and authorship, resonating with the New Black Aesthetics’ emphasis on hybridity and multiplicity. Considering sound as form expands this dissertation’s concern with visual and structural experimentation, underscoring the multimodal strategies through which New Black Aesthetic poets redefine the possibilities of poetry.

Mess and Mess and by Douglas Kearney (2015) pushes this discussion further by theorizing mess as both a method and an aesthetic. Kearney explores how Black poets embrace chaos, collage, and disruption to resist the containment of Black expression within legible frameworks. His own poetic practice—incorporating visual experimentation, typography, and performance—illustrates how form can embody the messiness of history and identity. For New Black Aesthetic poetry, Kearney’s concept of “mess” becomes a powerful tool: rather than “fixing” the fractures of Black experience, poets highlight fragmentation, erasure, and multiplicity as fundamental of cultural memory. This aligns directly with the New Black Aesthetics’ refusal of essentialism and its embrace of layered, hybrid aesthetics.

In addition to sonnets and visual play, forms such as erasure and documentary poetry have also received critical attention as modes of historical intervention. Poets like Phillip B. Williams and critics of M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* (2008) have shown how erasure and documentary techniques foreground the gaps, silences, and violences in the historical record, turning absence into presence. Within the framework of the New Black Aesthetics, these forms operate as tools of reclamation, allowing poets to directly confront histories of slavery, racial violence, and systemic erasure. By inscribing silenced voices back into poetic form, New Black Aesthetic poets expand the elegiac tradition into a collective act of remembrance and resistance.

Closely linked to these strategies are poetics of recognition, a concept Black poets use to write in the context of visibility, acknowledgement, and relational identity. Drawing on Paul Gilroy's theories of cultural recognition and Houston A. Baker's frameworks of Black modernity, scholars emphasize that recognition is not only about being seen by dominant culture but also about cultivating communal affirmation. In contemporary Black poetry, recognition often manifests through hybrid forms that acknowledge silenced histories and create spaces for collective witnessing. For example, Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) employs fragmented lyric and documentary prose to demand recognition of microaggressions and racial violence, at the same time engaging with invisibility and resisting it. Within the New Black Aesthetics, poetics of recognition underscore how formal innovation—whether through sonnets, erasure, documentation, or visual collages—operate not only as aesthetic practice but as a means of reconsidering Black identity within the broader American cultural and historical landscape.

Taken together, this body of scholarship situates New Black Aesthetic poetry within a series of African American formal innovation while also highlighting its distinct contributions to contemporary literature. By drawing on the sonnet tradition, experimenting with erasure and documentary techniques, and expanding into visual and sound spheres, New Black Aesthetic poets exemplify the aesthetic hybridity central to the movement. More importantly, the works of Shockley, Reed, Kearney, Robbins, and others demonstrate that form itself is never neutral but always entangled with histories of race, power, and identity. This dissertation builds on these insights to argue that New Black Aesthetic poetry transforms inherited and experimental forms into vehicles for cultural memory, political critique, and the redefinition of Black identity within American literature.

Methodologically, I analyze the four poetry volumes this dissertation focuses on in the framework of a New Formalist approach. Through a New Formalist lens, I will show how artists of the New Black Aesthetics reclaim poetry as a space of inclusivity and aesthetic innovation, highlighting historically marginalized voices. The four volumes challenge conventional historical record keeping in the form of archival curation. They further negotiate postcolonial narratives of slavery like the collection of emancipated Black voices by Elizabeth Regosin and Donald Shaffer. Hayes, Smith, Rankine, and Gorman articulate visions that are simultaneously rooted in a deep historical

consciousness and are radically innovative as they attempt to redefine cultural hybridity.

Critics like Rachel Blau DuPlessis provide a foundational approach to analyzing the social function of poetry. DuPlessis explains poetry's intersection with complementing political contexts. To clarify the political significance of poetry, Levine's "New Formalism" interrogates how form establishes order, both aesthetically and by mirroring political hierarchies that include race. Following their lead, this dissertation advances a new perspective on the politics of poetic form. How does New Black Aesthetic poetry employ lyrical form to comment on contemporary social, racial, and political issues? How do current Black poets design poetry through shape poetry to reflect on and critique oppressive social and political patterns?

Form, as this dissertation posits, directs the intentions of New Black Aesthetic poets. Dynamic intersections of forms characterize the poetry volumes of the New Black Aesthetics. In *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015), Levine implies a dynamic of form, claiming that forms travel through time and space (cf. 4-5). Black poets' spatiotemporal approach to social criticism applies a variety of poetic forms to comment on historical events that continue to impact Black lives. The poets' use of differing poetic forms mirrors selected facets of the U.S. interracial milieu. Their intersecting poetic forms advocate the overcoming of racial barriers. This dissertation seeks to reveal how poets merge temporal spheres when they incorporate former Black art movements into their present aesthetic. I demonstrate how they achieve a transcultural and interracial hybridity of poetic form.

Furthermore, I seek to problematize conventional notions of traditional poetic forms. I consider form as an organizing principle that is transposable and can be recontextualized depending on the historical context and the political needs of socially and racially suppressed groups (cf. Levine 7). As this dissertation will show, Black poets use the confluence of poetic form to operate on various historical and social levels. In doing so, they turn racial hierarchies into a formless phenomenon by merging poetic genres and race-specific aesthetic conventions to blur the color line.

Since these poets' innovative approach to making contemporary Black poetry accessible to all classes of readers, this dissertation foregrounds experimental poetry as a space that complements the social innovation of Black poetry with its formal and culturally critical innovations. Examining how experimental poetry disrupts the predominant U.S. cultural narratives, the four poets challenge established norms of the

poetic genre, its language, and how Black poetry obtains a mediating position. What is more, they refine racial representations and induce interracial work through the Black aesthetic. New Black Aesthetic poetry, specifically the poetry of Hayes, Smith, Rankine, and Gorman, offers an experimental space of engaging with, thinking about, and articulating race in the United States.

The four poets reimagine the possibilities of form. New Black Aesthetic poets use form to engage with the dimensions of racial, social, and political issues. Hayes, Smith, Rankine, and Gorman reconsider traditional poetic forms (i.e., the sonnet) by blending them with contemporary themes that dominate and severely impact the interracial climate of U.S. society, such as racial violence, environmental issues, racial self-perception, and health crises.

The racially suppressing social structure and racial historical content underscores the poets' New Formalist drive. They demonstrate a renewed interest specifically in the art of poetry, instead of other literary genres. It is the broad structural variety of poetry that allows poets to emphasize the deliberate interplay between structure and content to reflect upon societal structures and racial discrepancies. This dissertation places Hayes, Smith, Rankine, and Gorman in the context of New Formalism, showing that their poetic forms illustrate their present effort to articulate present racial, social, and political complexities.

Consequently, the democratic value of New Black Aesthetic poetry emerges as a recurring theme in this dissertation, with these poets striving to make contemporary Black poetry accessible, engage racially diverse audiences, and nurture collective reflection on race. Hayes' partially autobiographical engagement with racial violence, Smith's rewriting of African American history through aestheticizing the archive, Rankine's synchronous conversations with racially diverse voices, and Gorman's visual-poetic response to present hardships exemplify four distinct approaches to New Black Aesthetic poetry. These poets form the framework of this dissertation because they demonstrate both the experimental, multifaceted character of the movement and a shared commitment to unlocking poetry's egalitarian potential by foregrounding its racial diversity. Building on their work, this study investigates how New Black Aesthetic poetry functions as a democratic force that lowers the barrier of racial division by creating a space for marginalized voices and shared understanding across racial and social boundaries.

The dissertation's New Formalist lens examines how form and materiality intersect with poetry, society, race, and politics. By situating the works of Hayes, Smith, Rankine, and Gorman within historical dynamics and the legacy of earlier Black arts movements, it shows how they challenge dominant White ideologies. It further interrogates why they create a dialogue between content and form to embody critique and use poetic form as a vehicle to heighten readers' awareness of racial issues disrupting U.S. society. In this way, the dissertation aligns ideological (self-) recognition with visual recognition, an approach shared by the poets discussed in the following chapters.

As it has become clear so far, I will analyze the poets and their work through a New Formalist lens combined with postcolonial criticism. Drawing on Édouard Glissant and Aimé Césaire, I apply postcolonial assumptions to uncover and dismantle contemporary supremacist patterns. What becomes clear is that the poets' New Formalism also functions as a vehicle to imagine a new societal vision grounded in racial justice. My reading of the four poets interrogates the history of race dynamics specifically through form and visualization, addressing a gap in scholarship where discussions of racial issues and form in the context of the New Black Aesthetics have been largely neglected (e.g., Gabbert, Harrington, Schwartz and Cook). This dissertation foregrounds how poetic form serves as moderator and mediator between poet and reader. It examines how the New Black Aesthetics both acknowledge aesthetic conventions and articulate the aesthetic needs of contemporary society.

My argument advances a new perspective on how poets portray themselves through New Black Aesthetic art. They address social struggles in their poetry while positioning themselves as negotiators of these struggles, using poetry as their means of participation. I renegotiate the capacities of poetry so that they match the needs of the contemporary Black aesthetic community. This analysis answers how the lyrical bodies of free verse interact with and transform conventional poetry.

This dissertation applies an immersive close reading of Hayes, Smith, Rankine, and Gorman through the lenses of New Formalism, the social function of poetry, and Postcolonialism (cf. Levine, DuPlessis, Glissant, and Césaire). Hayes, as the first poet, employs the conventional sonnet as an act of resistance to social issues. Smith, Rankine, and Gorman demonstrate their claim of inclusivity through a clear visual departure from poetic conventions. As Levine proposes political struggles as a contest of belonging, this dissertation exemplifies her hypothesis by showing how poetic

diversity is incorporated into the American literary canon, a project also advanced by institutions of the New Black Aesthetics such as Cave Canem and the Dark Room Collective.

While Levine highlights the intersection of poetry and politics, DuPlessis emphasizes the synthesis of poetry and its sociocultural merit. In “Social Texts and Poetic Texts: Poetry and Cultural Studies” (2021), she defines poetry as a medium for making a statement, whether through reflection, manifestation, or developing consciousness (cf. DuPlessis 56). This dissertation begins where DuPlessis’ Marxist observation ends. The poets examined here have already reflected on U.S. sociopolitical conditions, past and present, developed the historical consciousness needed to rewrite Black American history, and acknowledged the manifestations of their aesthetic ancestors. Their poetry therefore skips the stage of gathering background knowledge and directly engages in its application and evaluation.

This dissertation focuses on what DuPlessis calls the *social life of a poem*, asking how New Black Aesthetic poetry addresses its readers, how it engages social issues, and how readers are expected to receive its critique. Like Levine, DuPlessis treats politics as central to poetry. While Levine links poetry to form, DuPlessis highlights the intersection of poetry and society, yet insists that the social is necessarily tied to the political. She thus frames poetry as a binary concept, which corresponds to this dissertation’s use of hybridity. For DuPlessis, politics links poetic form and the social (cf. DuPlessis 59). This dissertation responds by showing that the New Black Aesthetics also pursue cultural legibility of Black poetry, to borrow her term. Institutions such as Cave Canem and the Dark Room Collective reinforce this legibility by making Black poetry accessible and approachable.

To escape the constraints of convention, as Levine and DuPlessis suggest, this dissertation adopts an interdisciplinary approach that combines New Formalism with a critical postcolonial perspective on New Black Aesthetic poetry. While Levine focuses on form, a postcolonial lens contextualizes the history of social and racial oppression that informs the formal characteristics of the New Black Aesthetics. This approach extends the dialogue with DuPlessis by framing form as a mirror of society. Since inherited trauma—captivity, degradation, and physical and mental abuse—shapes the work of all poets examined in the following chapters, postcolonial theory provides a necessary foundation. It negotiates between poets, their place in Black

history, and their strategies for curating this history alongside the racial and social challenges their poetry confronts.

In applying a postcolonial approach, I especially respond to Édouard Glissant. His studies *Mémoires des Esclavages* (2007) and *Treatise on the Whole-World* (1988) provide a framework to challenge the persistence of colonial patterns in contemporary U.S. society. Alongside Aimé Césaire's emphasis on colonial remnants and the poetics of decolonization, they stage the critical lens for this dissertation. Glissant directs close readings of New Black Aesthetic poetry toward memory work: the preservation and rewriting of ancestral history, the resistance to erasure of cultural and racial legacies, and the formation of identities free of indoctrination.

Memory, as this dissertation argues, lies at the core of each poetry volume discussed in the following chapters and functions as a catalyst for Black poets to express and process history through poetry. Along with Ellis and DuPlessis, Glissant stresses the centrality of language. Serving as a key connector of *Mémoires* and *Treatise*, his focus on language aligns with this dissertation's reevaluation of cultural identification through the language of poetry. New Black Aesthetic poets employ poetry to celebrate American cultural diversity and to use poetic creativity as a tool of resistance against racial and social oppression.

Due to the complexity of my methodological approach, I now include a refined outline of how each chapter specifically approaches the connection of the New Black Aesthetics, New Formalism, and a postcolonial theoretical framework. In Chapter 1, my analysis of Terrance Hayes' *American Sonnets* demonstrates how New Black Aesthetic poets transform inherited structures into dynamic sites of struggle and survival. The sonnet, having emerged from European lyric tradition, becomes an endless and repetitive form in Hayes' work. He repeats the form seventy times, creating a sequence that refuses closure. Levine's theory of form clarifies this transformation: the sonnet is a rhythm traveling across centuries (see pp. 44-45). Yet, it collides with new contexts when Hayes fills it with the language of Black vulnerability and endurance. The repeated sonnet enacts a rhythm of survival—each poem self-contained but also part of a network of repetitions that collectively witness racial trauma. Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (1961) clarifies this insight. He describes the colonized writer's development from assimilation of colonial forms to their new purpose as means of liberation, a form of writing he terms "precombat literature" (see p. 50). Hayes exemplifies this. He inhabits the recognizable form of the sonnet while

filling it with African American vernacular, political critique, and prophetic warning. The recurring figure of the assassin represents White supremacy as both an imminent threat and a historical constant, aligning Hayes' poetics with Fanon's vision of literature that confronts and unsettles racial domination.

Moreover, Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity offers another theoretical layer for Hayes' poetry (see *The Location of Culture*, 1994). What Bhabha calls the "third space" emerges when colonial forms are appropriated and transformed, producing meanings that are neither fully colonial nor indigenous. Hayes' American sonnets occupy said space: he hybridizes the traditional form with jazz-like improvisation, pop culture, and African American vernacular (see p. 57). The form becomes unstable, refusing to completely align with its European origins and thereby unsettling hierarchies of literary value.

Literary value becomes even more evident in the context of DuPlessis' theory of a poem's social life, which stresses how Hayes' sonnets circulate as cultural artefacts: performed in public readings, reprinted, and used as educational material. Their repetition dramatizes not only the persistence of violence but also the endurance of form itself, proving the poem's ability to persist across time and communities (see p. 55). Hayes' work shows how the New Black Aesthetics mobilize the portability of form to create a poetic collection aligned with Fanon's combat literature, positioned within Bhabha's third space, and analyzed through Levine's New Formalist lens.

Chapter 2 demonstrates how Tracy K. Smith's *Wade in the Water* turns to historical fragments to comment on historical encounters with the submerged voices of America's racial past. Her use of erasure poetry illustrates Levine's sense of form as a rhythm and network. By deleting and preserving simultaneously, erasure enacts the rhythm of concealment and disclosure, dramatizing the silences enforced by slavery and war (see p. 89). Her poetry creates networks between archival texts and contemporary readers. These forms are socially significant, shaping how cultural memory is perceived and shared.

Here, Rinaldo Walcott's theorization of the Black aquatic emphasizes specifically the value of historical ancestry in Smith's work. For Walcott, water is both site of trauma—in light of the Middle Passage—and source of creativity, a space of fluidity, and a site of transformation. Smith's poetry inhabits this duality (see pp. 101-02). Her aquatic imagery connects historical suffering to ongoing cultural healing, evoking spiritual cleansing alongside loss. The formal strategies of erasure and collage

become aquatic themselves, moving between absence and presence, fragmentation and wholeness.

In this chapter, Bhabha's third space reappears. Smith's engagement with archives positions her between voices of masters and slaves, producing a hybrid authorship that resists a singular authority (see pp. 75-76). These erasures open a dialogic space where historical texts and contemporary interpretation coexist, embodying hybridity as a condition of memory.

DuPlessis supports the hypothesis that these poems circulate not only as literary artifacts but as cultural interventions. By recalling archival voices, Smith extends the social life of the poem into historical recovery and communal recognition (see p. 69, 71). Her work positions poetry as a vehicle for what Levine would call colliding forms: documentary records and lyric reflection, archive and invention (see pp. 89, 112). Within the New Black Aesthetics, Smith demonstrates how formal experimentation can embody Walcott's aquatic metaphor and Bhabha's hybridity, situating Black identity in a networked archive that spans across past and present.

In chapter 3, Claudia Rankine's *Just Us* represents the New Black Aesthetics' commitment to polygeneric experimentation. Combining lyrical fragments, essayistic prose, photographs, and transcripts, she refuses to limit herself to a single genre. Levine's account of colliding forms clarifies how this refusal itself is political (see p. 134, 141). By layering distinct structures, Rankine dramatizes the dichotomy and multiplicity of racial experience in contemporary America. The "whole" of her work is fractured, mirroring the fractured state of interracial dialogue.

Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950) offers an insightful framework for Rankine's project in light of the causes that create fractures. He argues that colonialism dehumanizes both the colonized and the colonizer, producing what he calls a "boomerang effect" in which the violence of domination corrupts European civilization (see p. 140). Rankine's *Just Us* extends this critique into the contemporary American context, exposing how White supremacy operates not only in obvious power structures but also in common exchanges of daily life. Her fragmented and polygeneric approach mirrors Césaire's rhetorical strategy. Rather than presenting a coherent narrative, she disrupts this coherence to reveal the fractures that racial domination produces in both society and individuals' subjectivity. By embedding these ruptures into form, Rankine transforms poetry into a decolonial practice, insisting that the psychic and social costs of racial oppression must be confronted directly. In this way,

her work brings Levine's concept of colliding forms into conversation with Césaire's call to disprove the concept of colonial humanism (see p. 137).

Roland Barthes' distinction between the Work and the Text provides another theoretical angle. *Just Us* resists the unity of the Work, functioning instead as a plural Text created from references, images, and intertextual allusions (see pp. 122-24). This textual plurality enacts what Césaire calls "poetic knowledge": a mode of knowing that promotes multiplicity.

Furthermore, DuPlessis and her concept of a poem's social life resonate again in this chapter, as Rankine's work is designed for circulation in public forums, ranging from classroom settings to social media platforms. Its hybridity invites readers to conversations that go beyond the physical page, aligning with the New Black Aesthetics' goal of merging aesthetic innovation with social engagement (see pp. 120, 124, 129). In *Just Us*, the collision of Levine's New Formalist approach with Césaire's decolonial poetics produces a literature of recognition and protest, insisting on the plural characteristics of both form and politics.

My fourth chapter focuses on Amanda Gorman's *Call Us*, which illustrates how the New Black Aesthetics project Black poetry into a global and future-oriented setting. Gorman bridges lyric tradition, visual experimentation, and performance, embodying Levine's sense of form as network and hierarchy. Her poems often juxtapose traditional stanzas with shaped texts and archival material, producing collisions that dramatize resilience during crises (see p. 172-74).

A theoretical approach through the lens of Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* provides an insightful framework for reading Gorman's poetry. For Glissant, identity is based on relations, produced through creolization and the traces of history (see pp. 178, 180-81, 196). Gorman enacts relational poetics by merging intergenerational memory with collective future visions. For instance, her shaped poems visually represent containers that embody Glissant's emphasis on trace. Memory is preserved not transparently but through suggestive, relational forms (see pp. 187-89).

Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* (1993) further contextualizes Gorman's future vision. By invoking diasporic history, Gorman situates American Black identity within transnational movements, affirming that national identity is inseparable from global Black experience (see pp. 175-80, 182). Her global perspective exemplifies DuPlessis' social life of a poem in the twenty-first century: poetry that is not limited to print but

remains present in performance, digital networks, and communal discourse (see pp. 191-92, 197).

In addition, Paul Jay's account of globalization as a cultural contamination deepens an understanding of how Gorman's poetics embrace contamination as creativity, presenting hybridity as the authentic basis of American identity (see pp. 202, 204). Levine's framework allows readers to see Gorman's forms as structures that travel across media and audiences, colliding to produce new arrangements of cultural memory. In this sense, Gorman merges New Formalism with Glissant's poetics of relation and Gilroy's diasporic history, offering a New Black Aesthetic poetics that celebrates hybridity as aesthetic method and political necessity.

As exemplified through Hayes, Smith, Rankine, and Gorman, the New Black Aesthetics demonstrate how form itself becomes a site of postcolonial struggle and cultural restructuring. Levine's New Formalism shows how sonnets, erasure, polygeneric texts, and visual poetry operate as dynamic structures that shape and reshape history. DuPlessis' approach to the social life of a poem recalls that these works circulate as cultural artefacts, embedded in communities, performances, and networks. Fanon, Walcott, Césaire, and Glissant each illuminate how these forms engage with histories of colonization and racial oppression while imagining alternative future visions. Reading the poets in the context of this theoretical framework shows that the New Black Aesthetics are not only an aesthetic movement but also a postcolonial project: the transformation of form into a weapon of memory, recognition, and renewal for Black identity in America.

The New Black Aesthetics foreground poetic form as historically, racially, and politically significant, and this dissertation explores four modes of form across four chapters. Chapter 1, "The Sonnet," examines the racial ambiguity of the African American sonnet, given that Hayes appropriates a stereotypically White poetic form to break conventions and create a distinctly Black sonnet. His instinctive portrayals of racial violence resonate with Césaire's critique of colonial remnants in interracial behavior. This chapter recontextualizes the sonnet in African American history not as a relic of the past but as a paradigm of continuity. In *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*, Hayes shows the sonnet's relevance for contemporary Black poets, demonstrating how the New Black Aesthetics emerge from earlier arts movements such as the New Negro Movement and the Black Arts Movement, while

also responding to the radical political climate of the Trump administration. Thus, Hayes simultaneously rejects and embodies a poetic legacy, positioning himself as a representative of Black cultural nationalism.

This chapter explores how Hayes merges an established form with experimentalism to mirror the social and political atmosphere of the New Black Aesthetics. By intersecting Hayes' experimental poetry, the poetic self-awareness of the 1920s, and the Black radical attitude of the 1960s, it offers a critical close reading of his innovation. Building on earlier aesthetic foundations, the analysis adds a new perspective to the debate on how poets of the New Black Aesthetics merge Black and White forms to bridge interracial gaps. Situating the discussion within Timo Müller's *The African American Sonnet: A Literary History*, the chapter shows how the New Black Aesthetic sonnet employs protest, praise, and love as thematic strategies to comment on the racial, social, and political climate fostered by the Trump administration.

Chapter 2, "Erasure," examines contradictions in Smith's framework of curating historical records. While White institutions erased Black history, Smith employs erasure poetry to counteract this process. Her method aligns with Glissant's call for memory preservation and memory processing as tools to overcome trauma. By engaging archival materials in her poems, Smith positions herself as an archivist determined to curate a rectified version of African American history. Whereas Chapter 1 highlights how contemporary poets voice social criticism through form and experimentalism, Chapter 2 emphasizes their role as curators who rehumanize Black people. In *Wade in the Water*, Smith uses erasure and found poetry to give obliterated Black voices a place in both contemporary history and poetry. This chapter argues that erasure poetry projects the historical complexity of Black identity. Using a historical lens rooted in voices of the Civil War, it examines how New Black Aesthetic poets' identification is shaped by archival voices that foreground the depth of Black cultural memory.

Through a critical close reading of Smith and Rinaldo Walcott's concept of the Black aquatic, this chapter shows how poets use erasure poetry to create dialogues across historical eras. By centering archival materials in Smith's work, the discussion repositions New Black Aesthetic poets as living embodiments of Black ancestral memory. This chapter underscores how historical awareness becomes essential to bridging interracial gaps in contemporary U.S. society. It highlights how poetic form

functions as a sociopolitical mirror, reflecting past interracial conflicts and exposing their continuity in today's racial discrepancies.

Chapter 3, "Documentation," examines interracial perception through Rankine, who composes a collage of mainstream American society. Her multimedia approach corresponds with Levine's political reading of form and with DuPlessis' view of poetry's social function. Rankine's work also aligns with this dissertation's argument that New Black Aesthetic poets act as intercultural mediators, as Césaire suggests, while celebrating cultural diversity, as Glissant proposes. To expand on the dialogic function of New Black Aesthetic poetry, this chapter analyzes Rankine's use of documentary poetry in *Just Us: An American Conversation*. It shows how Rankine employs a multimedia structure to represent the racial multiplicity of the United States and grant each race an appropriate place in her art. While Smith and Hayes focus on the historical impact of race issues, this chapter argues that the New Black Aesthetics also foreground current forms of racism to expose how constructions of Whiteness perpetuate racial imbalance and shape social practices in contemporary America.

Close reading Rankine's poetic collage, this chapter employs the concept of *poetry of social engagement* as a complement to DuPlessis' view of poetry as a path to social inclusivity. Through a postcolonial lens, it examines the social code Rankine seeks to expose to explain America's persistence in practicing racial violence, which Césaire identifies as a normative trait of former colonies like the U.S. Drawing on multiple individual perspectives on the contemporary racial climate, Rankine employs this code to bridge interracial disparities. This chapter therefore adds a perspective on Black poetry as an interracially mediating and polyvocal aesthetic practice, aligning with Levine's claim that form adapts to the political needs of suppressed groups and affirming Rankine's method.

Chapter 4, "Visuality," returns to the function of the curator but emphasizes the intertextual impact of Gorman's poetry. Focusing on forms of confinement in both content and form, she engages in memory work as Glissant suggests and preserves history by incorporating archival materials like Smith. This dissertation positions her as a connector of the previous three chapters and, as the youngest of the four poets, as the future face of the New Black Aesthetics. The chapter continues the theme of adaptability by interrogating the role of the visual poet in this movement. It demonstrates how Gorman employs shape poetry to convey critical content through formal appearance. By applying form and visuality to comment on race, Gorman

shows how visibility fosters recognition and identification for the reader. In terms of recognition, this chapter underscores how she uses archival materials to resurface Black history and strengthen cultural memory. It argues that she reflects on past occurrences as a comparative strategy to confront contemporary racial and political issues.

Using a postcolonial lens, this chapter examines New Black Aesthetic visual poetry in dialogue with Glissant, whose insights on memory work highlight Gorman's role in introducing a new generation of Black poets. She uses poetry to form racial identities free from supremacist indoctrination. This chapter thus contributes to the discourse on Black artists who employ poetry to reconstruct erased African American memory, establish a dialogue between past and present U.S. societies, and promote interracial progress. It argues that Gorman redefines Americanness through national and social identification rather than racial identity, counteracting the ideological remnants of postcolonialism that continue to confine Black people.

Each chapter assumes the newness of the contemporary Black aesthetic in its mission to re-envision American race history. The experimental character of the poets' lyrics allows them to assign a mediating function to their work and use poetry as an interracial bridge builder. Contemplating moments of cultural, historical, societal, and political recognition in their poetry helps Hayes, Smith, Rankine, and Gorman unhinge poetic conventions and retell Black history. Overall, this dissertation proposes three key assumptions: First, the New Black Aesthetics encourage a multiracial, cross-temporal dialogue to negotiate race issues in contemporary America. Second, poets of the New Black Aesthetics redefine poetic form through a New Formalist approach to use form as a mediator between lyrical content and its addressee and mirror the societal and racial milieu the poets address. Third, New Black Aesthetic poets weaponize poetry to claim power over aesthetic self-determination, access to their cultural heritage, and acknowledgement as Black writers to escape the ideological confinement of racial marginalization. In light of the history of racial discrepancies, New Black Aesthetic poets pursue a strongly progressivist drive, especially regarding their interplay of content and form, to confront and unhinge historically established traditions of racial oppression, marginalization, and violence.

Chapter 1

The Sonnet

Terrance Hayes wrote his sonnet sequence *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* (2018) in the wake of political turmoil caused by the newly elected Trump administration. The volume critically discusses the present racial tensions in U.S. society demonstrating that Black poets' struggles with racial identity are rooted in the New Negro Movement and the Black Arts Movement. Poets repulsed traditional poetic forms, such as the sonnet, as it was "too White" to produce a self-defined Black aesthetic free of White influence. As a result, Hayes portrays the contemporary African American sonnet as crucial for the innovative character of the current New Black Aesthetics. His poetic works rely on a transhistoricist perspective and demonstrate the interconnectedness of Black poets through artistic institutions. Their mutual intention is to establish a strong African American aesthetic through a rich historical legacy.

Considering the significance of the contemporary poet through a postcolonial lens, Hayes inquires how the African American sonnet proves relevant as a crucial tool for enforcing political change and places the New Black Aesthetics "in the context of history" (Fanon 147). The African American sonnet manifests contemporary sonneteers' legacy in their role "as an apprentice to history, the history of poetry, of Black folk" (Hayes and Rowell 1081). In this context, the sonnet serves as a historical artifact capturing the sociopolitical struggles of Black Americans by demonizing a man-slaying political apparatus through the motif of the assassin. To contextualize *American Sonnets*, the author determines why his sonnet sequence and he himself are apprentices to history despite his claim that he does not pursue a historical or cultural legacy (see *ibid.*).

Hayes takes on a representative role for the legacy of Black cultural nationalism. Calling himself an apprentice to history, Hayes outlines how *American Sonnets* serves as a mirror of creative movements of the Black aesthetic, such as the New Negro Movement and the Black Arts Movement. He presents the Black aesthetic as an archive of African American history with Black poetry as the historical artifacts. In doing so, Hayes refers to Langston Hughes as an iconic figure of the New Negro Movement to elaborate on past aesthetic appearances, on which the innovative character of New Black Aesthetic poetry is based. Regarding Hughes' essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), Hayes illuminates why merging Black

and White literary techniques is essential for the innovative character of the New Black Aesthetics. In this context, Timo Müller's study *The African American Sonnet: A Literary History* portrays the New Negro sonnet of the 1920s as a promoter of Black adherence to form along with his insight into the growing popularity of experimental poetry among the poets of the 1960s' Black Arts. Accordingly, *American Sonnets* does invoke racial harmony in a social environment through merging the Black aesthetic and White lyrical features, despite numerous reports on acts of violence against Black Americans. Hayes' sequence of sonnets elaborates on the Black poet's internal struggle of incorporating White patterns into a work of Black poetry to create a new Black art. Creating something new by merging oppositional forces provides Hayes a space to inquire how contemporary Black poetry is defined. Through this action, he simultaneously charges this new space. He contrasts confining White patterns regarding the original sonnet form with the New Black Aesthetic sonnet's simultaneous urge to break out of its predefined structure in terms of form, meter, and rhyme scheme.

Hayes specifically relies on Walt Whitman's use of free verse (cf. Whitman, *Leaves* 2007) to determine how the contemporary Black sonnet is presented as a product of the American literary past. Whitman's poetry allows Hayes to circumvent socio-aesthetic boundaries and frees the African American sonnet from conventional patterns. Hayes re-envision the form of the sonnet to break out of its "superficial trappings," as Levine describes his New Formalist approach (2). Thereby, the sonnet enables the Black poet to renounce the social status of racially or politically predetermined characteristics of literary art. In fact, a Whitmanian reading of the *American Sonnets* sequence equips Hayes' persona and his lyrical speaker with an emancipatory voice as an opposing force to the contemporary political cacophony.

Utopian thoughts about an American society that allow or at least work on facilitating interracial harmony further characterize *American Sonnets*. The embedded political statements show why Hayes' sonnet sequence is, in fact, a collection of political poetry. Using poetry as a means to engage in a political dialogue, Hayes echoes Wanda Coleman's poetry, whose "sonnets engage with the social issues and conditions concurrent to their writing in order both to advance a more progressive social politics and to outline a next stage in modern American poetics" (Ryan 417). Inspired by her sonnet collection *American Sonnets*, Hayes too creates an intergenerational dialogue with "[i]ts attention to past and present poetic voices . . . : a

sequence that infuses the history of the sonnet form with radical notions of art's responsibility for political engagement" (416). *American Sonnets* addresses both Black people as well as the individual poet. As a result, it exemplifies the extent to which the individual poet must thrive to have an impact on improving the social status and literary tolerance of the New Black Aesthetic poet.

Hayes indirectly refers to contemporary Black poetry institutions such as Cave Canem and the Dark Room Collective. Thereby, he focuses on the form of the New Black Aesthetic sonnet to represent the multiracial character of American society. He focuses on the crucial relevance of single human and poetic entities as representatives of their respective racial groups, exemplifying how the verbal force of the individual strengthens the entire community and the solidary visions the New Black Aesthetics have of the social environment of the U.S. From a historical point of view, Hayes' *American Sonnets* appears as a commemoration of the 1920s' Black aesthetic, considering that he publishes a sonnet sequence in 2018, a century after the emergence of the New Negro Movement. Thus, Hayes asks which legacy contemporary African American sonneteers should pursue in the twenty-first century. He calls himself "an apprentice to history" (Hayes and Rowell 1081), since he strongly bases his artistic development on an older generation of African American poets like Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Rita Dove.

Despite his refusal to create poetry due to a legacy, however, Hayes serves as a descendant of the aesthetic movements that dominated the previous century, such as the New Negro Movement of the 1920s and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. As a Black poet, Hayes demonstrates that he weaves the twentieth century into *American Sonnets* by addressing in his persona poems multiple key figures of Black poetry and politics: Among them are James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Jimi Hendrix, Hughes, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and W. E. B. Du Bois.

Reviving the African American sonnet of the 1920s, Hayes claims to "walk in the footsteps of public . . . history" (ibid.). He combines style and form with experimental writing and the practice of free verse that emerged in the wake of the Black Arts Movement. Moreover, the African American sonnet gained new popularity during the 1990s and at the turn of the millennium³. According to Timo Müller, the

³ In the 1990s, Black cultural nationalists sought to revive the radical ideological thought of the 1960s Black Power Movement, particularly as a counterforce to emerging Black conservative groups. Within this context, the Blackwashing of the sonnet functions as a strategy to assert Black poets' artistic freedom by transforming the form into a shared aesthetic and interracial space. These nationalist groups explicitly opposed White materialism as a symbol of success in a culture structured by racism and

sonnet as well as the sonnet *sequence* experienced their revival due to “[their] suitability for negotiating and revising the legacy of black cultural nationalism” (111). As an apprentice to history, Hayes *means* to fulfill a legacy: the legacy to rejuvenate and promote the aesthetic inheritance of his Black poetic ancestors.

Considering his legacy, Hayes specifically emphasizes Hughes to be an icon of innovation, upon which the Black aesthetic of the twenty-first century rests. According to Müller, “sonnets . . . in the 1920s and 1930s . . . revolve around the conventional themes of love, nature, [and] self-awareness” (49). As Hayes similarly states about *American Sonnets*, “[i]t’s a book of love poems for foes. It’s a book exploring a poetics (a practice) of kinds and kindness: kinds of sonnet, kinds of American, kinds of feelings, kinds of assassins” (“Poetics” 332). As a result, Hayes’ sequence of sonnets on this murdering and stifling force that works inside American history shapes the multiple faces of the White assassin in his poems. In this sense, the sonnet sequence builds a collage that hints at the multiplicity of characters, characteristics, as well as racial perspectives the American assassin embodies, and mirrors Müller’s expansive list of themes African American sonnets tend to cover.

Likewise, Hughes’ groundbreaking essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”⁴ as an address of self-love and self-awareness asks the Black poet to neglect White ideological ideals (of art) and instead embrace an African heritage. Regarding the ideological consciousness of the New Negro Movement, Hayes may be accused of betraying the Black aesthetic by exclusively focusing on the sonnet, a White and European lyrical form. Hughes promotes the coexistence, if not intersection of Black and White art forms as a way to overcome the racial mountain. Hughes claims that

for the American Negro artist who can escape the restrictions . . . his own group would put upon him, a great field of unused material [awaits,] ready for his art. Without going outside his race, and even among the better classes with their “white” culture and conscious American manners, but still *Negro enough to be different*, there is sufficient matter to furnish a black artist with a lifetime of creative work. And when *he chooses to touch on the relations between Negroes and whites* in this country . . . there is an inexhaustible supply of themes at hand. To these the Negro artist can give his racial individuality . . . and *his incongruous humor that . . . becomes ironic laughter mixed with*

marked by practices that continue to subjugate Black people, whether tacitly tolerated or legally sanctioned.

⁴ In his 1960 speech “Keep Moving from This Mountain” delivered at Spelman College, Martin Luther King, Jr. critiques American society through the metaphor of mountains that obstruct progress. He identifies four such symbolic mountains—ethical relativism, practical materialism, racial segregation, and violence—warning that they must be removed “if we are to go forward in our world and if civilization is to survive” (King, “Keep Moving”).

tears. (306-07; my emphasis)

Hughes doubts the effect of racial passing on the Black psyche. He ponders whether the public sees through his veil at some point. What is more, Hughes is afraid of himself for possibly losing his true racial identity once he merges into the White sphere.

Similarly, Hayes pursues this practice in *American Sonnets*, for which Hughes advocated a century ago. The sonnet “But there never was a black male hysteria” (41)⁵, the lyrical speaker directly addresses a White assassin, who threatens racially mixed people such as Hughes if they dare criticize their tormentor. When the lyrical speaker narrates that “The man was high yellow / In public, afraid of himself” (ll. 8-9), the environment is perceived as toxic, “Like a breath that comes so quickly you know / You’re breathing ether” (ll. 11-12). As a result, the consciousness of the afflicted becomes severely impaired, which is similar to the narcotic effect of ether. It explains why this sonnet reflects on Hughes’ critique of the Black artist, who used to cling intensely to White ideals and expect social appreciation. Racial appreciation among Whites, though, remains problematic, as Hughes’ essay implies, since his physical appearance would still be Black. Hayes adopts Hughes’ advice to stay true to his own race and, ultimately, himself. As Hayes demonstrates throughout his work, *American Sonnets* attempts to settle the racial struggle by introducing formerly White art forms to the New Black Aesthetics. Hayes’ poetry opens a dialogue between Black and White aesthetic traditions.

Based on Hughes’ poetic ideology, Hayes intends to prevent what Natasha Trethewey calls *historical erasure* (Hall xii)⁶. She criticizes a practice which Hayes seeks to counteract with *American Sonnets* as well. Trethewey specifically stresses the impact of Black aesthetic institutions. Led by its iconic founder Amiri Baraka, the Black Arts Repertory Theater and School (BARTS) emerged as a catalyzing force at the beginning of the Black Arts Movement, which coined the Black aesthetic activism of the 1960s and 1970s. The contemporary young Black artists’ agenda was to oppose racial alienation by creating a revolutionary Black art form. As a result, they

⁵ The sequence of sonnets is divided into five sections, each composed of fourteen poems that mirror the sonnet’s traditional structure of fourteen lines. As a whole, the volume operates as a highly self-reflexive and metapoetic experiment, testing the sonnet’s dual function as both a space for public dialogue and a mode of personal confession.

⁶ With the term *historical erasure*, Trethewey challenges efforts to erase the significance of Black people in American history. On a literary level, she employs repetition to recall and emphasize moments when African Americans played a major role. Her poetry resists the silencing of Black contributions by dedicating itself to “reinscrib[ing] what had been erased” (Hall xii).

strategically claimed their place in history by “demand[ing] an art of struggle, an art that related to the *reality* of our history” (Baraka 13; my emphasis). Trethewey joins this dialogue when she defines historical erasure as “things that get left out of the record and are equally important in the history of us as Americans” (Anderson 89).

Consequently, contemporary artists express a new self-consciousness⁷. As a representative of the contemporary New Black Aesthetics, Hayes adopts the spirit of BARTS through the omnipresent theme of confinement in *American Sonnets*. Like BARTS as the aesthetic flagship of the Black Arts Movement, the New Black Aesthetics owe their success to promoting numerous young Black poets, such as Trethewey, Tracy K. Smith, and Kevin Young. Alongside BARTS, two major Black poetry institutions nurture contemporary Black poetry: the Dark Room Collective and Cave Canem. As a representative of the Dark Room Collective, Trethewey fulfills “her determination to recover forgotten histories” (Hall xii), a mission Hayes pursues as well. Trethewey’s approach to history primarily focuses on her *personal* history on having lost her mother, while Hayes, in contrast, combines the personal histories of Black people with his personal history to recover and honor the *communal* African American history.

The Dark Room Collective focuses on the personal growth of their poets. Cave Canem is additionally concerned with the value of Black poems. Led by Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady, Cave Canem argues that “poets of color find productive space for writing without fear of censure or the need to defend subject matter or language” (“Mission”). Like Derricotte’s poetry, *American Sonnets* presents an autobiographical insight into its author’s identity formation, which he blends with the voice of an observant journalist reporting on momentous historical events in African American history.

Based on a poetic language, which is “honest, fine-honed, deceptively simple . . . [and] deadly accurate” like Derricotte’s (“Toi Derricotte”), Hayes plays with the technique of time travel to honor the victims of America’s racial history, ranging from Abraham Lincoln and Emmett Till to Trayvon Martin. Thereby, Hayes primarily recovers the violent underbelly of American history. In the sonnet “I only intend to send word to my future” (79), the lyrical speaker claims that “. . . Time / Travel is essentially the aim of any religion” (ll. 2-3). Applied to poetry institutions of the New

⁷ Gaining consciousness of one’s personal racial history by confronting erasure through poetry is a strategy Hayes shares with Tracy K. Smith. As discussed in chapter 2, “Erasure,” Smith’s erasure poetry serves as an archive of Black history, preserving what dominant narratives have attempted to silence.

Black Aesthetics, Hayes understands religion as synonymous with the institutions' agendas. Typically, these institutions reflect on past Black art and ponder about their future perspectives or the legacy they intend to establish. Traveling back and forth in time, they reconsider past aesthetic practices and situate them in a political context. Through their poetic work, the communal mission of these institutions opposes the ideological forces of White supremacy.

Hayes applies the conceptual ambiguity of the assassin as a leitmotif in *American Sonnets*, an allegory which he perceives as a curse for Black people. Generally, he understands the White assassin in a conventional or, rather, stereotypical way. Commonly known as a sect of murderers, who kill political opponents to gain a political position of power themselves, the White assassins Hayes portrays fulfill this stereotypical understanding of a murder cult. To emphasize the devastating impact of the White assassin on Black people, Hayes applies what Müller calls the *protest sonnet*. This lyrical construct is "characterized by a tension between individual and collective assertion" (40) and embodies a key characteristic of the sonnet sequence. The sonnet "Why are you bugging me you stank minuscule husk" (8) indirectly introduces this historical dialogue between social and political struggles of African Americans. As a central piece of *American Sonnets* in terms of an exemplary portrayal of the protest sonnet, it merges with a strong peevish and sarcastic undertone.

Each of the succeeding sonnets, however, focuses on a specific historical occurrence, Black murder victim, or a personal struggle of the lyrical speaker, but repeatedly refers to the contextual prelude of the sonnet "Why are you bugging me you stank minuscule husk" (8). This sophisticated, strategic construction of his poetic sequence again shows that Hayes' *American Sonnets* mirrors Fanon. Both focus on (formerly) colonized artists' "obsession with identifying the exact historical moment of the struggle, with defining the place of action and the ideas around which the will of the people will crystallize" (Fanon 163). In this respect, the allegorical function of the assassin is considered in the context of African American history, especially regarding the issue of protest.

The sonnet portrays an animalistic, overpowering force haunting African Americans, which introduces the assassin as a White villain, who murders innocent Black people. The introductory lines of the sonnet "Why are you bugging me you stank minuscule husk" (8) summarize centuries of suffering from White supremacists. The lyrical speaker inquires, "Why are you bugging me you stank minuscule husk / Of

musk” (ll. 1-2). It is typical of the lyrical speaker in African American protest sonnets of the 1920s to be torn between the poet’s individual point of view and his missionary, representative function for the Black community (see Müller 40). Accordingly, Hayes adopts this poetic duality of personal anger combined with the intergenerational outrage of African Americans to critique the devastating effects of racially motivated occurrences.

The theme that dominates the poem is an animalistic portrayal of the White assassin. Instead of using the common poetic term *personification*, Hayes chooses *animalization* as a rhetorical device. As a result, the sonnet strategically turns the assassin into a disgusting insect as multiple references to bugs and insects demonstrate and degrades the White supremacist to a disgraced, unwanted wild beast. Asking “Why are you *bugging* me you stank minuscule husk / Of musk” (8, ll. 1-2; my emphasis), the lyrical speaker additionally overshadows the initial lines with the dark side of history, since the term *bug* hints at the biological, moral, and political challenges Black people have been facing under White supremacist leadership. In this respect, the speaker of the African American sonnet intersects personal and Black people’s concerns. Poetry draws attention to a struggle which Hayes exemplarily represents with *American Sonnets* as both an internal and an external one (see Hayes and Rowell 1079).

To elaborate on the biological function of the bug, the lyrical speaker envisions an encounter of predator and prey. The biological meaning of the bug alludes to common insect species that typically feast on carcasses to provide their bodies with the necessary strength and uphold their rank in the natural order. When Hayes degrades the White assassin to a hunting insect, he simultaneously points at the heightened senses of Black Americans suffering from White supremacy. The initial lines of the sonnet “Why are you *bugging* me you stank minuscule husk” (8) describe the encounter of a Black lyrical speaker with a white bug. However, the focus on the animalistic senses of smell and touch are prominent. Instead of merely insulting the assailant as a bug, the lyrical speaker is intent on belittling them. The first word of the sonnet, “Why,” is loaded with grief, suffering, and determination, all of which have been fostered involuntarily by Black people due to their centuries-long suffering from the yoke of the White man.

Like prey, which seeks refuge as soon as it scents a predator in a typical natural environment, the lyrical speaker is constantly as alert of racist motions as the prey is

of natural predators. The lyrical speaker verbally belittles predating White racists by calling them a “stank minuscule husk / Of musk” (8, ll. 1-2). Like the secretion of the musk, which is often used as an apparently aphrodisiac ingredient in beauty products, the lyrical speaker associates the same fragrance with White predators and emphasizes their animalistic behavior as predators hunting for influence and power over Black people. Despite the predator’s hunting instinct, the lyrical speaker equally hints at its intelligent strategy in approaching prey. Instead of randomly attacking Black subjects, the White assassin proceeds with “deliberation” (l. 2) when cornering a victim. Criticizing the devastating impact of the White assassin on U.S. society, Hayes demonstrates that Black poets do not function as politicians although they are politically involved. Rather, he places them next to the politician “in the context of history” (147). While politicians are involved in the present, the Black poet analyzes their impact in a historical context, in which the past interacts with the present.

Next to the biological significance of the bug in Hayes’ poetry, the lyrical speaker focuses on the bug’s moral relevance. First portraying Black people’s centuries-long suffering under the White yoke, the poem also considers the possibility of failing to perform an effective counterstrike against the predatory behavior of the White assassin. The lyrical speaker ponders

Should I fail in my insecticide, I pray for a black boy
Who lifts you to a flame with bedeviled tweezers
Until mercy rises & disappears. (8, ll. 4-6)

These lines allude to Black people’s transformative development from an introverted position to an extroverted public appearance of Black radicals, whom the Black poet represents. Offering two basic readings, these lines first focus on the White assassin’s devastation of random Black families.

As *American Sonnets* noticeably refers to the assassination of innocent, unarmed Black children at the hands of White murderers, the murder case of Emmett Till portrays the beginning of a series of shocking Black child slaughters that continues to the present day. Till is the first victim of racist encounters *American Sonnets* most strongly alludes to. The sonnet “But there never was a black male hysteria” (7) begins with the claim that “there never was a black male hysteria / Because a fret of white men drove you crazy / Or a clutch of goons drove you through Money” (ll. 1-3). The sonnet “Why are you bugging me you stank minuscule husk” (8) responds to these lines as it mourns and “pray[s] for a black boy” known as Emmett Till, who was abducted and brutally lynched by men—which Hayes portrays as “animalistic

predators”—in *Money, Mississippi* in 1955 (l. 4). With Till’s iconic portrayal of Black suffering, Hayes appropriates the boy as a grammatical noun. Describing a scene in the sonnet “Drive like fifteen miles along a national parkway” (49), in which “a *till* of bodies bobbed at the piers” (l. 8; my emphasis), Hayes recalls the numerous enslaved African victims who died during their crossing of the Middle Passage in the era of the transatlantic slave trade.

Consequently, the lyrical speaker intensifies the mental pressure contemporary descendants of African slaves still experience in the form of generational trauma. The sonnet “Later the white boy we once beat like a drum” (74) states that “I would not have liked / To attend a middle school named after Emmett Till / Or for that matter, any murdered black person” (ll. 7-9). The lyrical speaker perceives commemorative institutions as a mental burden rather than an honorary tribute to the fallen, considering that the Black “poet must . . . understand that nothing can replace the rational and irreversible commitment on the side of the people in arms” (Fanon 162). In his role as the poet, Hayes frequently merges with the lyrical speaker of his sonnets. Thus, he himself functions as an exemplary Black artist narrating his personal history to create a representative picture of Black Americans. *American Sonnets* is an interlocking textual fabric of single sonnets that taken together build a collage of Black suffering throughout American history. Together, Hayes’ sonnets focus on a specific point of critique (i.e., institutionalized racism) but share a mutual message at their core (i.e., the communal power of Black poetry).

Ultimately, Hayes’ poetry presents him as an innovator of poetic form and language using a fierce vocabulary to disclose the guilt-ridden conscience of the White assassin’s mind. Hayes also uses an “analytical and descriptive” point of view (ibid.) to recollect African American history and trace the causes why racial struggles in the contemporary U.S. remain as present in daily life as they used to in the past. Hayes confronts his reader by invoking an exclusively violent history. When his lyrical speaker first prays for the soul of a Black child, the poem conveys a desperate hope for an insufferably violent act of revenge: “a black boy / Who lifts you to a flame with bedeviled tweezers / Until mercy rises & disappears” (8, ll. 4–6). Neglecting the illegality of such vengeance, the lyrical speaker refuses “divine justification to attack injustice: his standard is the well-being of his people. He no longer cares for the oppressors’ point of view but focuses on expressing his own” (Müller 46).

This uncompromising perspective extends to the cover design of *American Sonnets*⁸. Designer Lynn Buckley foreshadows the violence of the sonnet “Why are you bugging me you stank minuscule husk” (8) by depicting insects as vermin, a metaphor for the White oppressor. The design turns on the duality of sight: seeing the obvious while uncovering the hidden. At first glance, the cover resembles the U.S. flag. The blurry blue background stands in for the flag’s field, while the white typography of Hayes’ name and title echoes its stripes. This vision critiques the prevailing dominance of White writings or, more specifically, of the laws and politics written by Whites to legally subdue Black Americans. The illusion of the flag is further disrupted by two red stars, anomalies that symbolize what lies hidden. Once pure, these stars are now stained with the blood of those who fell victim to White supremacist ideology.

The supposed blurriness of the blue field reveals the design’s actual message. What emerges is the figure of a grasshopper, an insect haunting the nation by consuming its life-sustaining resources. Yusef Komunyakaa insists that recognizing the behavior of insects parallels that of humans: it “[is] a way of seeing” (Derricotte and Komunyakaa 515; my emphasis). Within this framework, the grasshopper stands in for the White assassins, whose greed for power extinguishes the possibility of peaceful coexistence. Buckley even highlights the pincers of the greedy grasshopper’s predatory jaw, which resonate with the Black boy’s “bedeviled tweezers”⁹ (8, l. 5). In unison, poem and cover image transform the White oppressor into predator and pest alike, exposing his hunger for domination as the infestation at the core of American history.

Hayes introduces the figure of the Black avenger as a retributive counterforce to the White supremacist. The stance echoes Malcolm X’s claim that Black people can no longer afford mercy toward a society that knowingly sustains their oppression¹⁰. Hayes channels this ethos through a lyrical speaker filled with rage. The diction is

⁸ The cover version of *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* I analyze is taken from the 2018 Penguin Random House UK edition. Also see www.penguin.co.uk/books/310041/american-sonnets-for-my-past-and-future-assassin-by-hayes-terrance/9780141989112.

⁹ The scene Hayes’ lyrical speaker describes alludes to Jonathan Edwards’ sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Edwards describes God as holding sinners “over the Pit of Hell, much as one holds a Spider, or some loathsome Insect, over the Fire” (214).

¹⁰ In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Malcolm characterizes American society as an apparatus that reduces Black people to numbers rather than considering them human beings. He explains that society views them as “a statistic that didn’t have to be, that existed because of a society’s failure, hypocrisy, greed, and lack of mercy and compassion. Hence I have no mercy or compassion in me for a society that will crush people, and then penalize them for not being able to stand up under the weight” (22; my emphasis).

harsh, filled with accusation, and driven by retributive longing. The lyrical speaker complains: “You are the size / Of a stuttering drop of liquid – milk, machine oil / Semen, blood” (8, ll. 6–8). Here the “bug” acquires a third meaning. It is no longer only an insect but also a political bug—a wiretap—that recalls COINTELPRO’s systematic surveillance of Civil Rights and Black Arts activists in the 1960s and 1970s, especially members of the Black Panther Party¹¹.

The lyrical speaker counters the Panthers’ forced dispersal by evoking the growing strength of Black poets. Diminishing the assassin to the size of an evaporating drop both ridicules White power and elevates communal Black resilience. Each liquid carries symbolic weight: milk as nurture, semen as creation, blood as birth. Machine oil, by contrast, is artificial and functions as a synecdoche for the political machinery of racism. Hate toward political leadership culminates in the lines: “You are the scent of rot at the heart / Of love-making” (8, ll. 10–11). The sonnet juxtaposes intimacy with fear: a Black couple’s union is overshadowed by terror for the child they might conceive. Their fear recalls Emmett Till, and the image insists that White supremacist propaganda contaminates even private acts of love.

Hayes makes this critique explicit in the sonnet “Goddamn, so this is what it means to have a leader” (38), where the speaker attacks Donald Trump’s presidency: “so this is what it means to have a leader / You despise” (ll. 1–2). The sonnet asks whether Trump represents

. . . a mandate for whiteness, virility, sovereignty,
Stupidity, an idiot’s threats & gangsta narcissisms threading
Every shabby sentence his trumpet constructs” (ll. 4–6).

Hayes casts Trump as both symptom and embodiment of White supremacist ideology. The metaphor of the “trumpet” satirizes his speech, its loudness masking emptiness. By tying Trump to the legacy of segregationist rhetoric, Hayes positions him in the lineage of officials who sanctioned violence against Black protesters in the 1960s.

American Sonnets repeatedly uses Trump as a motif for historical recurrence, satirizing him as a blaring, misophonic trumpet¹². Like Coleman, Hayes “employs

¹¹ The Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO), led by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, targeted members of the Black Panthers, who were labeled as threats to national security. In practice, COINTELPRO worked hand in hand with the police to exercise legal power and reinforce the political oppression of Black Americans. Those identified as “agitators” were designated as such only from the FBI’s perspective, reflecting the state’s attempt to suppress Black radical voices.

¹² Ironically, Howard University professor Clarence Lusane echoes Hayes when he refers to Trump’s “engage[ment] in *blaring trumpets*” (see Sprunt; my emphasis). Hayes thus mocks the failures of the

distinctive rhetorical devices . . . to enable both extended ruminations on persistent social inequalities or personal disappointments and focused critiques of words not backed by actions” (Ryan 419). Trump’s response to the protests after George Floyd’s murder—“when the looting starts, the shooting starts” (Sprunt)—aligns him with Walter Headley¹³, the racist Miami police chief who coined the phrase in 1967. Hayes anticipates this pattern of authoritarian violence, casting Trump as a contemporary chief assassin. Fanon’s claim that “[u]nderstanding the poem is not only an intellectual act, but also a political one” (167) resonates directly here: Hayes reframes the sonnet as political resistance to legalized violence.

In response to Trump literally legalizing militant actions against Black Americans, the sonnet “I pour a pinch of serious poison for you” (12) epitomizes Hayes’ darkly humorous homage to victims of White terror. The poem toasts “Killin Assassins” with bodily fluids and curses, transforming lament into protest (*ibid.*). Like the earlier sonnet “Why are you bugging me you stank minuscule husk” (8), it catalogs aggression and memorializes victims, creating what the text itself presents a “war-on-racism-veterans’ list” that dates back to the Civil War and exposes the identities of the victims’ murderers¹⁴. These catalogues transform elegy into indictment, exposing the identities of oppressors while elevating Black resistance.

Hayes threads these themes through multiple sonnets: “But there never was a black male hysteria” (7, 41), “Goddamn, so this is what it means to have a leader” (38), “Drive like fifteen miles along a national parkway” (49), and “Later the white boy we

political leadership in their awareness of prominent utterances in U.S. history that specifically relate to racial struggles.

¹³ In 1967, following a series of lootings in Black Miami neighborhoods, Miami police Chief Walter Headley “‘declar[ed] war’ on criminals,” whom he vowed to pursue with firearms (Rosenwald). Although he claimed that targeting criminals in Black neighborhoods would also protect Black residents, Headley openly dismissed the need for constructive relations, insisting that he did “not believe that community relations programs with minority groups are part of the law enforcement responsibility, and he made no attempt to establish systematic communications with the Miami black community” (*qtd.* in Rosenwald).

¹⁴ History of the White assassin in the sonnet “I pour a pinch of serious poison for you” (12):

- 2015 Dylann Roof massacres nine African Americans at the Charleston church shooting (see l. 2).
- 2012 George Zimmerman assassinates Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida (see l. 3).
- 1968 James Earl Ray assassinates Martin Luther King, Jr. in Memphis, Mississippi (see l. 2).
- 1964 Edgar Ray Killen assassinates James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner during the Freedom Summer (see l. 10).
- 1963 Ku Klux Klan members Robert Chambliss, Bobby Frank Cherry, Herman Frank Cash, and Thomas Edwin Blanton, Jr. execute the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four Black girls (see ll. 4-5).
- 1963 Byron De La Beckwith assassinates Medgar Evers in Jackson, Mississippi (see l. 9).
- 1955 Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam torture and assassinate Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi (see l. 10).
- 1865 John Wilkes Booth shoots Abraham Lincoln, the “slaves’ redeemer,” in the first assassination of a U.S. president (see l. 3).

once beat like a drum” (74). Together, they sketch an overview of African American history, emphasizing persecution, propaganda, and commemoration. Outrage blends with irony, echoing Langston Hughes’ description of the Black artist’s “incongruous humor that . . . becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears” (307). Sarcasm, then, is the tonal characteristic of *American Sonnets*, anchoring Hayes within the lineage of New Negro poetics while situating him firmly in the New Black Aesthetics.

Hayes’ critique extends into global poetic traditions, presenting himself as a fierce but humoristic critic of the Trump administration. Joining a global poetic debate on oppressive Fascist regimes, he identifies himself as a critical reader of the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda: “I do consider myself . . . a critical thinker – especially when it comes to reading the poetry of others” (Hayes and Rowell 1077). Neruda, Nobel laureate in 1971, protested against Fascist regimes in Chile and Spain and appears frequently in Hayes’ sonnets. Hayes even models passages on Neruda’s work to emphasize political and historical criticism in the U.S. The final lines of “Why are you bugging me you stank minuscule husk” mirror Neruda’s poem “Ode to a Lemon”¹⁵:

. . . The meat inside your exoskeleton
Is as tender as Jesus. Neruda wrote of “a nipple
Perfuming the earth.” Yes, you are an odor, an almost
Imperceptible ode to death . . . (Hayes, *American Sonnets* 8, ll. 11-14)

So, while the hand
holds the cut of the lemon,
half a world
on a trencher,
the gold of the universe
wells
to your touch:
a cup yellow
with miracles,
a breast and a nipple
perfuming the earth . . . (Neruda ll. 41-51)

Here Hayes transforms Neruda’s lemon into the exoskeleton of the assassin. Neruda’s lyrical speaker squeezes the lemon to collect its juice, an approach Hayes borrows. Both texts play on contrasts of hardness and softness, shell and flesh. Hayes’ assassin appears armored, yet inside remains mortal and vulnerable. By calling the assassin an “ode to death,” Hayes sarcastically elevates White supremacy while exposing its

¹⁵ For a more detailed discussion of the intertextual connection between Neruda and Hayes, see pp. 41-44.

fragility. Neruda's lemon fragrance reappears as the assassin's aura of decay, underscoring the omnipresence of death in Black history.

These protest sonnets both condemn White violence and honor Black victims as symbols of resilience. Hayes thus locates himself within a global poetic lineage of political critique. Neruda links him back to Walt Whitman, whose *Leaves of Grass* broke formal conventions through free verse. Whitman's "impure poetry" also fed into his political vision in *Democratic Vistas* (1871), written after the Civil War. Hayes inherits both lineages: Whitman's experimental forms and Neruda's political urgency. *American Sonnets* fuses these influences into a distinctly New Black Aesthetic protest form, one that critiques White supremacy while affirming poetry's role in shaping democratic futures.

Although White assassins imagine themselves encased in an impenetrable hard shell, their soft "meat" (8, l. 11) betrays their mortality and ultimate destructibility. Hayes underscores this fragility by reintroducing Neruda's lemon fragrance, turning it into a bitterly ironic emblem of White supremacy's aura of death. This omnipresence of death reflects the long historical continuum of Black suffering under systemic oppression. On one level, the protest sonnets in *American Sonnets* expose the violence inflicted by White aggressors. On another, they simultaneously honor Black victims for their symbolic endurance and transformative influence—agents whose suffering advances the Black community and energizes the revolutionary spirit of the New Black Aesthetics.

The symbolic force of *American Sonnets* also lies in Hayes' intertextual dialogue with key poetic predecessors. By positioning himself in aesthetic kinship with Neruda, Hayes forges a lineage that extends further back to Walt Whitman. Neruda had acknowledged Whitman as his poetic comrade, recognizing in him the practice of "impure poetry" and the refusal to conform to rigid formal traditions. Whitman, most famously in *Leaves of Grass* (1855), broke away from rhyme and meter, employing free verse and cadence as formal strategies.

Whitman's free verse emerges as a sophisticated device that mirrors the loose connective layers of *Leaves of Grass*: poems that are linked less by plot or argument than by a collective vision of everyday life. While embracing communal humanity, Whitman simultaneously elevates individualism and the singular bond between person and environment. His poetic emphasis on life's diverse forms anticipates the political reflections of *Democratic Vistas* (1871), written in the aftermath of the Civil War.

There, Whitman reimagines democracy in the wake of national trauma. Together, *Leaves of Grass* and *Democratic Vistas* become crucial touchstones for Hayes—formally in their use of free verse and thematically in their socio-critical outlook. Both works serve as prototypes for the aesthetic and political commitments Hayes rearticulates in *American Sonnets*.

As Whitman narrates about himself, “this author [Whitman] has also published a prose work, DEMOCRATIC VISTAS, treating of religious, social, political and artistic topics, with immediate reference to the present and the future of the United States” (Folsom xi). With *American Sonnets*, Hayes offers his own democratic vistas. He renames them, however, as different “kinds of sonnet, kinds of American, kinds of feelings, kinds of assassins” (“Poetics” 332). Delphine Rumeau observes a similar connection between Whitman and Neruda (and by extension Hayes), particularly Whitman’s effort “to seize life, all forms of life, without establishing hierarchies: ‘. . . he was neither afraid of being moralistic or immoralistic, nor did he want to separate the territories of pure and impure poetry. He is the first totalizing poet’” (sic 48). Hayes signals Whitman’s impact by shaping his lyrical speaker as a commentator on racial struggles, one who aims to provoke even minimal moral awakening in the White American conscience.

Rumeau also argues that Neruda’s bond with Whitman emerges in their tone: “it is fierce, not to say violent, and the harmonious vision of the American landscape gives way to a brutal denouncing of American politicians” (54). Hayes shares this tonal legacy. His protest sonnets depend on irony and sarcasm to attack the political leadership. He frequently refers to Neruda, and by extension Whitman, though without naming Whitman directly in *American Sonnets*. Hayes adopts a similar “impure” mode by reshaping the conventional sonnet. As Rumeau notes, his “choice of impure poetry is the choice of referentiality over pure construction and musicality” (49). Hayes resists strict rhyme schemes but often works in pentameter, balancing structure and disruption. This method ensures his critiques—political, social, and aesthetic—remain unmistakably visible.

The aesthetic stakes are central. Hayes uses poetry to interrogate the formal limits that contemporary Black poets strive to escape. The Hughesian poet sought to merge Black and White traditions, while the Black Arts poet rejected White influence altogether. Hayes does both. By referencing a White form yet reshaping it through

Black experimentation, he reimagines democracy as Whitman did, positioning his work as an intellectual space for the New Black Aesthetics.

Hayes merges Black and White lyrical patterns to sustain democracy through poetry itself. His aesthetic is self-centered, but it consistently gestures toward a bond with Black communities. Ed Folsom explains in his introduction to *Democratic Vistas* that “Whitman was . . . intrigued with the way a democratic self would act than the way a democratic society would function, and the defining of this revolutionary new self . . . was a job for the poet” (xviii; my emphasis). Whitman provided the political groundwork, Neruda followed him as poet and diplomat, and Hayes continues this dialogue. When Hayes alludes to Neruda’s “Ode to a Lemon,” he signals his role as both political commentator and poetic craftsman.

For Hayes, Neruda becomes a tool for accusing America of instilling ancestral trauma in Black people:

. . . Like no
 Culture before us, we relate the way the descendants
 Of the raped relate to the descendants of their rapists.

 I wish you the opposite of what Neruda said
 Of lemons. May all the gold you touch burn, rot & rust. (32, ll. 9-11; ll. 13-14)

Neruda describes a lemon “perfuming the earth” with golden sweetness as a reference to interpersonal love (ll. 41–51). Hayes inverts the image, turning sweetness into rot. The assassin becomes the cause of ancestral trauma, forbidden from enjoying creation. His punishment is to inhale decay rather than perfume. The refusal of sweetness enacts a form of retribution, a symbolic reversal of generations of racial destruction.

The newness of the New Black Aesthetics becomes visible in Hayes’ use of form. He asks how the rigid sonnet structure might mirror the intellectual confinement of the Black poet. By deforming the White sonnet, Hayes creates an intellectual refuge. Rita Dove, in her foreword to *Mother Love*, calls the sonnet a “*heile Welt*,” “an intact world where everything is in sync” (Dove; original italics). She adds that departures from rhyme and meter suggest “a world gone awry” (ibid.). Hayes echoes her critique: the sonnet’s “prim borders . . . are stultifying; one is constantly bumping up against Order [sic]” (ibid.). Yet he fills *American Sonnets* entirely with sonnets. The paradox underscores his refusal to be fixed to one style (see Hayes and Rowell 1074).

Levine’s New Formalist perspective clarifies Hayes approach. She argues that “[f]orm may be cast as historical, emerging out of particular cultural and political circumstances, or it can be understood as ahistorical, transcending the specificities of

history” (2). Hayes does both. He reproduces the sonnet in his dialogue with the New Negro legacy, but he also reinvents it as a form detached from any one era: he makes it ahistorical. His sonnets stage a protest against order through their content on racism and violence, even as their form demonstrates mastery. The dimensions of his experimental poetry are not a contradiction of but a play with tradition.

Hayes’ mastery of form aligns with what Müller and Houston A. Baker call “the mastery of form” (Baker, *Modernism*; Müller 40). Each of the seventy sonnets has fourteen lines of equal length. The entire book forms a single sonnet, since it is divided into five sections, each with fourteen poems—the structural equivalent of a sonnet’s lines. A conventional sonnet—such as the Shakespearean—divides into four parts, but Hayes’ fifth section functions as the additional line often found in sonnet variations. For instance, Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 99” has fifteen lines and “Modern Love: II” by George Meredith is a sonnet with sixteen lines. The fifth section of *American Sonnets* represents this additional line. His placement of the table of contents at the book’s end reinforces this structural ingenuity. Listing the first line of each sonnet as its “title” not only distinguishes them but also proves his formal control.

The work as a whole operates as a corona form, a sonnet sequence of fifteen poems where each sonnet’s final line becomes the first line of the next. Hayes adapts this by creating a fifteenth sonnet for each section, formed from its opening lines. These corona sonnets highlight each section’s theme. The third section, for example, emphasizes Black existentialism, clarifying that

It feels sadder when a black person says Nigga	44
The subject is allowed up to twenty years	45
The song must be cultural, confessional, clear	46
A remix . . . (Hayes, <i>American Sonnets</i> 87)	

The echo of “little song” as the literal meaning of “sonnet” redefines the sonnet as an elegy, connecting it to slave songs, generational trauma, and collective memory.

Müller calls this strategy “formal camouflage,” where Black content inhabits White form (97). Stephen Henderson emphasizes that Black poetry uses this camouflage to attack distortions of Black life and expose systemic ridicule. He argues that “white America’s perception of the lives and culture of Black Americans, which has been marked by distortion, and by a continuing and systematic attempt to ridicule, to deny, to absorb, or to appropriate that culture” (174). Consequently, *American Sonnets* – like Black poetry in general – “is to evoke a history of white critical condescension and snobbery, and . . . outright pathological ignorance and fear” (ibid.).

Hayes seizes the sonnet to trap White supremacy, turning the form into a weapon. His sequence seeks to reverse trauma by confining White consciousness within its own structures.

The sonnet “I lock you in an American sonnet that is part prison” (11) dramatizes this inversion, becoming both cage and weapon: the Black poet uses the sonnet as a metaphorical prison to metaphorically incarcerate and punish White conscience. Evoking this pathological fear in White people Henderson addresses, Hayes

[locks the White assassin] in an American sonnet that is part prison,
Part panic closet, a little room in a house set aflame.

.....
I make you both gym & crow here. . . .

.....
. . . It is not enough

To love you. It is not enough to want you destroyed. (11, ll. 1-2, l. 7, ll. 13-14)

Here the sonnet confines the assassin. The prison metaphor enacts psychological punishment, tapping into historical White fears of Black uprising, such as slave revolts. The confinement triggers panic and uncertainty, revealing trauma’s return as retribution.

The sonnet stages this punishment climactically: from capture, to psychological cage, to threat of torture. Müller calls the sonnet’s “bounded space [of the sonnet] . . . a social parable in that it models the balance of individual and collective concerns – of liberty and restraint” (6). Hayes plays with the homophone “gym/Jim” in “I make you both gym & crow here” (11, l. 7), mocking White supremacist claims to physical superiority. The “gym” becomes a site of poetic exercise, equating intellectual labor with bodily discipline.

Hayes’ imagery also resonates with Freudian theories of the Id. The Id coordinates instinct-driven behavior and determines paths to prohibited desires (see Tyson 25)¹⁶. In “Why someone would crowd into a church is beyond me” (58), the lyrical speaker wonders about “when my id is arrested” (l. 4). The Id here signals repressed instincts, a prison of stereotypes Black people try to escape. Without it, the lyrical speaker glimpses psychological liberation and questions the basic pillars of

¹⁶ Tyson explains that “[t]he id is devoted solely to the gratification of prohibited desires of all kinds – [e.g.] desire for power . . . – without an eye to consequences. In other words, the id consists largely of those desires regulated or forbidden by social convention” (25). Similarly, the Black poet seeks to break free from conventional race classifications and to achieve social and political recognition.

society—history, wealth, beauty, religious ritual—since all of these are “beyond me” without the speaker’s Id (l. 8).

The sonnet “Probably, ghosts are allergic to us. Our uproarious” (22) presses this further: “This bitter earth is a song / Clogging the mouth before it is swallowed or spat out” (ll. 13–14). Here, Hayes rejects Dove’s *heile Welt* vision. Instead, Earth becomes bitter, suffocating, an “I-can’t-breathe” landscape due to interracial frictions and oppression echoing racial violence with frequent Emmett Till-references, for instance.

Hayes frames these tensions through the volta, specifically “Voltas of acoustics, instinct & metaphor” (11, l. 13). The volta marks a shift in thought, but it also evokes music. The Shakespearean sonnet, for instance, typically “turns” after the twelfth line. Hayes insists that sonnets

communicate through rhythm and sound, through syntax, which is to say through music, through language. . . . [W]hile music is the most ideal form for *expressing* feeling, poetry is the most challenging and therefore the most rewarding way of *communicating* feeling. (Hayes and Simpson 130; original italics)

American Sonnets thus functions as one extended love sonnet, its turns marked by assassins, Americans, and shifting feelings, hinting at the lyrical volta in the sonnet “I lock you in an American sonnet that is part prison” (11) (see “Poetics” 332). Acoustics refer to the variety of sonnets (or songs), instinct aligns with the Id, and metaphor uses acoustics and instinct to sketch Hayes’ (or the lyrical speaker’s) perception of American society.

This volta directs readers toward America’s broken body politic, while at the same time suggesting a universal rhythm. Hayes does not use conventional meter; instead, acoustics, instinct, and metaphor form his rhythm. The lack of traditional meter becomes a marker of the New Black Aesthetic sonnet, aligning him with Wanda Coleman. *American Sonnets* does not have a conventional rhythmic meter but engages in metaphorical metrics through the correlation of acoustics, instinct, and metaphor.

These seemingly structural flaws are a further key characteristic of the New Black Aesthetic sonnet, a characteristic Hayes shares with Coleman. As Jennifer Ryan states,

Coleman’s poetics in the [*American Sonnets*] series relies upon several techniques for experimenting with syntax and diction that both recall Black Arts methodologies and contest the conventional boundaries of form and expression. . . . [E]ngaging in wordplay . . . [she] draws attention both to language’s permeable, plastic nature and to the subtle

transitions between one political viewpoint and another. (425)

Hayes too deforms mastery to assert originality, setting his *American Sonnets* apart from sonnet conventions. It innovates the New Black Aesthetic sonnet by “contest[ing] the conventional” sonnet as Coleman does (Ryan 425; also see Müller 40).

Enjambment becomes his key tool. Most of the sonnets run past conventional stopping points. Sentences spill across lines with little punctuation, creating momentum through run-on sentences and a sense of liberation. As a result, the reader experiences flight through Hayes stylistic strategy, just as the sonnets describe. His experimental use of punctuation creates this feeling of liberation for Hayes, playing with syntax and verbal expression while adhering to the traditional sonnet form.

In “You know how when the light you splatter spreads” (33), Hayes writes: “The feeling of wings clasp[ing] the back of the body, / The feeling of wings clapping wind along the spine” (ll. 13–14). Wings symbolize freedom and escape, and their rhythm animates the sonnet sequence. This implicated flight recalls W. E. B. Du Bois’ “Of the Wings of Atalanta,” where progress occurs overshadowed by loss. He states that “something was vanquished that deserved to live, something killed that in justice had not dared to die; to know that with the Right that triumphed, triumphed something of Wrong” (sic 48). Hayes shares this duality: mourning Black victims of White supremacists while celebrating Black artistry and iconic Black artists. Fanon captures the paradox—“underneath the self-loathing, the sound of laughter can be heard” (159). Hayes’ sonnets embrace this alternation between grief and joy as their central aesthetic.

Hayes accordingly introduces the praise sonnet coupled with an approach Müller calls “thematic camouflage” (101). In *American Sonnets*, the contemporary Black sonnet becomes a symbol of Hayes intellectual activism to overcome the racial mountain. Such sonnets are “tributes from one poet to another” (101). In the sonnet “Seven of the ten things I love in the face” (16), Hayes praises James Baldwin’s physical appearance, using the body as metaphor for poetic legacy as thematic camouflage.

In contrast to Müller’s approach, Hayes camouflages the lyrical speaker’s celebration of Baldwin’s physical perfection instead of camouflaging form. Hayes introduces Baldwin as a dual figure, implying his sonnets as mirrors of Baldwin, because they represent “certain kinds of threats for one in my body” (“Poet” 00:00:09-12). Hayes himself comments on Baldwin’s influence, explaining that

he can write beautifully about politics, he can write politically about beauty. . . . he’s just a great model for work that covers the full spectrum,

the overlap of what it means to be human, African American, contemporary. He just remains a good muse through all kinds of situations. (00:01:15-38)

He presents Baldwin as the “good muse” (ibid.), attending carefully to his physical features in order to underscore Baldwin’s importance for the New Black Aesthetics. Hayes’ praise of Baldwin’s appearance resonates with Zora Neale Hurston’s groundbreaking essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1934). Hurston observes that the lyrical speaker in Black literary art “ha[s] in his mind the picture of the object in use. Action. Everything illustrated. So . . . the white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics”—or, in lyrical terms, in metaphors (32).

Metaphor and simile, as distinctive rhetorical markers of Black literary excellence, connect directly to Hayes’ earlier emphasis on the vivid interplay of “acoustics, instinct & metaphor” (see 11, l. 13). In this light, the sonnet “Seven of the ten things I love in the face” (16) dwells entirely on Baldwin’s physical appearance, focusing in particular on his face and, most notably, his eyes. Yet this focus functions as camouflage: while the content appears to linger on Baldwin’s features, the sonnet simultaneously points to a deeper purpose—elaborating Baldwin’s broader metaphorical role as a paradigm of the New Black Aesthetic poet. Especially the line “The crease between his eyes like a tuning / Fork” (ll. 5-6) metaphorically directs contemporary Black poetry as realized in *American Sonnets*, signaling both psychological struggles and social oppression Black Americans are compelled to confront.

Hayes praises Baldwin in a manner that reflects the deeply personal yet inherently political dimensions of Baldwin’s work. He foregrounds his pivotal statements on personal, communal, political, and social liberty in the context of transformative grassroots movements such as the Civil Rights struggle of the 1960s. By invoking Baldwin, Hayes establishes an appropriate tone for the New Black Aesthetic voice of protest—one that directly confronts the White assassin while reconnecting to the volta of acoustics within the sonnet. This tone, in turn, reverberates among Black poets and underscores their enduring social and political influence.

By praising Black poets through an acknowledgment of their verbal power, Hayes underscores the necessity of disciples who internalize and disseminate the creed of the Black poet. The description that “The dimple in [Baldwin’s] chin / Narrows & expands like a pupil” (16, ll. 8-9) first evokes the mechanics of the eye. Once again, Hayes draws on the Black literary patterns Hurston identifies, elevating metaphor as

central. Just as a pupil instinctively contracts and dilates to focus on its surroundings and filter essential aspects, Baldwin's features become emblematic of the volta of instinct. In this sense, the pupil metaphorically represents Black disciples, who absorb the manifestos of poetic leaders and transform them into a new poetic fundamentalism for both the Black protest sonnet and the Black praise sonnet. In doing so, Hayes signals both the tensions and the coexistence of struggle and joy, a duality that defines *American Sonnets*.

This sonnet sequence can be understood as what Fanon terms *precombat literature*, defined by its reliance on humor, allegory, and anguish (159). Hayes' disciples—and, by extension, Baldwin's—form the foundation of New Black Aesthetic institutions such as Cave Canem and the Dark Room Collective. As the lyrical speaker asserts in the sonnet “Maxine Waters, being of fire, being of sword,” they “are black as a Baldwin speech” (23, l. 12). This line affirms Hurston's ever-present claim that metaphor and simile remain essential to nurturing the next generation of Black poets. These rhetorical devices stabilize and empower Black protest poetry, functioning as its structural pillars. In praising Baldwin's physical form, Hayes deliberately turns to the volta of metaphor, redefining the conventional sonnet through a self-expressive portrait of the Black poet. Using Baldwin as a central metaphor, Hayes sketches the contours of the contemporary Black sonnet while simultaneously asserting the legitimacy of Black writing itself.

Debates over the defense and acknowledgment of Black writing resurface in *American Sonnets*, as Hayes positions himself within a larger Black historical legacy. Haki Madhubuti, writing in the context of the Black Arts Movement, argued that legitimizing Black writing meant insisting on its inclusion in academic curricula, thereby securing equal standing with White literature (see 260). Hayes builds on this claim but also sharpens the distinction between legitimacy and tolerance. As *American Sonnets* makes clear, the issue is not simply interracial acceptance. Müller characterizes the Black Arts Movement as at once confining—by rooting poetic identity in White literary forms such as the sonnet—and liberating, since many poets refashioned the sonnet into a form responsive to their cultural and racial needs (12). While the sonnet was acknowledged as legitimate, it was never fully tolerated.

In *American Sonnets*, the sonnet “It was discovered the best way to combat” (75) dramatizes the internal struggle of the lyrical speaker, who confesses that “My problem was I'd decided to make myself / A poem” (ll. 8–9). This conflict is not new.

More than a century earlier, Du Bois had already described the same torment, one that continues to haunt the poet of the New Black Aesthetics. By weaving this connection into his work, Hayes underscores his role as an apprentice to history. In “The Sorrow Songs” from *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois defines slave songs as “naturally veiled and half articulate” (159). That veil returns in Hayes’ New Black Aesthetic sonnets, where camouflage functions metaphorically to encode the Black experience within a White literary form (see Müller 97, 99–102).

Hayes also mirrors Du Bois’ claim that sorrow songs “tell in word and music of trouble and exile, of strife and hiding; they grope toward some unseen power and sigh for rest in the End” (sic Du Bois 159). This stance links him to Rita Dove, who, like Hayes, challenges the *heile Welt* ideal of the White sonnet. Rather than imagine a utopia free of racism, Hayes reshapes the Black sonnet into a modern sorrow song that narrates the inner struggles, troubles, and desires of the New Black Aesthetic “souls of Black folk.” Each poem in *American Sonnets* thus becomes a sorrow song: hopeful in its gestures toward joy, yet marked by unfulfilled wishes and nostalgic longing. That fragile optimism is repeatedly overshadowed by sarcasm, anger, and despair at the dystopian reality of racial oppression. In this way, every sonnet offers a moment of recognition, capturing the lived experience of racial minorities and transforming *American Sonnets* into a collage of poetic recognition.

In this context, Hayes introduces a second category of praise sonnet—one that honors not only the physical presence of the Black poet, as in his tribute to Baldwin, but also the literary craft of the sonneteer. The Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke appears only once by name in the sequence, in the sonnet “Rilke ends his sonnet ‘Archaic Torso of Apollo’ saying” (37). Here, Hayes imagines several versions of a precarious existence—wasted life, life in mortal danger, or life destroyed. Only the opening lines recall Rilke directly, echoing his famous injunction: “‘You must change your life’” (l. 2). That imperative resonates with Hayes’ own practice of using poetry to force recognition and transformation. Like Hayes and Dove, Rilke is remembered for a sonnet sequence, *Sonnets to Orpheus* (1923)¹⁷, which, though it rarely names Orpheus, nonetheless revolves around him as its thematic core.

¹⁷ With his references to Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus*, Hayes also points to parallels in their poetic development. The German poet Hermann Hesse captures Rilke’s transformation in a way that can be applied to Hayes as well: “[It is] remarkable how ... his mastery of form increases, penetrates deeper and deeper into his problems! And at each stage now and again the miracle occurs, his delicate, hesitant, anxiety-prone person withdraws, and through him resounds the music of the universe; like the basin of a fountain he becomes at once instrument and ear” (“Rainer Maria Rilke”).

Hayes follows a similar pattern. Orpheus appears only sporadically in *American Sonnets*, but he functions as a central metaphor, much like Baldwin. In alluding to Orpheus' descent into the underworld in search of Eurydice, Hayes invokes what Müller calls the "psychological and cultural abysses" of American society (122). Orpheus, as a mythic figure, becomes a mirror of the New Black Aesthetic poet: one who must confront danger, navigate loss, and yet insist on artistic creation. This metaphor provides profound insight into the precarious identity of the Black poet and signals Hayes' interest in interactive, readerly engagement.

The sequence's opening sonnet underscores this point by reframing the myth of Orpheus in terms of writing itself. The lyrical speaker recalls that

Orpheus was alone when he invented writing.
His manic drawing became a kind of writing when he sent
His beloved a sketch of an eye with an X struck through it.
He meant *I am blind without you*. She thought he meant
I never want to see you again. It is possible he meant that, too.
(5, ll. 10-14; original italics)

Here, the invention of writing emerges as both self-expression and communication, a gesture meant to bridge solitude but prone to misinterpretation. The eye, as an instrument of vision, carries the weight of reunion or separation, echoing Baldwin's physical features as metaphor. Just as sight determines Orpheus' fate, so too does vision—or its distortion—shape the Black poet's struggle for recognition in *American Sonnets*.

Hayes frames *American Sonnets* within what Norman Holland calls *psychological reader-response theory*, which emphasizes the reader's transactive engagement with a text and the attempt to connect it to personal experience (see Tyson 182). The sequence offers no paratextual guides—no footnotes, no comments—forcing readers to grapple with its meanings on their own terms. In this way, Hayes demands interpretation rather than providing it. His poems, while formally sonnets, operate as *persona poems*: monologues in which both Hayes and his lyrical speaker address an implied audience that listens without reply. Poet and speaker thus act as messengers, while the reader is positioned as recipient of their words.

This demand for active interpretation aligns Holland's theory with DuPlessis' argument that "[s]canting the aesthetic, generic, and conventional aspects of poetry limits criticism to an extractive reading strategy that reduces a text to a message" (60). Hayes resists that reduction by rejecting rhyme schemes and using meter only sparingly. The parallel with Eurydice is telling: she misreads Orpheus' sketch through

the lens of her own psychological bond, just as readers bring their identities and histories to Hayes' sonnets. White audiences, conditioned to see the sonnet as a European form, may misinterpret *American Sonnets* as simply a modernized version of that tradition. Black readers and fellow poets, however, uncover the camouflage that hides its Blackness within a White frame and thereby retrieve the deeper message. In this way, Hayes confirms Levine's point that poetic forms "have the capacity . . . to endure across time and space" (14), adapting not as timeless abstractions but as flexible responses to pressing social circumstances.

Hayes frames Orpheus as the original inventor of writing to symbolize the birth of the Black poet in *American Sonnets*. By doing so, he resists the conventional view that Phyllis Wheatley marks the cradle of African American literature (see 5, ll. 1–2). Instead, Hayes situates the Black poet within the mythic register of European antiquity, where literature itself was deeply shaped by myth. Linking this framework to the Middle Passage, Hayes interprets the "sketch of an eye with an X struck through it" (5, l. 12) as a metaphor for the blindness of enslaved Africans, who could not know where their forced journey would lead. The uncertainty of their fate echoes Orpheus' dependence on Eurydice for guidance. Similarly, the Black poet depends on predecessors and role models to enter and sustain the Black aesthetic tradition. The sonnet "For her last birthday I found in a used New Jersey" (24) traces this development, establishing a historical lineage: after Wheatley's achievement as the first published Black female poet, Hayes deliberately incorporates other foundational figures of Black poetry into *American Sonnets*.

Among these figures, Amiri Baraka occupies a central place. In the sonnet "For her last birthday I found in a used New Jersey" (24), Hayes moves beyond Baldwin's aesthetics to celebrate Baraka as a model of radical transformation. The sonnet charts the metamorphosis of the Black poet from Wheatley's initial recognition to a more militant identity, one that refuses confinement to White literary conventions. Instead, poets of the New Black Aesthetics are urged to claim both Black and White inheritances while also embracing the uncompromising radicalism of the Black Arts Movement. Hayes captures this duality in the image of writing "Accessories includ[ing] an ink pen & his father's pistol" (24, l. 6), a metaphor for turning language into weaponry. Baraka embodies this violent rebirth: "the night . . . Baraka put a bullet in him" (ll. 12–13) marks the symbolic death of LeRoi Jones and the emergence of Baraka as a fiercer version of the Black poet.

It is understandable that Eurydice interprets Orpheus' sketch as a refusal to see her again, since she represents a past joy that is irretrievably lost to them both. In the classical myth, Orpheus ventures into the underworld to reclaim her, striking a bargain with Hades: Eurydice may follow him back to the world of the living, provided that he does not turn to look at her before they reach the surface. Overcome by longing, however, Orpheus glances back, sees only her shadow, and is forced to watch her slip once more into the realm of the dead.

Hayes' turn to this myth in *American Sonnets* underscores the text's layered complexity. Though structured entirely as sonnets, the volume remains deeply tied to musical and performative traditions. As Hayes explains,

poetry is the only literary form that can reflect elements of all other literary forms. It can adapt the narrative qualities of fiction; it can take the form of a dramatic monologue; it can use the archival elements of history, or the factual elements of journalism. (Hayes and Simpson 128-29)

Orpheus' journey into the underworld becomes an allegory for the Middle Passage, whose psychological scars persist in the form of generational trauma (also cf. Müller 123). Torn from their homes and thrust into slavery, Africans shared Orpheus' blindness, unable to know their destination or retain their past identities. The ambiguous message to Eurydice encapsulates this tension: a yearning to reclaim the past paired with an equally powerful desire to forget what is unbearable. By staging the invention of writing as an Orphic gesture, Hayes frames the birth of the Black poet as an act of resilience—one that does not erase trauma but, with strategic care, confronts it and finds a way to endure.

When Orpheus journeys through the underworld, he encounters the three-headed hellhound Cerberus, whom he lulls to sleep with the music of his lyre. His caution stems from an awareness of the beast's deadly power, but his ability to tame it grants him authority over his opponent. Hayes uses this myth to allude to the New Black Aesthetic institution *Cave Canem*—Latin for “Beware of the dog.” Just as Orpheus relies on music to pass Cerberus unharmed, Hayes highlights the interplay of acoustics, instinct, and metaphor. The three heads of the hellhound serve as a metaphorical image for this triadic relationship, underscoring the balance between artistry and survival.

This dynamic comes into focus in the sonnet “The black poet would love to say his century began” (5), which frames *American Sonnets* with the dual image of the sonnet as both prison and saferoom for the Black poet. At first, Orpheus is trapped by

Cerberus. Yet his instinct tells him to use music, turning the underworld into a safer space through artistic performance. As Komunyakaa observes, Hayes' mythological allusions capture "the havoc that [danger] wreaks on the psyche, and to the creation of states of consciousness . . . which keep horror at bay" (Derricotte and Komunyakaa 514). Orpheus thus becomes a figure for the Black poet, transforming the rigid White sonnet into a refuge by inscribing it with Blackness markers, including tributes to iconic poets of the Black aesthetic.

At the same time, Hayes places the Black poet in Cerberus' role, warning White readers to both beware and be aware of the poet's intellectual force. When Orpheus deceives the hellhound, Hayes simultaneously deceives the audience, who too easily center the male figure and neglect Eurydice. Yet the myth, as Hayes reminds us, is ultimately about her. After all, Orpheus marches into the underworld for *her*, to reclaim his wife. In the sonnet "From now on I will do my laundry early Sunday" (59), Hayes insists that "I believe / Eurydice is actually the poet, not Orpheus. Her muse / Has his back to her with his ear bent to his own heart" (ll. 10–12). Here, Eurydice emerges as the true leader, displacing the traditional narrative of male artistic dominance.

The sonnet "From now on I will do my laundry early Sunday" (59) indirectly recalls the Civil Rights Movement, where the crucial contributions of Black women were often eclipsed by the public prominence of Black men. Hayes reframes the New Black Aesthetic sonnet as a saferoom for the work of Black women poets, insisting they must be "fearless, / And God-fearing, an ancestral insurgent, clean / As new money, a cryptographer, a storyteller" (25, ll. 5–7). These praise sonnets celebrate the presence of Black women and affirm their role as indispensable to the flourishing of the New Black Aesthetics.

In this context, *American Sonnets* elevates the sonnet as a poetic form for honoring Black women's art. DuPlessis observes that "a poem . . . might be characterized variously as a '*reflection*' or a refraction of the socioeconomic, a '*symptom*' of it, 'a characteristic *manifestation* of it,' . . . a '*coming of consciousness*'. . . of real forces in literary form" (56; original italics). Hayes draws on this notion in his treatment of Eurydice. Orpheus, guided by her presence, attempts to lead her back into the world of the living. Yet his premature glance results in her return to the underworld. The failure, however, works in Eurydice's favor: had she reemerged, she would have been repossessed as his wife. Remaining with the dead secures her autonomy over both mind and body. In slipping away, she resists becoming what

DuPlessis calls a “socioeconomic symptom,” rejecting the constraints of subordination and asserting independence from male authority.

The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice thus becomes a structural pillar of the New Black Aesthetic sonnet. As Müller notes, their passage through the underworld mirrors the historical trauma of the Middle Passage (123). The myth functions as a fictional component, while Orpheus’ inner conflict adds dramatic weight. Hayes reshapes the African American sonnet into a polygeneric art form, one that integrates drama, fiction, myth, and the factual archive of Black history. In doing so, he aligns the Black poet with the *griot*—the traditional West African storyteller who embodies a community’s living memory. As Fanon remarks, this blending of forms “introduce[s] increasingly fundamental changes,” enabling poets to “modernize the types of struggle. . . . It even happens that . . . social misfits . . . are rediscovered and rehabilitated” (Fanon 174). Hayes extends this vision to the present, championing contemporary poets—especially Black women—as essential to institutions like Cave Canem and the Dark Room Collective. Rejecting intellectual elitism, he foregrounds the collective advancement of Black poets and insists on the cultural power of their art.

As a Black poet and modern storyteller of the New Black Aesthetics, Hayes reaches back to Whitman and his idea of the proletarian bard. In “Fancies at Navesink,” Whitman’s lyrical speaker declares,

Metre or wit the best, or choice conceit to wield in perfect rhyme, delight
of singers;
These, these, O sea, all these I’d gladly barter. (sic *Leaves* 2007, 592)

Although Whitman never wrote sonnets, this statement connects directly to Hayes, who likewise refuses to anchor his *American Sonnets* in a regular rhyme scheme. For Whitman, rejecting rhyme was part of challenging elitist aesthetics in the name of the people. Hayes updates this strategy by linking it to Eurydice’s struggle to escape her status as a “social misfit” and by reimagining the sonnet as a democratic form for the New Black Aesthetics.

Both poets dismiss rhyme and meter as luxuries of elitist art. Hayes consistently turns to free verse in *American Sonnets*, liberating the sonnet from its reputation as a misfit form within Black poetry. By choosing stylistic freedom over inherited constraint, he dismantles the idea of poetic perfection defined by rhyme, meter, and form and makes the sonnet more accessible to a broad readership. In his hands, free verse becomes a metaphor for resistance, mirroring the determination of Black poets to free themselves from supremacist structures that still shape U.S. society.

At the same time, Hayes' use of figures like Orpheus or Baraka highlights how individual voices reveal broader ideological and racial tensions. This emphasis on the individual mirrors his appeal to both Black and White audiences, bridging traditions and insisting on the intersection of Black and White poetic practices. In this sense, the New Black Aesthetic sonnet prevents "poetic misfits" in the same way DuPlessis describes social misfits—by reframing marginality as central. Hayes achieves this through two modes: the protest sonnet, which critiques America's racial history, and the praise sonnet, which honors the aesthetic achievements of Black poets across generations. Together, these two forms sketch both a historical and an artistic portrait of Black experience.

Alongside protest and praise, Hayes dedicates *American Sonnets* to an intimate, individual mode: the love sonnet. Müller observes that "the love sonnet subsist[s] in a personal sphere at odds with the orthodoxy of black cultural nationalism" (106) during the Black Arts Movement. Hayes adapts this tradition by reimagining the love sonnet as an enclave of individuality that still speaks to the communal ethos of the New Black Aesthetics. In this way, he positions contemporary Black poets in a more emancipated space: they can honor their racial identity while also asserting deeply personal voices.

The love sonnets in *American Sonnets* foreground individual Black identities, in contrast to the collective orientation of protest and praise sonnets. Hayes frames these poems as guides for understanding how cultural identity emerges through personal as well as communal experience. In this respect, the love sonnet becomes a manual for how multiple personal backgrounds contribute to U.S. society. Homi Bhabha's "third space of enunciation"¹⁸ underscores this point, since Hayes' polygeneric sonnets resist the myth of a unified American culture. As Bhabha argues, culture is never "a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the people" (sic 54). By aligning the love sonnet with Bhabha's theory, Hayes marks the New Black Aesthetics as more progressive than earlier movements like the New Negro Movement or the Black Arts Movement, rejecting their rigid racial binaries and showing how race often lingers as a specter most powerfully internalized by Whites.

¹⁸ Bhabha defines the third space of enunciation as a site that juxtaposes "the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot 'in itself' be conscious" (53). Emerging from both colonial and postcolonial patterns, this unconscious state functions as a space that dissolves polarizing forces, including those that shape interracial struggles (see 56).

Still, Hayes refuses to abandon the reality of racial violence. His lyrical speaker insists that “[White assassins] will never assassinate my ghosts” as they once destroyed Black bodies (17, l. 14). Here, Bhabha’s theory of homogenized identity becomes present: Black people are unified by their collective experience of racial violence, just as White supremacists are unified in their ongoing attempts to suppress them. Against this background, Hayes imagines language itself as a site of transformation. When the lyrical speaker asks, “Can we really be friends if we don’t believe / In the same things, Assassin” (81, ll. 8-9), he frames the creation of a shared cultural language as the only possible cure for White proximity and violence. Unity, if it exists at all, must be forged not through tradition but through the reimagined language of the Black sonnet.

In *American Sonnets*, the dream of a racially unified society remains utopian, serving to critique America’s failure to pursue peaceful coexistence under White supremacy. Hayes opposes this ideal vision with the violent realities of American social structures. This tension between utopia and reality reflects Du Bois’ reading of the love song, which he claims is scarce and polarized: “[l]ove-songs are scarce and fall into two categories – the frivolous and light, and the sad. Of deep successful love there is ominous silence, and in . . . these songs there is a depth of history and meaning” (160). As an apprentice to history, Hayes incorporates both sides into his own love sonnets, grounding them in the historical significance of the African song as the foundation of both African American music and the African American sonnet. The lyrical speaker states:

The song must be cultural, confessional, clear
But not obvious. . . .
.....
The song must have six sides to it & a clamor
Of voltas. The song must turn on the compass
Of language . . . (46, ll. 1-2, ll. 4-6)

This passage underscores how instinct, acoustics, and metaphor—the pillars of Hayes’ poetics—extend to the Black love sonnet as well.

By calling his sequence “*American Sonnets*,” Hayes makes a pointed claim about cultural heritage. He insists readers recognize how his partly African ancestry shapes both the language and the form of his sonnets. In doing so, he recalls the griots, traditional African oral historians who preserved and transmitted collective memory. His reference to “voltas” as synonymous with “song” ties the poems to the Volta-Congo languages, divided into six branches—Kru, Kwa, Benue-Congo, Gur, Adamawa-Ubangi, and Dogon (Bendor-Samuel)—that mirror the “six sides” of the

African American song (see Hayes, *American Sonnets* 46). The “compass of language” evokes the multilingual origins of American English itself, a hybrid shaped by centuries of contact, migration, and the transatlantic slave trade. By connecting this linguistic multiplicity to the sorrow song, Hayes frames the love sonnet as a vehicle for negotiating difference. The aim, finally, is to foreground the “light side” of Du Bois’ love song—one that facilitates interracial communication while viewing America’s history of pain and trauma.

American Sonnets frames historical reflection within the archival space of the sonnet. The love sonnet, in particular, becomes a spatiotemporal form that examines what van Jordan calls the iconographic quality “of our daily lives that serves as a reflection of our internal lives” (348–49). Both the physical and intellectual oppression of Black people testify to the constant struggle for equal social integration. In response, New Black Aesthetic institutions provide talented poets with the space to thrive in communities of support. Within these enclaves, the sonneteer channels combative energy into cooperative creation, which “negotiate[s] . . . the intraracial distinctions of belonging and exclusion” (Müller 95). For van Jordan, these “internal lives” extend not only to interracial dynamics but also to questions of belonging among Black Americans themselves. Such institutions admit members from diverse social backgrounds, emphasizing inclusion and collective strength.

This promotion of individual poets within collective institutions links directly to the theme of temporality in *American Sonnets*. Hayes juxtaposes the personal and the communal, as the sonnet “I only intend to send word to my future” (79) declares: “I only intend to send word to my future / Self perpetuation is a war against Time” (ll. 1–2). The absence of punctuation creates interpretive openness, inviting both external and internal readings of temporality for the New Black Aesthetic poet.

Externally, the lines gesture toward the communal future of Black poetry. Here, self-perpetuation becomes essential to ensuring that Black institutions continue reshaping racialized social structures and preventing artists from vanishing into obscurity—forgotten ghosts confined to archives and commemorative photographs, as in the sonnet “Any day now you will have the ability to feed the name” (56, ll. 13–14). Internally, Hayes’ use of enjambment ties the future of the poetic community to the poet’s own prospective self. In this sense, perpetuation is figured as a combative response to time’s erasures, a survival strategy that defines both the poet and the tradition he inherits.

Hayes situates *American Sonnets* within what Bhabha terms a postcolonial “contramodernity” (361). His stance as an apprentice to history opens future perspectives for the Black aesthetic, even as he describes himself more as a scholar of African American history than as a theorist of future Black poetics. By pursuing the legacies of the New Negro Movement and the Black Arts Movement, Hayes embodies the poet of the future from the vantage point of the past. As Bhabha argues, modernity always unfolds in correlation with the past (see 345)¹⁹.

This temporal layering appears clearly in Hayes’ treatment of the African American sonnet. Whereas the Black Arts Movement often rejected the sonnet as a White form, the New Black Aesthetics reclaim it as a progressive and valid Black art. Hayes realizes the futuristic vision of Black Arts poets who had already sought to incorporate the sonnet into the corpus of Black poetry. In Levine’s terms, what earlier poets failed to see is that poetic forms function as “organizing principles . . . [which] are iterable—portable. They can be picked up and moved to new contexts” (7). In Bhabha’s phrasing, this constitutes “a form of cultural reinscription that moves *back to the future*,” or, more precisely, “a ‘projective’ past, a form of the future anterior” (361; italics in original). *American Sonnets* embodies this back-and-forth movement through time, connecting past, present, and future to historical events and locations. As Müller observes, the sequence “combines temporal and spatial strategies to subvert conventional notions of blackness and the limitations they impose on black life and identity” (12). These limitations have long constrained Black poets in their aesthetic freedom and sources of inspiration; Hayes answers by reframing the sonnet as a temporal experiment.

Time itself becomes a survival strategy in Hayes’ poetics. The lyrical speaker insists that “A brother has to know how to time travel & doctor / Himself when a knee or shoe stalls against his neck” (77, ll. 13–14). This love sonnet anchors itself in the poet’s personal sphere, while implicitly referring to the communal one. Likewise, in “In a parallel world where all Dr. Who’s” (77), the lyrical speaker instructs Black poets to treat poetry as a cure for racial violence, a resource for intellectual recovery. The lines “Time-machine / [to be] a kenning for the mind” (61, ll. 11–12) extend this metaphor: Hayes encourages his peers to time-travel through memory and history,

¹⁹ Reflecting on the intersection of past and present, Bhabha asks, “what is modernity in those colonial conditions where its imposition is itself the denial of historical freedom, civic autonomy and the ‘ethical’ choice of refashioning?” (345). In the context of the New Black Aesthetics and their roots in the colonial origins of the U.S., his question clarifies how contemporary Black poets articulate their understanding of temporal and historical connections through their work.

training their intellects as poets. In doing so, they merge the New Negro sonnet with the free verse of the Black Arts Movement—interacting with the sonnet while distancing themselves from the ideological taboo against mixing Black and White art. The result is the experimental poetry of the New Black Aesthetics, through which Hayes defines the intellectual identity of the contemporary Black poet.

American Sonnets centers on the identity of the Black male, drawing both on Hayes' autobiographical experiences and on broader cultural patterns of racialized threat. Komunyakaa likewise emphasizes the vulnerability of Black male identity, portraying "language and the poem itself becom[ing] a last defense . . . [L]anguage avenges pain, brings back what is lost, masks suffering, denies it, and heals it" (Derricotte and Komunyakaa 513). Hayes' sonnets echo this defense mechanism by repeatedly returning to a refrain that functions as both a thematic anchor and a protest: "But there never was a black male hysteria" (7, 76). In most cases, this phrase appears as the sonnet's opening line, but in the sonnet "But there never was a black male hysteria" (7) it frames the poem entirely, surfacing in both line 1 and line 14. The framing encapsulates the Black man's daily exposure to lethal threats, whether from racist mobs or from the pseudo-legal institutions that justify racial violence (see 7, l. 7). The lyrical speaker indicts such institutions, denouncing their "reviews" as "half-studies, misreads & night / Mares" (7, ll. 10–11).

The recurrence of this line across the sequence dramatizes both persistence and erasure. In the sonnet "But there never was a black male hysteria" (76), the lyrical speaker contemplates the disappearance of the Black male, noting how White hysteria, rooted in fear of Black retribution, produces violent results that society accepts with disturbing ease. Claiming the Black male to be "not being hunted / By hysteria" (76, ll. 12–13), the sonnet turns the statement inside out, insisting instead that Whites hysterically hunt the Black male. Hayes heightens this irony through sound: *hunted* echoes *haunted*, suggesting the intergenerational trauma that shadows the Black male psyche. That same logic of homophony extends to another pairing: *Black male* as a phonetic double of *blackmail*. The pun reveals the cultural script underlying the sonnets: a racist ideology that threatens to annihilate the Black male precisely for asserting equality with Whites. By addressing these traumas directly in experimental sonnets, Hayes transforms the genre into a space of resistance. His project is to reimagine the cultural identity of the Black male and, in doing so, to redefine what Black poetry can be within the frame of the New Black Aesthetics.

Hayes' role in shaping Black identities through the New Black Aesthetics aligns closely with Müller's claim that twenty-first-century poets must "draw . . . on spatiotemporal experimental technique to destabilize essentialist conceptions of the black experience and negotiate the individual views, identities, and allegiances of contemporary African American poets" (128). In the sonnet "But there never was a black male hysteria" (41), Hayes explicitly connects himself to Hughes, a central influence, to compare the everyday social struggles Black men and poets endure. "Lines covered in bruises & stars, almost / Unhinged lyrics" (41, ll. 7–8) imply Hayes' connection to Hughes and suggest that the violence inflicted on the Black body merges into poetic form. The figure of "The man . . . high yellow / In public, afraid of himself" (ll. 8–9) dramatizes the internal dilemma of racial identity: whether to pass as White or to embrace the position of a Black poet, knowing that society will refuse to accept him fully as either. The passage encapsulates the fractured sense of belonging that haunts the Black poet's self-definition.

This tension between belonging and exclusion highlights the broader struggle of Black poets for recognition, situating Hayes within what Houston A. Baker terms the "deformation of mastery" (cf. *Modernism*). For Bhabha, this process becomes "a vernacularism, based on the enunciation of the subject as 'never a simple coming into being, but a release from being possessed'" (346). Hayes' *American Sonnets* embodies that release: by appropriating the rigidly codified sonnet form, marked as White, and fusing it with experimental free verse as a marker of Blackness, he produces a poetic hybrid that both resists and reclaims possession. This hybridization demands cultural tolerance for poets like Hughes, whose internal conflicts exemplify the psychic toll of racialization. At the same time, Hayes' sonnets establish a spatiotemporal framework that anchors the New Black Aesthetics in a dialogue with past movements while pressing forward into new artistic ground. Ultimately, the very confinement of the sonnet provides the necessary pressure for innovation: Black poets carve out an aesthetic space of liberation, turning free verse into a tool for both personal and collective possession of the form—and of themselves.

In *American Sonnets*, Hayes uses the sonnet both as a liberating form of expression and as a tool for personal and public acknowledgment. In the sonnet "It was discovered the best way to combat" (75), the lyrical speaker longs to become a piece of art, suggesting that poetry grants the Black poet freedom of spirit: "As a poem I could show my children the man / I dreamed I was" (ll. 11–12). The speaker, implied

as male, desires a flawless appearance that mirrors the ordered structure of the sonnet. Yet his pursuit of acknowledgment through experimental verbal and physical expression remains a utopian ideal. Hayes places blame for this impossibility on White supremacy, which relies on legal language as a means of political enunciation to maintain power. The sarcastic edge of his critique emerges in the sonnet “Because a law was passed that said there was no worth” (54), where the lyrical speaker declares that “The race was made of various adverbs / And adversaries” (ll. 10–11). Here the “adverb,” a non-inflectable word class, becomes a metaphor for White supremacists’ refusal to legally recognize different, non-dominant (racial) forms of expression.

By claiming the sonnet, Hayes directly counters White supremacy’s hold on cultural forms and transforms it into a site of resistance. This act recalls Bhabha’s theory of the “third space,” where “[t]he social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation” (3). The African American sonnet of the New Black Aesthetics thus becomes a hybrid space in which the combined traditions of Black and White art redefine the form and affirm its legitimacy within contemporary U.S. culture.

As I argued before, Hayes also stresses his role as an apprentice to history by situating *American Sonnets* in dialogue with earlier art movements and with the legacies of past generations. For him, learning from the Black aesthetic tradition is inseparable from familial inheritance and spatiotemporal awareness. In the sonnet “Inside me is a black-eyed animal” (6), the lyrical speaker recalls: “I was raised / By a beautiful man. I loved his grasp of time. / My mother shaped my grasp of space” (ll. 9–11). The father’s “grasp of time” places the son within African American history and its legacies, while the mother’s “grasp of space” provides the formal grounding of the sonnet. Together, these parental bonds shape the lyrical speaker’s sense of self-validation and cultural identity, reinforcing the larger claim that the New Black Aesthetics are built from both inherited history and formal innovation.

In *American Sonnets*, the father becomes a metaphor for time, guiding the lyrical speaker toward recognition of his place in African American history and his duty to carry forward ancestral legacies. This emphasis positions the sequence as a collage of poetic recognition. By building on the aesthetic achievements of past generations, the speaker—like Hayes—preserves and enhances his work through the sonnet form. The mother, by contrast, embodies spatial grounding, shaping the sonnet

as the environment in which the speaker locates his selfhood. The sonnet “Inside me is a black-eyed animal” (6) exemplifies the love sonnet in its focus on the intimate sphere of the Black family, who provide “a shelter from disruption in which love, intimacy, and vulnerability can subsist” (Müller 105). The seemingly flawless structure of the “American Sonnet” mirrors the mother’s dual role: strictness in discipline and tenderness in affection. Hayes underscores this tension formally through enjambments, which leave lines open to external influences, symbolically exposing the lyrical speaker to the intimacy and vulnerability Müller identifies.

The father also functions as an emblem of the past, one that the son perceives as both wound and historical legacy. Contextualizing the father in the course of history,

A son finds his father handsome because
The son can almost see how he might
Become superb as the scar above a wound.
And because the son can see who he was
Long before he had a name, the trace of
His future on earth long before he arrived. (43, ll. 9-14)

Hayes frames the father as a scar—painful yet beautiful, evidence of survival and of time’s healing power. Here, the father becomes a front-line soldier in the racial struggle, whose scars shape the son’s self-reliance. For the son, the father is both a historical artifact and a living wound, one that begins to heal through the son’s readiness to inherit and continue the fight. Having learned his father’s story, the son gains a name, a future, and an intellectual role as a poet, prepared to represent the struggles of the generation before him.

While the father teaches the son to mediate between Black and White cultural spheres, the mother grounds him in self-awareness and nurtures his role as an advocate of the New Black Aesthetics. Natasha Trethewey’s account of the literary hybrid resonates here: she argues that the representation of multiple voices in a literary piece must be read not as “‘memoir, but . . . an investigation of the self’ as well as a type of ‘investigative reporting’” (Hall x)²⁰. In the sonnet “My mother says I am beautiful inside” (65), the lyrical speaker functions as Hayes’ autobiographical mirror, recalling formative episodes of adolescence and the precarious threshold of manhood. When his

²⁰ In her interview with Jocelyn Heath (2011), Trethewey describes *literary hybrids* as a variety of voices, “a blend of investigative reporting with interviews, blended with a kind of travel narrative, blended also with personal narrative – not a memoir, but somehow clearly an investigation of the self as well” (203). Hayes’ sonnets reflect a similar hybridity. They stage diverse speakers and their memories while investigating the impact of history on Black people. He combines historical facts from Black perspectives on U.S. history with his own experiences as an American. In uncovering and exploring his own self, Hayes also investigates the collective self of the Black minority in his representative function as a Black poet.

stepfather left the family for remote work, Hayes struggled with self-awareness, having lost the only male role model in the household. In response, he acted with reckless independence, convinced of his adulthood yet untethered from guidance.

Hayes recalls that his mother once threatened him with a gun to reassert his place within both family and society. As he explains,

[s]he didn't know how else to discipline me. She wanted me to know she was still the *man* of the house, so to speak. (Hayes and Rowell 1071; original italics).

'I was 18 trying to be a man, [but to her] I'm the same thing I've always been, a son'. (1072)

Though she never intended harm, this moment taught him respect for himself and for his social environment, a lesson that shaped his developing self-awareness. Recognizing his mother's intention clarifies the ancestral legacy Hayes enacts as a Black poet. Just as his mother used intimidation without violence, his lyrical speaker often threatens the White assassin rhetorically, urging readers to confront the racial attitudes inherited from their ancestors. Hayes' depiction of his mother resonates with Coleman's claim that "post-Black Arts poetics . . . involves attention to not only race and class, but also gender" (Ryan 428).

The image of the gun, however, leaves a lasting impression in *American Sonnets*. In the sonnet "My mother says I am beautiful inside" (65), the lyrical speaker recalls a Black mother who "calls me her silver / Bullet" (65, ll. 4–5). As a renowned poet, Hayes transforms this memory into pride in his origins, integrating it into his art. The sonnet continues: "My mother says I am beautiful inside / And out" (ll. 1–2). Here, Hayes alludes to Hughes' "racial mountain," asserting the value of personal origin as central to Black poetry and its role in affirming the Black aesthetic. At the same time, the sonnet echoes the "Black-Is-Beautiful" ethos of the Black Arts Movement by celebrating both the physical and intellectual dimensions of the Black poet.

Ultimately, *American Sonnets* underscores how multiple influences construct the identity of both poet and poem. The lyrical speaker embodies his parents' lessons, internalizing and continuing their identities within himself. In parallel, the African American sonnet emerges as a polygeneric form that incorporates a wide spectrum of genres. Hayes, as a modern disciple of the New Negro and the Black Arts Movements, embodies the legacies of both traditions, while each sonnet in *American Sonnets* operates as a single fragment contributing to the total sequence.

In literary terms, each element in *American Sonnets* functions as a *pars pro toto*—a Latin phrase meaning “one part that represents all.” As a rhetorical device, it designates the detail that embodies the larger whole. Hayes structures his sequence around this principle: the lyrical speaker stands in for Black Americans, Hayes himself becomes a figure for the New Black Aesthetic poet, and the African American sonnet represents American poetry as a whole. By extension, the Black race becomes a synecdoche for America’s cultural identity. In this context, Hayes insists that his “race war” is fought on the intellectual rather than physical level, seeking recognition for the African American sonnet as a legitimate art form. This stance is crystallized in the sonnet “I’m full of more water than a forest” (40), where the lyrical speaker proclaims that

. . . My armor is flesh
And spirit. I carry a flag bearing a different
Nation on each side. I carry money bearing
The face of my assassins. (ll. 3-6)

Here, “flesh and spirit” serve as weapons, underscoring Hayes’ refusal of physical violence. Instead, *American Sonnets* functions as an archive of generational trauma, while the poet’s resistance emerges through what Trethewey has called “investigative reporting” (Hall x). Hayes thus positions his intellectual labor, supported by institutions like Cave Canem and the Dark Room Collective, as the true site of poetic and cultural power.

At the same time, the sequence critiques America’s unfinished project of cultural identity by exposing the persistence of racial division. The Black lyrical speaker’s flag embodies this duality: on one side, the white stars and stripes of the United States, which remain bound to White supremacy; on the other, the flag of Black nationalism, an emblem of self-determined cultural survival. This visual contrast dramatizes a nation coexistent yet profoundly divided. Further, Hayes’ speaker points to U.S. currency—bearing exclusively White faces—as another marker of exclusion, a daily reminder that “White assassins” claimed the nation for themselves while erasing the Black labor that secured its early economic growth. In this sense, the enslaved person becomes another *pars pro toto*, a figure through which Hayes critiques the nation’s refusal to acknowledge Black hands as foundational to its wealth.

The sonnet “Why someone would crowd into a church is beyond me” (58) shifts to a more emotional register when the lyrical speaker’s mother laments, “Why give good money to Death?” (l. 14). Her question identifies White supremacist

leadership as an “assassinating regime,” one that abolished physical slavery yet continues to oppress Black Americans through economic means. This emotional outburst underscores her sense of marginalization—she perceives herself as only one among many racial groups that shape American culture, yet still denied equal recognition. In this way, the mother functions as a *pars pro toto*, embodying both her own experience and that of the broader Black community seeking acknowledgment within the nation.

Hayes sets this *pars pro toto* against its counterpart, *e pluribus unum*—the U.S. motto meaning “multiple parts become one.” Originally signifying the union of the colonies into a single nation, the phrase is reimagined in *American Sonnets* to signal the multiplicity of racial and cultural lineages that compose the modern United States. Hayes transforms the motto into a meditation on pluralism, insisting that the African American sonnet itself is both an archive and a living practice that keeps this plurality in view. As an apprentice to history, Hayes situates his sonnets as tributes to Black aesthetic achievements and as polygeneric spaces of enunciation. In doing so, he asserts that the African American sonnet of the New Black Aesthetics functions as a *pars pro toto* for American literature as a whole, and *American Sonnets* becomes a culturally recognized fraction of *e pluribus unum*.

Chapter 2

Erasure

On January 6, 2021, pro-Trump radicals stormed the Capitol in Washington, D.C., protesting the outcome of the 2020 presidential election. For poets of the New Black Aesthetics, the riot intensified questions about whether the White supremacist mindset toward Black Americans had shifted at all—or whether it remained as entrenched as ever. In *Wade in the Water* (2018), Tracy K. Smith responds by constructing a poetic and historically grounded archive that offers a rectified account of African American history. Her poems weave together love, death, compassion, and aggression to narrate the “true” history of Black people, one long distorted by erasure. As a poet of the New Black Aesthetics, Smith claims for herself what Schwartz and Cook describe as the archival “power to make records of certain events and ideas and not of others, power to name, label, and order records to meet business, government, or personal needs, power to preserve the record, power to mediate the record, power over access, power over individual rights and freedoms, over collective memory and national identity” (5). By reconceptualizing the archive as a Black expression of historical authority, Smith seeks to correct the longstanding absence of power “from the traditional archival perspective” (ibid.). In doing so, she not only explores how contemporary Black poets confront Langston Hughes’ racial mountain but also directly challenges White supremacist efforts to efface the role of Black people from America’s historical record.

If Smith’s *Wade in the Water* reconceptualizes the archive as a form of Black historical authority, then her paratextual framework becomes the structural key to that rectification. One significant paratextual feature in *Wade in the Water* is Smith’s consistent use of italicized titles. As paratexts, these titles operate not only as identifiers but as framing devices that shape the reader’s approach to each poem before the lyrical text begins. Their italicized appearance functions as a visual hint that signals instability, transition, and fluidity—qualities that are central to the poetry collection’s focus on water and memory. By presenting the titles in italics, Smith informs readers that her poems are not autonomous in themselves but entries of a dynamic historical and cultural archive. The paratext functions as a mediator: it marks the threshold between history and poetry, guiding the reader to consider the poems as sites of passage where personal memory, collective trauma, and archival recovery intersect.

Smith also uses paratexts to frame her poems as spaces of recognition as theorized by DuPlessis. Headings, notes, and textual framing characterize her work as positioned in a social context, encouraging readers to consider not only the poems themselves but also their larger cultural resonance. For instance, when a title identifies a poem as drawn from correspondence or a historical record, it functions as a hint at recognition: the reader is invited to acknowledge both the art of the poem and the historical reality of a reawakened, historical voice. These paratexts operate as means of recognition, transforming the act of reading into an act of witnessing. They resist the erasure of marginalized voices by insisting on their visibility of lyrical spaces, rather than banning them to scholarly appendices or footnotes.

Epigraphs and references to biblical passages and historical documents form another crucial layer of paratext in *Wade in the Water*. By situating her poems within these intertexts, Smith creates a dialogue between tradition, national history, and contemporary Black experience. Biblical allusions frame suffering and deliverance within a spiritual framework. Historical references employ the voice of the lyrical speaker to highlight specific archival realities, such as Civil War letters or accounts of slavery. These paratexts function as interpretative guides, situating each poem within a larger canon of historical texts that have shaped collective memory. The biblical echoes Smith incorporates emphasize the moral urgency of her poetry, while her historical paratexts are rooted in a specific archive. Thereby, she reinforces the New Black Aesthetics' commitment to blending lyric form with documentary recovery.

Building on her paratextual strategies, Smith grounds the rectification of history in the very materiality of *Wade in the Water*. The book becomes a material expression of the Black aquatic, resisting the dominance of White narratives that long claimed the authority of "official" U.S. history while erasing Black memory. To counter this development, Smith insists on the historical complexity of Black identity by employing a broad range of poetic forms. Poetry, she argues, is the only literary genre capable of "radically re-humaniz[ing]" Black people (Smith, "Staying Human"). By transforming historical documents into a poetic archive, she opens the possibility of an interracial dialogue and reshapes collective memory. The multiplicity of forms mirrors the individuality of each Black person, even as they remain part of a larger racial community. In this sense, *Wade in the Water* functions as an archive of the repressed, positioning the poet of the New Black Aesthetics as a griot of contemporary Black Americans. Through the entwined concepts of the Black archive, the Black

aquatic, and Hughes' racial mountain, Smith preserves cultural memory, foregrounds Black identity, and offers a corrected account of African American history.

As a central figure in the contemporary New Black Aesthetics, Smith pursues this archival rectification by positioning herself as both historian and curator of African American experience. Her poems create a space for the voices silenced or ignored by White historical accounts, insisting on the recognition of Black contributions to U.S. history. Black poetry thus becomes a countermeasure to the historical erasure of African American presence and influence. Smith's authority is grounded in her affiliation with influential Black poetry institutions such as the Dark Room Collective, which provided both recognition and support for her work. At the same time, her reach extends beyond these circles, culminating in her service as U.S. Poet Laureate from 2017 to 2019²¹. Critics often describe her poetry as haunting, a quality that arises from her ability to weave the collective unconscious into her personal history. As Toi Derricotte, co-founder of Cave Canem, observes, Smith's poems "are beautiful and serene, but underneath, there is always a sense of an unknown vastness. Her poems take the risk of inviting us to imagine, as the poet does, what it is to travel in another person's shoes" ("Tracy K. Smith"). This sense of vastness reflects her role as an archivist: she preserves African American history by inviting readers to experience its depth and weight from within the lyrical space of her work.

Smith's haunting poetics, noted by Derricotte, also resonate with Natasha Trethewey's observation of an aura of ghosts within her work. Trethewey explains that these ghosts lend poetry a "seediness," embodying "the presence of this history" (Anderson 91). This sense of spectral presence proves especially significant in *Wade in the Water*, where Smith and Trethewey share thematic concerns such as racist violence against African Americans and the subordination of Black women. Their poetic "doubles," as Keith D. Leonard suggests, become fertile ground for "the black mind's active creation of beautiful solutions to the aesthetic problems caused by race politics" (25). In Smith's case, the haunting imagery underscores her archival project:

²¹ The Library of Congress appointed Tracy K. Smith as the twenty-second U.S. Poet Laureate in recognition of her investigative approach as a poet. Carla Hayden, the Librarian of Congress, explained that Smith's poetry "brings history and memory to life; calls on the power of literature . . . With directness and deftness, she contends with the heavens or plumbs our inner depths – all to better understand what makes us most human" (Armenti et al.). Emphasizing poetry's power to shape public consciousness, Smith used her laureateship to launch the project "American Conversations: Celebrating Poems in Rural Communities," which sought to spark nationwide dialogue about poetry's role in shaping social constructs and to deepen people's awareness and appreciation of the art form.

by engaging with the “historical seediness” of racial conflict, she turns her poetry into a record that insists on remembering what dominant narratives would prefer to erase.

This commitment to remembrance positions Smith within a lineage of iconic Black poets who also dedicate their art to countering historical erasure. Trethewey herself frames her work as a corrective archive²² (Anderson 89), while Lucille Clifton—Smith’s greatest poetic influence—embodies a “sense of agency and authority; the power of personal and collective history; and a nonsensational mystic spirituality linked to broader diasporic understandings of the sacred” (Harding 37). Smith inherits and expands these commitments, focusing her own curatorial work on selective remembrance. Through *Wade in the Water*, she asks how New Black Aesthetic poets might provide tribute to those who have been systematically excluded from history. Her answer lies in building an archive that illuminates forgotten personal stories and situates them as central to the cultural memory of Black America.

Yusef Komunyakaa’s phrase “investment in silence” (7) captures the essence of Smith’s archival project: she retrieves the silenced voices that American canons have intentionally overlooked. While *Cave Canem* remains vital to questions of cultural identity, Smith primarily affiliates with the Dark Room Collective, whose members devote themselves to “the almighty power of language to make any themes, ideas, beliefs, and questions mean more” (Lee 15). This pursuit aligns with what DuPlessis terms *cultural legibility*, “a learned practice” tied to institutional frameworks that shape what is valued and remembered (59). Smith critiques the limitations of her MFA training at Columbia, which excluded many Black writers, and credits the Dark Room Collective with providing the access her alma mater denied—to figures such as Komunyakaa and Rita Dove²³. It was this community that allowed her to develop into the archivist she embodies in *Wade in the Water*, ensuring her work contributes to both cultural preservation and poetic innovation.

Smith’s archival orientation is clear in her own reflections. In conversation with Charles Rowell, she explains that the Dark Room Collective supported her in discerning “what kinds of things you want to begin to notice” as a Black poet (868). For Smith, this means attending to the (his-)stories of anonymous Black individuals,

²² See footnote on the definition of *historical erasure* in chapter 1, “The Sonnet,” p. 32.

²³ In an interview with Claire Schwartz, Tracy K. Smith explains that listening to Black poets at the Dark Room Collective, rather than being limited to mainstream White writers, shaped her fundamental understanding of poetry’s impact. She recalls that this experience “did something so important to counterbalance the voices that I was hearing in my classes, [where] I didn’t read Yusef Komunyakaa or Rita Dove . . . I read them because of the Dark Room” (179).

on whose behalf she, Komunyakaa, Dove, and other poets write. The Collective's mission—to forge intergenerational connections through creative work—deeply shaped her approach, nurturing her sense of belonging within a community of like-minded writers (see Leonard 27–28). Out of this environment, Smith cultivates her archival impulse: to represent overlooked Black lives and place them at the center of America's historical memory.

Her poetry enacts this communal dialogue. As Komunyakaa observes, Smith engages “through metaphorical inquiry that is highly political and enduring” (qtd. in Leonard 21). *Wade in the Water* builds precisely such a dialogue between the African American past and present, tracing how the shadow of enslavement continues to shape Black identities. Rather than focusing primarily on indicting oppressors, Smith directs her energy toward recovering her ancestors' voices and acknowledging their struggles, which makes her a notably gentler voice than Terrance Hayes within the contemporary “chorus”²⁴ of African American poets. This orientation highlights her role as an archivist: she forges a record of historical memory that reflects the lived experiences of Black Americans and insists on their agency within U.S. history. In this sense, she also extends Lucille Clifton's legacy of weaving poetic agency and historical power into art.

As Schwartz and Cook remind us, “[a]rchives have always been about power” (13). *Wade in the Water* foregrounds precisely this dimension: its “power to privilege and to marginalize,” its function as “a tool of resistance,” and its ability to “reflect and constitute power relations” (ibid.). Smith's lyrical speakers bear the responsibility of building such an archival framework. They amplify multiple Black voices—ordinary citizens, mothers, and artists alike—whose everyday environments expose them to systemic struggles with poverty, gender hierarchies, and violence. In doing so, Smith turns her poetry into an alternative archive, one that confronts the exclusions of dominant historical narratives while preserving a more complete account of Black American life.

Smith frames *Wade in the Water* with “*Garden of Eden*,” a poem that immediately reinterprets biblical myth as a record in need of correction. By opening with the creation story, she highlights her archival role: to interrogate familiar narratives and expose their failures. The lyrical speaker admits to a “profound longing / . . . / For the Garden of Eden” (Smith, *Wade* 3), but quickly dismantles the myth by

²⁴ See Brown, p. 647.

focusing on monotony and sameness. This critique appears formally in the poem's structure: a single stanza of long run-on sentences that mirror the stasis of paradise.

The lines

Everyone I knew was living
The same desolate luxury,
Each ashamed of the same things:
Innocence and privacy . . . , (ibid.)

point to the psychic burdens of ordinary life and the absence of genuine liberation. Instead of accepting Eden as an unchallenged archive, the lyrical speaker insists on rewriting it, inserting personal and veiled histories that contest dominant records of U.S. society.

This biblical opening also underlines Lucille Clifton's influence. As Rachel E. Harding notes, Clifton's Black Christian upbringing made her "very familiar with the many stories of the Old and New Testaments, and [she] was already predisposed to view them from the liberationist perspective of the black church" (39). Smith's "*Garden of Eden*" echoes that tradition by claiming agency in the face of monotony and by demanding radical change. Even the title gestures toward transformation: "Eden" can be read as an anagram of "Need"—the need to elevate Black people from desolation to recognition as cultural assets; the need for Black poets to distinguish themselves within American poetry; the need to transform privacy into a collective tool of resistance. The paradise within and desolation outside reflect the racial divisions of the United States, making Eden a metaphor for exclusion and longing.

By emphasizing this "profound longing" (Smith, *Wade* 3), Smith positions the poem as a direct confrontation with White elites who believe themselves divinely justified in maintaining racial hierarchies. The ending underscores her critique: "The known sun setting / On the dawning century" closes with an ambiguous cliffhanger that destabilizes the very idea of history's neutrality (ibid.). Historical "facts," the poem suggests, are never neutral but constructed by those in power, deciding what becomes part of the record and what is erased. In this way, the poem sets the tone for *Wade in the Water* as a whole: an archive that both preserves and contests, insisting on new forms of remembrance that center Black experience.

Smith builds on Clifton's view that "Black [Christian] religion . . . has been not only a freedom exegesis but a protected space for the cultivation of an alternative orientation . . . in contradiction to the derision and constriction imputed to African Americans by the mainstream" (Harding 41). In doing so, she challenges the dominant

historiography of the United States. For Smith, history as traditionally taught is an indoctrinated record that limits perception: “this mindset can prevent you from being open to *other versions of fact*” (“Art” 00:13:21–27; my emphasis)²⁵. The ending of “*Garden of Eden*” responds to the opening’s longing for paradise. The “dawning century” (Smith, *Wade* 3) points to both a new beginning and a collective awakening from delusion. It signals that a bright age for the Black poet is about to begin, reframing paradise as future possibility rather than past loss.

The imagery also layers biblical and metaphorical references. “Sun” functions as a homophone for “son,” invoking Adam as the first human son in the Old Testament and his harmony with Eve. Smith uses this pairing to symbolize racial differences, extending the contrast into light and darkness. Adam as “sun” represents day and light, while Eve becomes “eve,” evening, and night. The poem thus positions human origins as metaphors for racial coexistence. In this framework, the New Black Aesthetic poet “becomes historical inscription, . . . challenging the authority of traditional historical knowledge by making self-critical poetic interpretation at least as legitimate” (Leonard 23). Eve, then, becomes a metaphorical stand-in for Smith as a Black woman writer. The poem closes with light, signaling the dawning age of Black Americans, who, like a Jesus-like son, will be redeemed by the work of New Black Aesthetic poets.

For Smith, metaphor itself is the poet’s central redemptive tool. As she explains, metaphor “is an acknowledgement of the fundamentally distorting nature of the things that move us. Metaphor recalibrates our sense of experience, so that the ordinary world applies less and less to what we have been taught to feel” (Smith, “Altogether” 390). The poem’s reliance on metaphor reframes both history and experience, asserting the legitimacy of Black poetic reinterpretation as a counter-history.

“*Garden of Eden*” sets the stage in *Wade in the Water* by voicing the African American poet’s longing for a new beginning in racial coexistence, and the following poem, “*The Angels*,” expands that vision. Here, divine Black angels arrive as

²⁵ Smith argues that the creation of historiography is a subjective act shaped by influential “authors” who decide which aspects of a historical event or period merit permanent recording. She highlights the dualities, if not multiplicities, of historical reporting, since history inevitably encourages multiple perspectives on past occurrences (see “Art” 00:11:54–12:35). Yet, Smith deliberately seeks to disrupt traditional recollections constructed by supremacist narratives and instead amplifies the voices of the suppressed and overlooked. In doing so, she builds a counterbalance to falsified reports and exposes the ideological stakes of historical memory. Central to this effort is her inquiry into what constitutes a “(historical) fact,” which she defines as nothing more than a widely accepted assumption about a historical event, reinforced by an ideologically likeminded majority.

“Emissaries / For something I needed to see” (Smith, *Wade* 4). Though at first intimidating, these figures embody the racial dynamics that continue to suppress Black communities under White indoctrination. “[W]ith a deck // Of playing cards between them,” the angels metaphorically hold the fate of Black people in their hands (ibid.). Yet their role is not only to expose oppression but to aid in recalibrating experience. As Smith explains, metaphor itself “recalibrates our sense of experience, so that the ordinary world applies less and less to what we have been taught to feel” (“Altogether” 390). In this way, the angels illuminate the collective power of Black communities to resist marginalization and transform historical trauma into communal strength.

At the same time, the poem enacts what Schwartz and Cook call the disproof of the “archival myth of neutrality and objectivity” (18). Rather than reproducing state-centered histories that “privilege . . . the official narratives of the state over the private stories of individuals” (ibid.), Smith insists on centering erased or overlooked Black voices. “Think of the toil we must cost them,” the lyrical speaker proclaims, a reminder of unrelenting Black activism against White supremacy (Smith, *Wade* 4). The angels in the eponymous poem thus serve as harbingers from the past, voices that “come, telling us / Through the ages not to fear” (ibid.), guiding the path toward the new beginning longed for in “*Garden of Eden*.” Beyond the archivist, Smith assumes the role of a curator—selecting, framing, and reanimating both mythical sources like Eden and foundational political documents such as the Declaration of Independence. In doing so, she claims authority over the archive itself, preserving the African American contribution to U.S. history and reshaping the cultural record to prioritize race relations as central to the nation’s past and future.

Smith defines the archive of the New Black Aesthetics as a site of power that operates not through “absolute control” but through what Simon Gikandi terms the “‘third text’ of the archive, namely works written by people who were neither masters nor slaves” (93). Positioning herself in this in-between space, Smith writes as a descendant of enslaved people but never as a slave herself. In *Wade in the Water*, she selects and reframes archival materials to create space for Black historical presence, establishing a cultural distinction that resists erasure while honoring the continuity of African American memory.

This “third text” connects directly to Homi Bhabha’s theory of the Third Space of Enunciation. Bhabha explains that “[t]hese ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs

of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (sic 2). Smith exemplifies this process, foregrounding her own poetic selfhood while simultaneously embodying the communal role of the Black poet. Through this framework, *Wade in the Water* sensitizes readers to the persistent thread of racial struggle, exclusion, and—importantly—bridge-building across U.S. history.

As mediator, Smith positions herself between races, between historical epochs, and between the personal and communal functions of her poetry. She enacts this role formally as well, creating a dialogue between the material design of her texts and the abstract content they carry. The visual layout of her poems often registers absence or fracture: gaps on the page mirror the lyrical speaker’s sense of loss, dislocation, or fragmentation of identity²⁶. Nowhere is this more powerful than in the second section’s central poem, “*I Will Tell You the Truth about This, I Will Tell You All about It*”²⁷. Drawing from letters written by Black Civil War veterans and their families, the poem gives voice to individuals grappling with the incompleteness of their lives—most often their desperate appeals to President Lincoln to locate family members lost to slavery or to the chaos of war.

The poem “*I Will Tell You the Truth about This*” gathers exemplary passages that capture the feelings of loss and desperation troubling its Black lyrical speakers. Each page preserves the voice of a single individual, yet together the letters trace a collective arc—from the enslaved bondsman, to the liberated person, to the legal U.S. citizen. Shaped by Smith’s biblical influences, the poem structurally recalls the Gospels as a multiperspectival narrative of one story. As Smith explains, it is “simply the same story told from different perspectives. And the thing that’s most beautiful to me about those books is that there are very subtle differences – tiny gaps between what one speaker remembers and what another does” (Smith and Rowell 863). In doing so, the poem inaugurates African American history as told by Black contemporaries themselves, free from the manipulative omissions of White historiography.

As a curator of a reliable Black archive, Smith turns fragmentation into a strategy for wholeness. Each letter records an individual speaker fractured by the absence or loss of a family member whose emotional or financial support was

²⁶ See pages 77-78 of this dissertation.

²⁷ Smith explains that the “documents in question have been abridged, [but] the poem preserves the original spellings and punctuation,” underscoring her intent to maintain the historical atmosphere of the archival materials she incorporates into the poem (Smith, *Wade* 75).

indispensable. By presenting both the audible fragments of voice and the visual fragments of handwritten letters, Smith underscores the personal incompleteness of each author. Yet when placed side by side, these fragments produce a composite picture of Black Civil War contemporaries whose concerns resonate across individual cases to represent the wider experience of African Americans.

From a New Formalist perspective, “*I Will Tell You the Truth about This*” functions as what has been called “[a] panoptic arrangement of space, . . . which will always afford a certain kind of disciplinary power” (Levine 7). *Wade in the Water* assumes the role of a poetic panopticon: it observes all the voices equally, confers on them a shared disciplinary power, and secures recognition for those once erased from the official record. By incorporating these letters into her archive, Smith advances a poetics of recognition—acknowledging overlooked fates, restoring interpersonal bonds, and affirming the individuality of the speakers. In turn, she situates these fragmentary voices as the genesis of African American history and as cultural roots with which contemporary Black Americans can identify.

One “monitored” voice emerges in a letter dated November 21, 1864, written by a Black mother who pleads for her son’s release from the Union army. Addressing Abraham Lincoln directly, rather than relying on subordinates, she petitions:

Mr abarham lincon
 I wont to knw sir if you please
 whether I can have my son relest
 from the arme he is all the suport
 I have now his father is Dead. (sic Smith, *Wade* 22)

This passage illustrates how voice and writing combine to preserve the mother as a whole historical individual. Yet Smith deliberately portrays her fragmentation in two ways. First, she embeds visual gaps into the poem, training readers to notice textual anomalies that metaphorically represent the writer’s fractured psyche. Second, by preserving the original spelling, Smith underscores the archival accuracy of her project while also highlighting the intellectual fragmentation imposed by slavery. White supremacist policies of enforced illiteracy sought to prevent collective resistance. The mother’s fractured writing mirrors her emotional fracture: with her son enlisted as a soldier, she risks losing the only remaining support of her family.

Where this letter underscores the intensely individual grief of a Black mother, another petition to Lincoln, dated August 25, 1864, expands the scope from the personal to the communal:

Mr president It is my Desire to be free to go to see my people
 on the eastern shore my mistress wont let me you will please
 let me know if we are free and what i can do. (sic 27)

Here, Smith highlights another form of fragmentation: the uncertainty bred by political silence. The letter testifies to the lack of communication surrounding Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, leaving the enslaved unsure of their freedom or legal rights. The capitalization of "Desire" in mid-sentence marks the one word granted visual weight, signaling that full recognition of personhood remains only a desire. Thus, even with emancipation promised, the writer remains suspended in a fractured state—yearning for freedom yet denied confirmation of its reality.

Economic hardship emerges as another crucial source of fragmentation alongside political and social struggles. A letter from August 28, 1865, written by a wife to her husband, reveals that personal freedom did not guarantee the reunion of Black families:

I guess you would like to know the reason why
 that I did not come when you wrote for
 and that is because I hadnot the money
 and could not get it and if you will
 send me the money or come after me
 I will come . . . (sic 30)

As in the earlier examples, Smith deploys textual gaps to emphasize the finality of painful truths. Here the gaps highlight the wife's financial despair, marking economic inequality as yet another barrier to Black families seeking stability after emancipation. Freedom, as the letter makes clear, was not enough; economic security was required to sustain it.

Smith's inclusion of this letter also underscores the influence of Clifton. Like the woman in the passage, Clifton's own family endured severe economic struggles in the South before joining many others who moved northward "in search of improved economic fortunes and in an effort to escape some of the worst of American legal apartheid" (Harding 38). In Smith's hands, this archival fragment becomes both a testament to Black families' precarity and an early echo of the Great Migration, which would take place decades later between 1910 and 1970.

The material design of *Wade in the Water* reinforces this sense of movement. Every title in the collection appears in italics, visually blurring into motion. The forward-leaning script suggests urgency, as though the poems themselves were straining toward something just out of reach or charging against a threatening obstacle.

Through this paratextual strategy, Smith links the wife's delayed journey to a broader historical pattern of Black mobility shaped as much by necessity as by desire.

Water becomes one of the most important metaphors in *Wade in the Water*, both visually and thematically. The blurred design of the italicized titles recalls the motion of natural waves, signaling Smith's larger effort to come to terms with African American history. In her collection, water is interchangeable with history itself: African American history begins in the waters of the Atlantic Ocean with the horrors of the Middle Passage. Within the framework of the New Black Aesthetics, water functions as both archive and metaphor, a spiritually cleansing force that carries cultural memory. By equating *Wade in the Water* with "wade in African American history," Smith makes this connection explicit when her lyrical speaker declares, "History is a ship forever setting sail. On either shore: mountains of men, / Oceans of bone" (Smith, *Wade* 36). The flourishing slave trade transported these "mountains of men" across the Atlantic, while countless others filled the oceanic graveyard—an "ocean of bone"—choosing death over bondage. In this image, the Middle Passage is not just a historical event but a metaphorical site of both annihilation and endurance.

This vision of human mountains also recalls Hughes' metaphor of the racial mountain. In Smith's version, the White mountain looms as a metaphor of Western power, subduing the Black mountain of Africa, while the mass grave of the Atlantic deepens with every voyage. By juxtaposing Black and White mountains, Smith confronts the racial divide as a central historical obstacle. Her strategy connects directly to Schwartz and Cook's argument that archivists must resist preserving only the records of "mainstream culture" (18). As a poet-archivist, Smith asserts herself as a "powerful records creator" (*ibid.*), opposing the White mountain's dominance with a Black mountain of memory and survival. The White mountain, as Hughes insisted, "is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America – this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization" (305). Smith reclaims that metaphor by embedding it within her aquatic archive, positioning her poetry as a counterforce to both erasure and assimilation.

In *Wade in the Water*, Smith expands Hughes' metaphor of the racial mountain into a literal and figurative border crossing. The poem "*Driving to Ottawa*" invokes the crossing from the U.S. into Canada, directly recalling the Underground Railroad as a route to freedom for enslaved people when slavery remained a legal institution in

the United States. The lyrical speaker memorializes those fugitives as the unacknowledged foundation of American economic prosperity by situating them within a modernized rural landscape that still bears the traces of its plantation past: The lyrical speaker is

Looking into the distance
Blotted out by hills that give way
Sometimes suddenly to silos
Or the teetering barns of a past
That's gone, but won't lie down
And let us grieve it. (Smith, *Wade* 12)

From the vantage point of present-day liberation, the Black speaker suggests that the racial mountain can indeed be overcome. The barns and silos that once represented enslavement now lie behind the hills, banned to a past that refuses to disappear entirely but no longer determines the path forward.

The succeeding poem, "*Wade in the Water*," continues this theme by depicting the resilience of both nineteenth-century and contemporary Black Americans who "knew / To climb" the mountain of interracial obstacles (13–14). As a poet writing from the vantage point of both Black womanhood and Black contemporary experience, Smith affirms Hughes' claim that "[t]he road for the serious black artist, then, who would produce a racial art is most certainly rocky and the mountain is high" (Hughes 307). Her verse underscores that Black poets, while deeply aware of the burdens of history, must continually balance on the edge of the abyss between safety and racist threat. This precariousness mirrors their dual task of narrating African American history while simultaneously articulating the path to individual Black selfhood—a self that refuses to assimilate to Whiteness.

Thus, when the lyrical speaker observes "The mountains a deep heavy green, and / The rocky steep drop to the waters below" (Smith, *Wade* 57), the lines function as a metaphor for the demanding ascent that Black people have already endured. The fertile summit of the green mountain gestures toward Smith's utopia: a vision of interracial harmony and social advancement that honors the long trajectory from the waters of the Middle Passage to the contested ground of contemporary America.

In *Wade in the Water*, the poem "*Charity*" dramatizes the demanding climb up the racial mountain, charting the ascent from slavery to the struggle for equal participation in American culture. The lyrical speaker notes that Black perseverance meant "*keeping going mostly out of spite*" even while "*hating what [they] carry*" (62; original italics). That spite signals a crucial inheritance: the radical self-determination

of the 1960s Black Arts poets, who transformed the hatred of racism's burdens into fuel for uncompromising resistance. Smith makes clear that interracial understanding cannot occur before the peak of the mountain is reached, portraying the difficulty of the climb through the image of a stumbling Black woman. Walking uphill, she is

Watching the berth she allows each
Foot (as if one is not on civil
Terms with the other), watching
Her shoulders braced as if lashed
By step after step after step, and
Her eyes' determination not to
Shift (ibid.)

The woman's uncoordinated steps mirror the continued communicative barriers between races, rooted in deep-rooted supremacist hierarchies. Her braced shoulders recall the literal whippings endured by enslaved ancestors, yet her gaze conveys unyielding determination. Here, Smith echoes Hughes' famous insistence that Black artists must remain resolute "to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. . . . We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves" (Hughes 309).

Likewise, the poem "*New Road Station*" challenges the notion that history is a static archive of the past, a phenomenon that merely "sleep[s] inside a tomb" (Smith, *Wade* 40). Instead, Smith presents history as a dynamic, living organism—restless, urgent, and marked by the threatened survival of a species in a hostile environment. The lyrical speaker begins with a striking personification, stating that

History is in a hurry. It moves like a woman
Corralling her children onto a crowded bus.

History spits *Go, go, go*, lurching at the horizon,
Hammering the driver's headrest with her fist. (ibid.; original italics)

Here, Smith casts history in a distinctly Black female body, corralling and commanding with maternal urgency. This personification transforms history into a figure of ancestral African roots, a symbolic guardian of Black survival. At the same time, the maternal fist raised against the driver evokes the iconic Black Power salute, signaling both resistance and impatience. For Smith, history is not passive documentation but a force that hammers against the structures directing its course.

The lyrical speaker, aware of the lurching movement of the bus, recognizes that the journey toward racial justice is neither linear nor comfortable. Detours, false starts, and abrupt jolts remain part of the route. Yet this discomfort is necessary, since the urgency of "History in a hurry" insists that Black Americans cannot afford to wait for

gradual change (ibid.). Instead, they must press forward to redirect the trajectory of race relations before the past's horrors once again overtake the future.

Smith develops history as a dynamic organism through the recurring motif of the Black voice, most notably in “*New Road Station*” and in the archival collage “*I Will Tell You the Truth about This*.” Both poems stage what Simon Gikandi terms the “archive of enslavement” (see 91–92). Drawing on the U.S. era of slavery, he explains that

when it comes to slave testimony before the nineteenth century, we are dealing with two archives: on one hand, we have the library left behind by powerful masters who deployed modern knowledge to secure the racial ideology of enslavement; on the other hand, there is the repressed archive of the enslaved, deprived of subjectivity and voice in order for white supremacy to be heard. (ibid.)

Smith directly intervenes in this binary by recovering repressed voices and transforming what Gikandi describes as historical *re*-pression into cultural *ex*-pression. Her use of verbatim accounts of Black fragmentation, especially in “*I Will Tell You the Truth about This*,” insists on the validity of testimony that White supremacist archives had excluded. Similarly, the maternal figure of history in “*New Road Station*” accelerates this project, embodying both urgency and fear that Black voices, if not heard in time, may once again be erased from historical records.

Thus, Smith positions her work as a corrective archive that nurtures Black subjectivity and insists on recognition. The very title “*I Will Tell You the Truth about This*” functions as a declaration of authority, opposing the proslavery “truths” curated by White power. Meanwhile, the fast-paced atmosphere of “*New Road Station*” dramatizes the pressure of time—not only the anxiety of being left behind in history, but also the poet’s demand for long-term recognition of Black experience within the historical record.

In *Wade in the Water*, Smith defines her poetic mission as the creation of an archival space for Black people within U.S. history. More than a record of Black historical writings, her project seeks to anchor this history both in textual archives and in the ears of the nation. She explicitly frames her activist poetics as an act of listening, stating, “I want the reader to *just listen*” (Smith and Schwartz 184; my emphasis). The italicized “just” functions almost as a portmanteau of *justly* and *listen*, underscoring her demand that readers engage silently, reflectively, and with fairness. By cultivating readers as “just listeners,” Smith insists on an unbiased confrontation with the

struggles that have shaped Black life in America—a task central to the New Black Aesthetics.

This demand for just listening sets the stage for “*The United States Welcomes You*,” a poem that dramatizes the impossibility of an unbiased welcome in a racist society. The text unfolds as a dialogue between two speakers, one Black and one White, whose interaction stages the contradictions of acceptance “with reservation.” The poem opens with a White speaker provocatively interrogating a Black figure, echoing the condescending questioning that African Americans face before law enforcement or in judicial spaces. Smith thus mirrors the enduring logic of Jim Crow, presenting it as a shadow that continues to shape White authority’s perception of race. At the same time, the Black voice carries the weight of generational trauma, underscoring how poets of the New Black Aesthetics must still confront these inherited wounds. By framing the exchange in the context of an immigration terminal, Smith sharpens the irony: the Black subject, already native to the U.S., is treated as a permanent foreigner. When the White speaker asks, “Why this dancing?” the phrase recalls Thomas D. Rice’s²⁸ blackface caricature of Jim Crow, mocking Black people as grotesque dancers (Smith, Wade 39). The reference signals how racist stereotypes continue to police Black identity even in supposedly neutral institutional spaces.

Smith deepens her engagement with generational trauma in “*The United States Welcomes You*” by shaping the poem around the formal structure of a sonnet. Instead of fourteen lines, she offers fourteen questions, each echoing the sonnet’s etymological root as a “little song.” This form emphasizes how the lyrical speakers’ voices sing—or rather interrogate—the mistrust and daily struggles that Black Americans endure. One White supremacist voice asks, “Why and by whose power were you sent?” (ibid.), refusing to acknowledge the Black subject as a rightful citizen and reducing them instead to a suspect. The form itself becomes part of Smith’s critique: as she explains, “the right question can be more important than its answer, which was liberating for me as a writer – and as a person”²⁹ (Smith and Rowell 858). In *Wade in the Water*,

²⁸ See digital file of Rice’s caricature from the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/resource/pgs.13926/.

²⁹ In an interview with Hilary Holladay, Lucille Clifton reflects on the purpose of art, stating that “I think most artists create art in order to explore, not give the answers. Poetry and art are not about answers to me; they are about questions” (Holladay). This perspective shapes Tracy K. Smith’s own aesthetic approaches, particularly in her treatment of interracial relationships. Clifton’s influence extends beyond inspiration; she becomes Smith’s very method, her approach to poetry itself.

questioning becomes a poetic strategy of resistance, disrupting the silence that racial oppression tries to impose.

The Black speaker in the poem builds on this strategy by posing the central political question: “How and to whom do we address our appeal?” (Smith, *Wade* 39). This inquiry links the present to Lincoln’s legacy, asking which modern institutions will defend Black Americans and extend the work of racial justice. Published in 2018, *Wade in the Water* situates this question at the outset of the Trump presidency, a period marked by renewed attacks on racial and gender equality. Smith later reflected that the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021, revealed that “the mindset that allowed people to storm the Capitol is proof that this nineteenth-century perspective isn’t gone” (“Art” 00:06:24–33). Thus, her role as a poet of the New Black Aesthetics is not only to critique but to reframe: to “trace how formal innovation and emotional complexity locate empowerment not only in critique and affirmation but also in reframed thinking” (Leonard 26). Through the fusion of sonnet form and interrogative structure, Smith models how poetry itself can both expose oppression and imagine new frameworks for Black empowerment.

Smith reemphasizes Abraham Lincoln as a historical beacon of hope and redemption, positioning him as the figure most likely to answer “our appeal” (Smith, *Wade* 39). Reflecting on the January 6 Capitol riot, she insists that Lincoln “is probably one of the most relevant Americans we can think of at this moment” (“Art” 00:06:36–39). Through this invocation, Smith ties nineteenth-century emancipation to twenty-first-century crises of democracy, foregrounding the continuing relevance of Lincoln’s legacy. Gikandi’s archival theory clarifies the stakes of her project: by voicing suppressed sources authored by ordinary Black figures, Smith pursues recuperative work that prevents their erasure from historical memory. In this light, the Black archive *Wade in the Water* assembles is not “an antiquarian project,” “but . . . a *living principle of American life and writing*” (Gikandi 82; my emphasis). Smith’s poetry insists that Black history survives through its continual reactivation by New Black Aesthetic poets.

Her choice of title highlights this living quality by foregrounding aquatic imagery as a metaphor for archival work. In the poem “*Urban Youth*,” the lyrical speaker recalls, “. . . You / Wrote a poem about the sea and never forgot it” (Smith, *Wade* 68). Here, the sea embodies cultural memory, linking water with the preservation of Black history. Like a wave striking the shore, Smith’s archive both unsettles and

enriches the historical landscape. Each wave erases traces of the past while carrying fragments—sand, driftwood, debris—back into the depths, where they risk being lost forever. This natural process becomes a metaphor for U.S. historiography, which has long privileged White narratives as the nation’s foundation while deliberately effacing the contributions of Black Americans. Kenneth E. Foote names this practice “effacement”³⁰, and Smith responds by positioning her archive as a counter-wave: one that reclaims what White supremacy sought to wash away.

Smith extends her aquatic metaphor by framing history itself as a wave. As Rinaldo Walcott explains, “the wave crashing on the shore both takes and leaves something behind, and indeed it leaves change, too, along with future possible change”³¹ (72). For Smith, this dual force exposes how White supremacists justify their obliteration of African American contributions as if it were a natural process: a tidal erasure that drowns the cultural roots buried beneath the surface of U.S. history. Just as the sea pulls hidden objects into its depths, White narratives drag Black memory out of sight. Smith critiques this process by questioning the very notion of the historical “witness.” Too often, White contemporaries are positioned as the primary recorders of national history. In response, she insists that “we have to remember that even when we’re writing poems about what others are doing to the world, we can’t let go of the fact that we’re complicit in some way – that we are responsible for every single act that we are writing in disapproval of. . . . I am not merely a witness; I am *accountable*” (Smith and Rowell 866; my emphasis). By surfacing the lived experiences of anonymous Black individuals, Smith does not offer a detached observation but active responsibility for reshaping historical awareness. Her poetry becomes a defensive act against White attempts to obliterate the Black past.

This dual notion of accountability becomes central to Smith’s New Black Aesthetic poetics. On one hand, accountability signals guilt—especially for supremacist groups whose acts of violence and erasure shape the record. On the other, accountability denotes responsibility—the obligation of Black poets to reflect, rectify, and preserve the record. In this sense, Smith situates herself among poets who claim

³⁰ In his article “To Remember and Forget: Archives, Memory, and Culture,” Foote examines how historiography can be impacted, if not manipulated, through the effacement or rectification of historical reports. His argument supports Tracy K. Smith’s role as a poetic archivist within the New Black Aesthetics, where her work deliberately counters erasures and preserves overlooked voices.

³¹ The historical and symbolic significance Derek Walcott assigns to saline water and the ocean informs his theory of the Black aquatic. For a detailed analysis of how *Wade in the Water*, the New Black Aesthetics, and the Black aquatic intersect, see pp. 101–08 of this chapter.

responsibility for memory as a form of power. She cites her collaboration with Hans Magnus Enzensberger, a German poet renowned for “working across genres and media to interrogate and speak back to the world as he sees it” (Lee 12). His model informs her decision to design *Wade in the Water* as a multi-angled archive, a collage of experimental forms that preserve Black memory against the tide of erasure. Kenneth Warren sharpens the point: “African American literature – the idea that a body of literary works could help clarify, consolidate, and direct the aims of the race . . . – was at its conception . . . nothing more than the expressive arm of the race relations project” (372). Smith accepts this charge, clarifying that the role of the contemporary Black poet is not only to reject White perspectives but also to build alternative accounts that rectify cultural memory.

Smith closes *Wade in the Water* with “*An Old Story*,” a poem that reframes Black generational trauma as both burden and repository of strength. For her, trauma is not only a memory of violence but also a resource that equips Black poets to propose an alternate history. As Smith explains, the poem seeks to craft a new national myth “that allows us to look forward with courage and maybe a new sense of what the goals are” (“Art” 00:35:59-36:06). The lyrical speaker thus announces with near-biblical solemnity that

A long age
Passed. When at last we knew how little
Would survive us – how little we had mended

Or built that was not now lost – something
Large and old awoke. . . . (Smith, *Wade* 73)

Here, “mending” and “building” become metaphors for repairing race relations. Black poetry, in Smith’s vision, acts as the bridge that can reconnect fractured histories and guide society toward interracial harmony (“Art” 00:30:22-31:12).

The poem frames this vision by recalling the origins of Black memory—when enslaved Africans “were made to understand it would be / Terrible” to serve the Western world (Smith, *Wade* 73). That memory of terror anchors the utopian hope for racial harmony as an unfulfilled promise, a horizon still to be reached. Yet even as the poem looks forward, it also looks back, emphasizing the horrific memories inherited from enslaved ancestors, memories that cause poets to “[weep] to be reminded of such color” (ibid.).

Color itself becomes archival here: the very category that produced generational trauma also marks poets as living repositories of history. Every Black

poet, Smith suggests, carries an embodied archive, giving voice to those silenced by history. In *Wade in the Water*, this living archive is expressed through formally distinct poems—none identical in pattern, materiality, or typography. Each page offers a different visual arrangement, metaphorically giving Black people individual faces and insisting on their exceptionalism. Even the italicized titles reinforce this archival fluidity. Their wavy script suggests motion and instability, echoing Smith’s aquatic imagery. By visually leaning forward, the titles embody the work’s forward thrust: a determination to mend, to build, and to inscribe Black history into the record.

Smith turns to erasure as both theme and poetic technique to counter the presumption that White supremacist accounts are the sole trustworthy sources of U.S. history. By reworking erasure into an aesthetic strategy, she transforms what has long been a tool of marginalization into a method of preservation. Erasure, for Smith, secures space for both individual and collective Black memory and embodies the very concept of the archive: it resists disappearance by carving out visibility within the textual field of history.

In *Wade in the Water*, Smith insists on the term *erasure* rather than *obliteration*. The distinction matters: obliteration suggests destruction, while erasure opens space for rewriting and reclamation. Tied to her aquatic metaphors, erasure becomes a fluid medium for memory, a container that preserves rather than annihilates. As Foote argues, “the idea of archives as memory is more than a metaphor. The documents and artifacts [archivists] collect are important resources for extending the spatial and temporal range of human communication” (392). Smith applies this principle directly, extending history’s range by employing erasure to inscribe African Americans into the national record.

One of her central strategies is the erasure poem, in which an existing text is broken down until only selected words remain. The blacked-out passages highlight absence while the visible fragments speak with renewed force. In this sense, erasure is not only a corrective technique but also a collage, preserving traces of the original while reshaping its meaning. Smith’s archival project thus becomes a dual movement, exposing the violence of historical erasure while reclaiming it as a poetic act of survival and recognition.

Using erasure poetry as a response to White supremacist narratives exposes how those narratives have systematically suppressed Black contributions to U.S. culture. In this respect, Smith aligns herself with Natasha Trethewey, who describes

such suppression as *historical erasure* (Anderson 89). Trethewey herself recalls a telling example: Recalling her research on the Native Guards³², she explains that

[the Native Guards'] colonel had confiscated a diary from a Confederate in Louisiana and took it for his own and began to cross-write over what was there. That hit me as a perfect metaphor . . . [with] this cross-hatching [as] a perfect intersection of north and south, black and white, that you can't separate. (90).

Trethewey's metaphor illuminates the palimpsest-like quality of erasure, where old texts and new meanings coexist in tension.

Smith turns the Declaration of Independence into a palimpsest in her eponymous poem "*Declaration*." Like the colonel of the Native Guards, she chooses a historical document, erases passages, creates a new message, and claims the text as her own. Smith's lyrical speaker accuses the White supremacist that

He has

sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people

He has plundered our –

ravaged our –

destroyed the lives of our –

taking away our – (sic Wade 17; original italics)

Unlike the colonel, however, Smith does not cross-write or overwrite passages. She erases them, leaving blanks for the reader to confront and fill in. The poem presents incomplete sentences marked with hyphens, a stylistic choice that shows the influence of Emily Dickinson. For Dickinson, a hyphenated or dashed syntax is typical³³, and Smith adapts this feature to create spaces of imagination. In *Wade in the Water*, these dashes become metaphors for the absence of recognition. They suggest that Black Americans still lack full acknowledgment by White supremacists for their social and racial struggles. Hyphens, therefore, become a hallmark of Smith's poetics of recognition, providing both a visual and material space for Black presence in history.

³² Trethewey's *Native Guard* (2006), a Pulitzer Prize-winning poetry collection, commemorates both her Southern ancestral heritage and the Louisiana Native Guards, one of the first Black Civil War regiments. Like Tracy K. Smith, Trethewey intertwines her personal history with the broader historical framework of the United States, positioning her lyric voice at the intersection of memory, ancestry, and national narrative.

³³ Regarding her practice of compressed language, Tracy K. Smith identifies Emily Dickinson's poem "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" (1891) as the single most influential text in shaping her own writing style.

Smith herself emphasizes this kinship with Dickinson, explaining that both poets use “a compressed kind of language, something that would speak to experience” (Smith and Schwartz 176). Where Hayes employs the sonnet’s fixed form as a compressive strategy, Smith relies on reduction, erasure, and omission. Her compressed language is metaphorical: it reflects the restricted status of Black people, who for centuries were denied recognition as full Americans—or even as full human beings. Until the Civil War and the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment³⁴, these restrictions shaped Black life and limited Black rights.

The first half of “*Declaration*” highlights this condition by presenting a porous and incomplete Black identity alongside an equally flawed public recognition. Smith draws a parallel to the British settlers in the New World, who struggled to improve their chances of survival in hostile conditions. These settlers sought to transform the wilderness into habitable spaces, but they were politically harassed and exploited by the British crown. In both cases, historical subjects endure restriction and exploitation while striving toward recognition and autonomy.

Smith uses the Declaration of Independence as a metaphorical palimpsest, rewriting the conditions of an oppressed people into the context of ongoing racist tensions that persist into the era of the New Black Aesthetics. The homophony between the pronoun “our” and the word “hour” underscores this act of overwriting, as Smith signals the emergence of a new “hour,” a new era of race relations. Although the text setting appears scattered and fragmented, this is deliberate. Smith enacts Komunyakaa’s definition of the language and aesthetics of erasure poetry, where “one inform[s] the other” (7). Form and content merge: the erasures themselves embody the tensions that the poem addresses.

From the perspective of Levine’s New Formalism, this technique reveals the self-sufficiency of poetic language. As Levine explains, “[l]iterature is not made of the material world it describes or invokes but of language, which lays claims to its own forms . . . and its own materiality” (10). By removing settler-specific nouns from the original Declaration and leaving blanks, Smith retrospectively inserts Black petitioners into early American history. The very language of her poetry becomes the space in which Black presence is recognized. Foote’s theory of effacement clarifies why this intervention is necessary. He notes that “effacement occurs both actively and passively after particularly shameful events” (387). In such cases, the perpetrators of violence

³⁴ The Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution granted formerly enslaved people civil rights.

erase events not only to hide them from others but also to relieve their own guilt and shame. *Wade in the Water* resists this cultural erasure by surfacing racial crimes that White supremacists intended to bury. Smith effaces the void itself—the invisible social status imposed on Black Americans since their enslavement—and transforms it into a poetic archive.

In this sense, “*Declaration*” is not only an archival intervention but also a political gesture. It gestures toward the legacy of Black radicalism rooted in the 1960s Black Power Movement. As Leonard emphasizes, poets of the New Black Aesthetics inherit this legacy because “cultural self-determination was central to any liberation” (19). They claim the right to redefine aesthetic forms as acts of cultural and political resistance. Leonard continues that this inheritance “grant[s] contemporary poets license to see their own ways to and through this aesthetic self-determination” (ibid.). For Smith, the erasures of “*Declaration*” enact precisely this license by transforming the blank spaces of history into sites of Black presence and power.

The poem “*Theatrical Improvisation*” continues the radical energy of “*Declaration*” by staging Black resistance in the form of a theatrical script. The poem dramatizes Black women confronting and intimidating men of influence, thereby creating a metaphorical critique of the Trump administration. The lyrical speaker narrates their ambush with both intensity and ecstasy:

They fidget
Over him like rowdies, then crouch down,
Level with his eyes: *The only way this country’s*
Going to turn around is –
It will be a bloodbath –
Tell him! – (Smith, *Wade* 42; original italics).

Here, Smith echoes Malcolm X’s radical stance that violence is not sought but may be returned in defense. In other words, Black people “answer violence with violence,” but only as a last resort.

At the same time, the poem does not advocate interracial violence. Rather, Smith uses theatrical confrontation to imagine the possibility of equal dialogue across races. The women first loom over their target, suggesting superiority, but then crouch down to meet him at eye level. This leveling envisions dialogue as the true means of “turn[ing] around” the country (ibid.). Yet the women also foresee catastrophe, assuming that the political leadership will continue to refuse such dialogue. Smith dramatizes this danger through her use of hyphens and visual form: short lines stretch into increasingly dense blocks of text, a pattern resembling a pool of blood or a

“bloodbath.” Form and content converge, as generational memory becomes the source of both desperation and warning.

As in “*Declaration*,” Smith’s use of hyphens in “*Theatrical Improvisation*” gestures to the urgency of carving out social space for Black voices. Elisa Gabbert notes that “[v]erse, by forcing more white space on the page, is constantly reminding you of what’s not there” (Gabbert). In Smith’s work, this surrounding White space mirrors the dominance of White institutions—laws, agendas, and ideologies—against which Black poetry asserts itself. The interplay of Black text and White space metaphorically critiques the void created by White supremacy, from the abduction of Africans into slavery to the exclusion of contemporary Black poets from American curricula. In this sense, the New Black Aesthetics fulfill Komunyakaa’s description of its sound as “coded messages to the void, maps to nowhere, as if language shouldn’t *mean* – an antipoetry” (7; original italics).

In the poem “*Declaration*,” the lyrical speaker underscores their coded message through verbs of destruction and loss such as “harass,” “plunder,” “ravage,” “destroy,” and “take away” (see Smith, *Wade* 17). These terms accuse White supremacist leaderships of exploiting and oppressing Black people, a practice that endures across U.S. history. Smith has explained that she wrote “*Declaration*” to confront the generational trauma that continues to affect her. By appropriating a historically foundational national document, she sought “to see if there was another story, another message within” and to apply it to “our collective experience of the twenty-first century” (“Art” 00:10:34-47). This strategy reconsiders the Declaration of Independence not as a static artifact but as a living text that can be reinterpreted through the lens of the New Black Aesthetics.

Smith’s reinterpretation further relies on the historical function of the Declaration itself. From a colonial perspective, a declaration was a direct petition to the British king, bypassing the Parliament. In *Wade in the Water*, Smith transposes this act of petition into the modern context, replacing colonial voices with contemporary Black Americans. The expectation is that her readers will understand the Declaration’s historical role while simultaneously viewing her poem through the perspective of Black petitioners addressing a U.S. president rather than a monarch. This parallel connects “*Declaration*” with “*I Will Tell You the Truth about This*,” where direct appeals to President Lincoln similarly resist effacement by preserving and archiving historically obliterated Black voices.

A Black soldier's letter to Lincoln exemplifies this continuity between Smith's archival poetics and historical testimony. Although the New World promised freedom and prosperity, much of its economic growth depended on the labor of indentured servants and enslaved Africans. Unlike indentured servants, who were granted eventual release, African Americans often found emancipation illusory. As one soldier wrote, "*that we never was freed yet / Run Right out of Slavery / In to Soldiery & we / hadent nothing atall & / . . . / . . . we / all are perishing our self—*" (sic Smith, *Wade* 28; original italics). His testimony highlights the fear that "freedom" came only at the price of his life and that his existence risked erasure in a society still structured by White supremacy. In this way, "*Declaration*" challenges readers to confront the blanks it leaves on the page as signifiers of the silenced histories of oppression.

Smith presents the New Black Aesthetic poet as one who experiments with language, especially through acts of erasure and distortion. Komunyakaa asks "to what extent . . . language [can] be distorted before it loses meaning, before it erases itself" (10). Smith responds to this question by demonstrating her mastery of syntactical distortion in the poem "*Wade in the Water.*" Like "*Declaration,*" this poem relies on incomplete and fragmented sentences, yet here the brevity is even sharper. The effect is a poetics of fracture that mirrors the violence of slavery itself. The lyrical speaker accumulates exclamations and expressive nouns to mimic rhetorical bullets aimed directly at the reader. In a climactic passage, the speaker cries:

. . . O Woods – O Dogs –
 O Tree – O Gun – O *Girl, run* –
 O Miraculous Many Gone – (Smith, *Wade* 14; original italics)

This accumulation raises the reader's anxiety to match the terror of the fugitive slave. The clipped monosyllables intensify the confrontation, giving the impression of shots fired in rapid succession. All except the phrase "Miraculous Many" are monosyllabic, a choice that creates a rhythm of panic, urgency, and confrontation³⁵. These rhetorical fragments embody both the desperate cry for survival and the rage directed at White supremacy.

Building on the fragmentary force of the poem "*Wade in the Water,*" Smith recalls the desperate flight of a slave girl as a representative figure for the enslaved population. The excerpt's hyphenated syntax mirrors the fragmented construction of "*Declaration*" and again highlights Emily Dickinson's impact on Smith, whose poetry

³⁵ Cf. Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "We Real Cool" (1959). Smith's style strongly mirrors Brooks' monosyllabic approach.

is marked by this hyphenated style. In this passage, Smith combines an urgent cry (“O”) with expressive nouns to narrate the girl’s escape. Pursued by her White master and his dogs, the girl dashes through the woods, fearing she will be hanged (“O Tree”) or shot (“O Gun”) if caught. The punctuation becomes part of the story itself, performing what Komunyakaa calls the synthesis between content and aesthetic appearance (see 7). Where Hayes relies on compression through long, unpunctuated lines, Smith uses punctuation to carve out pauses and extend the narrative rhythm. Read as dashes, the hyphens mirror the dashing movements of the girl, her captor, and the dogs. The lyrical speaker’s exclamation of relief at the “Miraculous Many” recalls those who, like this fictional girl, managed to escape the brutality of slavery (Smith, *Wade* 14).

Beyond this fictionalized escape, Smith draws on archival sources to strengthen the truth-value of her poetry. Both “*Declaration*” and “*Wade in the Water*” reproduce memory by turning historical moments into erasure poems that preserve Black cultural identity. In doing so, Smith exposes how official archives have long been shaped by strategies of forgetting. As Foote explains, “[a]rchivists have never come to terms with the concept of the cultural effacement of memory. They have long recognized the necessity of selective retention” (392). Acts of obliteration, whether deliberate or passive, often follow moments of violence and shame, erasing evidence that might otherwise disrupt dominant narratives. Archivists demonstrate that “effacement occurs both actively and passively after particularly shameful events and involves obliteration of the evidence of violence,” as Foote further explains (387). By reactivating these suppressed memories in poetic form, Smith counters the obliteration of African American history and reclaims it for the Black archive.

In *Wade in the Water*, Smith insists that White supremacists are fully aware of their history of racial oppression as an assault on humanity. She underscores this point by selecting little-known archival sources for her erasure poems “*Unwritten*” and “*The Greatest Personal Privation*”³⁶. These documents, drawn from the Civil War era and its aftermath, preserve the perspectives of slaveholders and abolitionists. Smith’s use of such material directly prevents supremacist attempts at obliteration, since these correspondences reveal the transactional language of slaveholders, who treat enslaved

³⁶ The archival sources Smith draws on for these two poems appear in Erskine Clarke’s *Dwelling Place: A Plantation Epic* (2005). Clarke examines the Jones family’s contradictory position on slavery, highlighting their morally reprehensible sale of an enslaved family—a central event Smith also addresses in her poems. For example, Charles Colcock Jones, the head of the family, dies as a slaveholder despite his publicly supportive stance on abolitionism (see Clarke 100).

people as “human labor stock.” By highlighting and reshaping such texts into poetry, Smith turns suppressed or ignored records into sites of historical accountability.

The poem “*Unwritten*” particularly emphasizes a letter exchange between Mary and Charles Colcock Jones. In this letter, Mary Jones discusses “a change / Of investment” with her husband, an oblique reference to the sale of their current slaves (Smith, *Wade* 21). The title captures what is deliberately left unsaid, pointing to the content Mary tries to conceal by only hinting at her intentions. Smith forces her reader to confront this silence: what remains unwritten is as telling as what is expressed. On one level, Mrs. Jones attempts to disguise her family’s economic profit, admitting only in parentheses that “(The loss of the services of a servant is great)” (ibid.). On another level, she betrays her moral awareness of slavery’s injustice, fearing that “for our own good we have to answer / For all that has happened” (ibid.).

In “*The Greatest Personal Privation*,” Smith again echoes Mary Jones’s voice, pushing further into the psychology of remorse. Here, the erasure poem climactically emphasizes the guilt Mrs. Jones feels about selling her husband’s enslaved family. Returning to Foote’s claim that archivists often fail to address effacement adequately (see 392)³⁷, Smith offers a counterexample: her poetic archive deliberately foregrounds the very voices and silences that traditional history tends to suppress. In so doing, she transforms archival gaps into material for recognition, turning suppressed White admissions of guilt into testimony that supports Black historical memory.

Smith structures “*The Greatest Personal Privation*” as a classical five-act drama to deepen its archival and ethical resonance. In the exposition, the White lyrical speaker expresses compassion for the enslaved family likely to be torn apart through resale, confessing that “[she] ha[s] prayed for those people // Many, many, very many times” (Smith, *Wade* 18). The rising action culminates in a climax where her troubled conscience produces a death wish, as she longs to be “waiting to be sent / Home in peace with God” (ibid.). The peripeteia arrives when the lyrical speaker shifts focus from personal guilt to collective culpability, admitting that “I know they have desired / We should not know // What was for our own good, / But we cannot be all the cause // Of all that has been done” (19). Here, a White lyrical speaker joins the voices of Black individuals, aligning Smith’s archival strategy with her larger vision of cooperative interracial dialogue.

³⁷ Foote observes that “[a]rchivists have never come to terms with the concept of the cultural effacement of memory. They have long recognized the necessity of selective retention, but have done so to avoid squandering limited archival resources on redundant or relatively unimportant records” (392).

Against the forces of effacement, Smith pursues rectification by turning Mrs. Jones' letters into a lesson on the politics of memory. As Foote observes, "[a] society's need to remember is balanced against its desire to forget, to leave the memory behind and put the event out of mind" (385). Smith exposes this tension by refusing to let White voices remain unexamined, while simultaneously recovering neglected Black testimonies. She insists, for example, that "the Civil War was absolutely fought about slavery" ("Art" 00:05:25-27), using both archival retrieval and poetic transformation to educate readers about historical reality. In doing so, Smith complicates the assumption that all White people embodied an oppressive regime; rather, she reveals how certain voices within White supremacy acknowledged injustice and left records worth revisiting. "If a tragedy seems to illustrate a lesson of human ethics or social conduct worth remembering," Foote continues, "or if it demands that warnings be forwarded to future generations" (385), these rectified archives not only reframe the past for Smith but also work toward a future in which interracial dialogue becomes possible.

Smith directs her Black reader to distinguish between opposing ideological strands within White America. On one side, she positions the supremacist party that legalized enslavement and perpetuated Black economic disadvantage. On the other, she highlights the abolitionist party, haunted by guilt and ethical unease, whose voices reveal an emotional drive to rectify injustice. In "*The Greatest Personal Privation*," this distinction emerges in the fourth dramatic act, where the White lyrical speaker discloses her abolitionist mindset and instructs her readers that "We have it in // Contemplation to wait and see" how future generations, such as poets of the New Black Aesthetics, might overcome racial barriers and come to terms with America's oppressive past (Smith, *Wade* 19). The fifth stanza, functioning as the final act, connects to this anticipation but turns into catastrophe, echoing Foote's warning that countless Black family bonds were ". . . soon and unexpectedly cut off / Many, many, very many times" by slavery's violence (20).

Supremacist violence and Black death thus become inextricable in Smith's archival strategy in *Wade in the Water*. Following the erasure poem "*I Will Tell You the Truth about This*," Smith introduces "*Watershed*"—a found poem and the longest piece in the collection. Unlike erasure poems, which rely on fragments from a single source, found poems assemble passages from multiple documents. This shift highlights Smith's intent as an archivist to preserve cultural memory with heightened emotional

force. Where erasure poems capture the voices of individuals most directly scarred by slavery, found poems amplify collective experience, forging solidarity out of dispersed voices. By uniting fragments into a shared archive, Smith exemplifies Leonard's observation that poets of the New Black Aesthetics "trace how formal innovation and emotional complexity locate empowerment not only in critique and affirmation" but also in "reframed thinking" (26). In this way, erasure poems preserve the immediacy of generational trauma, while found poems demonstrate how individual voices merge into a collective articulation of survival.

In "*Watershed*," Smith merges environmental catastrophe with individual testimonies of near-death to underscore how pollution metaphorically parallels racial injustice in the United States. By connecting ecological destruction to systemic racism, she situates environmental harm within the broader dystopian framework of American race relations. Already in 2016, Smith expressed this concern, linking the condition of the Earth to the historical context of U.S. racial justice: "[w]e have an impact upon the earth that is analogous to the ways that we treat one another. Consuming, harnessing. These are the things we do to the planet. These are the things that institutions do to individuals" (Smith and Schwartz 191-92). Between this interview and the 2018 publication of *Wade in the Water*, Smith appears to have shaped the collection as a response to her own hypothesis about the intersection of environmental and racial crises. In this context, "*Watershed*" scolds White supremacists for exploiting Black labor while simultaneously urging reflection on America's political and economic failures as steps toward imagining an interracial utopia.

The immediate context of "*Watershed*" is Smith's research into the case of corporate defense attorney Rob Bilott, who uncovered DuPont's environmental crimes in Parkersburg, West Virginia. Bilott represented farmer Wilbur Tennant, whose cattle consumed toxic water contaminated with PFOA, a chemical that DuPont knowingly discharged into a nearby creek. The poisoned water did not remain localized. It entered the drinking supply of surrounding communities and ultimately spread into bodies around the world. Journalist Nathaniel Rich emphasizes the scale of this catastrophe, reporting that "[w]here scientists have tested for the presence of PFOA in the world, they have found it" (Rich). In 2000, Bilott secured access to DuPont's internal records through a court order, effectively transforming himself into an archivist. By meticulously collecting and analyzing the company's documents, he constructed an archive that proved DuPont's knowledge of and complicity in the toxic dumping.

Smith's poem draws on Rich's report about DuPont's toxic dumping to highlight corporate deception and systemic effacement. Rich emphasizes that "DuPont's scientists understood that the landfill drained into the Tennant's . . . property, and they tested the water in Dry Run Creek. It contained an extraordinarily high concentration of PFOA" (Rich). Instead of disclosing this discovery, DuPont produced a misleading report "that blamed poor husbandry for the deaths of their cows. Bilott had what he needed" (ibid.). The lyrical speaker in "*Watershed*" echoes this concealment: "DuPont: / did not make this information public / declined to disclose this finding" (Smith, *Wade* 48). By paralleling DuPont's silence with her own poetic exposure, Smith positions her work as an act of rectification against both environmental crime and racial oppression.

Rectification, however, takes on a modified role in Smith's archive. Traditionally, rectification occurs "after accidental tragedy" (Foote 387). Smith, by contrast, deliberately selects instances of offense against humanity to challenge narratives internalized as historical fact. She presents these cases from the perspective of the harmed, establishing the Black poet as their mouthpiece. In doing so, she appropriates the figure of attorney Rob Bilott—who revealed DuPont's crime through archival research—and reimagines him as a model of the environmental archivist. Foote argues that "human violation of . . . waste dumps is an important concern. No matter how securely the waste is stored, it is virtually impossible to prevent people from disturbing the waste" (381). In Smith's metaphorical application, "waste" becomes synonymous with racism. *Wade in the Water* traces the persistence of this toxic substance within American society, charting Black people's metamorphosis from servitude to their contested recognition as citizens. The lyrical speaker reinforces this metaphor by warning that racism has "entered the water table" (Smith, *Wade* 47). As the water table sustains ecosystems, so too does cultural diversity sustain a flourishing society—a foundation Smith insists has been contaminated but not beyond repair.

In "*Watershed*," Smith's use of material form underscores Komunyakaa's point about the synthesis of syntax and aesthetics (cf. 7). The poem arranges the factual text of the DuPont case as scattered fragments across the page, visually mirroring disruption. In contrast, reports of near-death experiences—drawn from the corpus of the Near-Death Experience Research Foundation³⁸—appear in italicized, justified text.

³⁸ The Near-Death Experience Research Foundation (NDERF) archives testimonies from people who claim to have been on the verge of death, whether through accidents, suicide attempts, or complications during surgery. These reports describe experiences such as a separation of consciousness from the body,

Their formal balance conveys neutrality and distance, even as they document trauma. This interplay of fragments and ordered prose emphasizes that Earth itself becomes a social construct, one that Smith links metaphorically to U.S. race relations. As the lyrical speaker observes, this construct “*was very strong but has been / weakened considerably*” through racial struggles (Smith, *Wade* 49; original italics). Here Smith suggests that White doctrines intoxicated Black consciousness in the same way Parkersburg residents unknowingly consumed toxins. The result is a psychological absorption of White ideals, a process Black artists had already critiqued in the 1920s, for instance, regarding Hughes’ reflections on the “negro artist.”

Smith extends this critique by using “*Watershed*” to dramatize the silent spread of racist ideologies. One near-death narrative recalls that the speaker “*could feel Earth’s desperate situation. Her aura appeared to be very / strange, made me wonder if it was radioactivity*” (ibid.; original italics). Radioactivity, as an invisible yet lethal force, becomes a metaphor for racism—intangible but devastating in its effects, producing violent outcomes such as lynching. The metaphor intensifies when the poem recounts a woman who used a toxic DuPont product “as soap in the family’s dishwasher” (ibid.), only to realize that DuPont “knew this stuff was harmful / and they put it in the water anyway” (50). Through this testimony, Smith underscores deliberate exploitation. The White economic supremacist profits from environmental harm just as slave traders once profited by trafficking human cargo. Both practices intoxicate natural systems—the ecosystem of Parkersburg and the cultural ecosystems of African villages—by extracting their vital nutrients. In this way, “*Watershed*” collapses environmental and racial histories into a single metaphor of contamination, reminding readers that Black cultural memory is inseparable from cycles of exploitation.

The poem alludes to generational memory as inseparable from the generational trauma of people of African descent. The lyrical speaker underscores how Black children, like their parents, became subjects of racially induced violence. Violence itself emerges as a viral epidemic—a pathology embedded within the social organism of White supremacy. The poem begins with a vivid portrayal of bodily deformed

movement toward a bright tunnel, or visions of Earth’s ecological decline from an aerial perspective. NDERF defines a near-death experience as a “lucid experience associated with perceived consciousness apart from the body occurring at the time of actual or threatened imminent death” (Long). Smith appropriates this concept in relation to the everyday (death) threats directed at the Black body.

. . . skinny red cow
hair missing back humped

[and] a dead black calf . . . , (45)

This image ties contemporary environmental disaster to plantation conditions that predate the watershed moment of the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation. By invoking this connection, Smith resists the effacement of enslaved workers' conditions, insisting that the exploitation of Black laborers and their children resulted in health outcomes as lethal as those of DuPont's employees more than a century later.

Smith further stresses how toxins—whether chemical or ideological—are inherited by future generations. Focusing on slave mothers and their children, she highlights the dual role of Black women as both the nutrients of a prospective healthy society and the relentless victims of physical and emotional devastation. Mothers ensured continuity through childbirth, yet they were simultaneously forced into exhaustive field labor and, often, deprived of their children through sale or premature death. The comparison to DuPont's poisoned cattle underscores how systemic violence stripped life from the very source of renewal. By linking maternal loss in slavery to contemporary violence against Black children, Smith insists that both past and present are marked by an unbroken cycle of racist harm, directed against the youngest and most vital members of a multicultural society.

Smith positions herself and other New Black Aesthetic poets as cultural educators tasked with confronting America's racist past. Since the lyrical speaker "*suspect[s] that Earth may be a place of education*" (50; original italics), poetry becomes a medium for teaching, for bridging racial divides, and for exposing the cultural fractures that resist interracial harmony. In this role, the speaker merges with Smith herself, who reflects on her responsibility as a poet. She considers it

a great
opportunity to use my background for people who
really needed it. (46)

Here, Smith envisions the New Black Aesthetic poet as a guide who addresses both America's racist mindset and Black people's ongoing questions of belonging and identity. She frames *Wade in the Water* as a memoir of the nation's roots, chronicling a centuries-long struggle against racial conflict. Convinced that poetry itself transforms perception, she stresses that "reading poems changes you: your inner ear, your sense of who you want to be, what kinds of things you want to begin to notice" (Smith and Rowell 868). By merging her voice with those of historical Black and

White figures, Smith depicts the New Black Aesthetic archivist as one who evaluates “*humanity from a spa- / cious and indescribable ‘God’s eye view’*” (48; original italics). In doing so, she compiles a mosaic of national memory, yet also determines which fragments ultimately constitute American identity.

The dynamic quality of memory in *Wade in the Water* also resonates in the volume’s title. “Wading” suggests a condition of restlessness and desire, one bound up with both movement and waiting. This duality emphasizes how Black identity is forged in motion yet haunted by anticipation. For Smith, water symbolizes the medium through which individual historical records merge into both representative and deeply personal narratives. Christina Sharpe develops a similar aquatic metaphor in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, where she shows how the aftermath of slavery continues to shape contemporary Black lives. Like Smith, she “include[s] the personal . . . to connect the social forces on a specific, particular family’s being in the wake to those of all Black people in the wake; to mourn and to illustrate the ways our individual lives are always swept up in the wake produced and determined, though not absolutely, by the afterlives of slavery” (8). The poem “*A Man’s World*” illustrates this metaphor directly, as its lyrical speaker “decipher[s] / Rivers, . . . recite[s] / Its history” (Smith, Wade 9). In this act of recital, Smith reaffirms the curatorial role of the poet-archivist, who preserves and amplifies verbatim representations of Black historical records as a central pillar of the collection.

Her role as a poet-archivist emphasizes her ability to decode written records that most accurately represent African American history. By doing so, she situates her work within the legacy of the Black Arts Movement, which influenced the New Black Aesthetics. Amiri Baraka, for instance, envisioned his mission as creating “self-defined terms for dealing with African American experience and the creation of intellectual and cultural spaces in which this black self-examination could take place freely” (Leonard 20). Smith continues this radical tradition by appropriating letters and employing an epistolary style, particularly in her poem “*I Will Tell You the Truth about This.*” The use of letters underscores her commitment to embodying the collective memory of Black Americans, transforming her poetry into a living bond between the past and the present. *Wade in the Water* therefore asks how New Black Aesthetic poets can determine Black identity through archival practices. By assigning water an archival role, Smith extends this inquiry to the “Black aquatic,” a metaphor for curating the transatlantic roots of Black identity.

For Smith, accountability means assuming responsibility for curating a reliable and enduring depiction of Black history. Her archival practice highlights not only her own responsibility but also the *response-ability* of Black historical voices. By engaging directly with epistolary documents written between the mid-nineteenth century and Reconstruction, Smith underscores how Black individuals resisted White supremacy through literacy, despite systemic attempts to suppress it. These letters prove that freed slaves and veterans gained not only physical liberation but also mental and aesthetic agency. Their ability to interpret their social environment and narrate individual stories turns these letters into physical media of cultural memory. Through them, Smith amplifies voices that communicate across time and crystallize the historical elements shaping Black identity.

Eric Ketelaar's reflections on archives and memory help explain how Smith uses epistolary materials to mediate between history and identity. He describes mediation as the process in which "[s]ocial partners communicate the social context for identity formation. Objects or artefacts interact between the self and her cultural context. This interaction through a medium is called *mediation*" (61; my emphasis). Smith's reliance on letters as archival objects illustrates this process. They act as mediators between the origins of Black people's freedom struggles and their contemporary legacies, holding memories that extend beyond the Middle Passage. In this framework, *Wade in the Water* draws on water as a contradictory medium—one that signifies both life and death, freedom and captivity, oppression and cultural development.

As part of this aquatic framework, Smith aligns her work with what Rinaldo Walcott terms the "Black aquatic." In his eponymous article, he emphasizes that

[t]he black aquatic pursues the relationship Black people have to bodies of water as foundationally formative of blackness, and it seeks to provide an aesthetic narratology and hauntology of contemporary claims of black subjectivity. Therefore, if the sea has been death, it has also been birth. The black aquatic names the claim that blackness itself is birthed in salt water – the Atlantic Ocean as a first instance – and then later becomes a kind of saline embodiment of early modern and late modern new life forms or Black selves. (65)

Smith engages this double-edged symbolism by weaving the sea into personal memory and generational trauma.

The poem "*Urban Youth*" exemplifies Smith's turn to everyday scenarios to reveal the lasting resonance of the Middle Passage. Here, the lyrical speaker remembers an ancestor who

Wrote a poem about the sea and never forgot it.

.....

I forget now what there was to see.

So much now gone was only then beginning. (68)

These lines trace the continuity from the earliest Black poets through to the present, affirming the sea as a site of both trauma and renewal. The remembered voyage embodies Walcott's claim that water births Black selves, while Smith situates this legacy at the heart of the New Black Aesthetic poet's identity.

Phillis Wheatley's legacy provides a crucial foundation for Smith's engagement with the Black aquatic and archival memory. As the first published female Black poet, Wheatley directly reflected on her forced sea voyage in her poem "*On Being Brought from Africa to America*" (1773). Smith's poem "*Urban Youth*" echoes this moment by situating America's revolutionary founding alongside the birth of the Black aesthetic, positioning Wheatley as the mother of African American poetry. Her transformation from Phillis the slave to Phillis the poet occurred in transit across the sea, where, despite not yet knowing English, she was already marked by the Blackness that would distinguish her voice from White supremacist traditions. In Ketelaar's terms, the sea became the medium of mediation, the space that shaped her cultural identity (see 61). Smith invokes this historical beginning to frame *Wade in the Water* as an archive rooted in both death and rebirth, particularly by placing near-death experiences in dialogue with the life-giving and destructive power of water.

In this context, Smith emphasizes water as both a comfort and a liminal space. Survivors in "*Watershed*" recall that "*it was experiencing the luminous warm water that I felt the / most connection with the eternal*" (Smith, *Wade* 52; original italics). They further describe, "*The waters were [perceived as] living waters, the grass was liv- / ing, the trees and the animals were more alive than on earth*" (48; original italics). These living waters function as a metaphorical womb, recalling the amniotic fluid that nurtures and releases new life. Yet, Smith also stresses the paradox: while plants and animals prosper in this imagined aquatic space, humans—particularly Black people—remain suspended between life and death. During the Middle Passage, enslaved Africans were physically alive but denied cultural personhood, reduced to commodities rather than recognized as contributors to American identity.

Smith shares her understanding of the ocean as a liminal space with Rivers Solomon, whose novel *The Deep* (2019) similarly imagines aquatic in-betweenness as central to Black memory. The novel tells the story of the unborn children of enslaved

African women who drowned themselves during the Middle Passage. These unborn children survive and form an underwater community that lives with the generational trauma of slavery, echoing Smith's exploration of painful memory. Solomon's narrator observes that "[t]hose cursed with more intact long-term recollection learned how to forget, how to throw themselves into the moment. Only the historian was allowed to remember" (Solomon, ch. 1). In *Wade in the Water*, Smith takes up precisely this role of the historian. She selects specific historical events that record Black suffering and presents them through archival material, guiding her readers "into the moment" (ibid.) while preserving "intact long-term recollection" (ibid.) as the foundation of her poetry.

By contrast, the lyrical speaker in "*Urban Youth*" embodies cultural blindness and the absence of memory. This speaker has no recollection of the Middle Passage and remains disconnected from the Black past unless enlightened by ancestral heritage. Smith stresses the importance of generational transmission, aligning with Ketelaar's view that "the family memory [through which] the individual is connected with a past he or she has not experienced. This connectivity is the basis for any culture" (52). To visualize this process, Smith links several poems in *Wade in the Water* through parallel syntactic structures or thematic echoes. In doing so, she highlights how cultural blindness can fragment identity, while ancestral memory offers a path toward wholeness.

The poem "*Annunciation*" illustrates how Black cultural identity is transmitted across generations, even to the very young. The lyrical speaker describes their ". . . young son, eyes set / At an indeterminate distance, / Ears locked, tuned inward, caught / In some music only he has ever heard" (Smith, *Wade* 70). Though still a child, the boy projects cultural awareness and determination rather than disorientation. His "indeterminate distance" metaphorically recalls the idea of wading in water—an act of searching for identity while moving toward clarity. This scene resonates with Ketelaar's concept of creator, user, and archivist, who together "construct stories which establish for them who they are and who they are not, where they fit in and where they don't, who belongs to them and who doesn't" (66). In this archival sense, Smith herself acts as both creator and curator, drawing on historical documents by formerly enslaved people to assemble *Wade in the Water* as a living archive of Black history.

Smith further underscores the horrors preserved in the Black aquatic, highlighting the right to rectify traumatic memories that have defined Black identity.

The poem “*Theatrical Improvisation*” stages a hypothetical enactment of these generational traumas in an aesthetic form. The lyrical speaker recalls that

*Foreign workers gave us paper and told us to draw.
Some of us drew families fleeing. . . .
.....
Some drew boats about to go under. Some filled
The page with angry water. Some drew our mothers
And our older sisters kicking their legs and grabbing
At air when they got pulled away by the hair.* (Smith, *Wade* 42; original italics)

Here, the lyrical speaker conveys how traumatic memory is forced into representation. The “foreign workers” evoke the crews of Western slave ships, whose oppressive practices fractured Black families and subjected women in particular to sale, separation, and sexual violence. By transforming these memories into art, Smith demonstrates how the New Black Aesthetics reclaim generational trauma as a foundation for identity and cultural resilience.

The drawings imagined in “*Theatrical Improvisation*” also refer to the Black souls lost at sea during the Middle Passage, many through suicide by drowning. In this imagery, drowning closes the circle of the Black aquatic, since “blackness refuses to be divorced from its watery birth” (Walcott 72). Rather than ink, some artists render grief and agony with tears—angry saline water that most authentically symbolizes the traumatic memory of slavery’s saltwater origins. These drawings ultimately portray loss in its many forms: the loss of family, of life, of agency. Because White supremacists reduced enslaved Africans to objects, Smith reclaims this very objectification as an act of ownership, turning the Black body into a site of self-possession and resistance.

The poem “*Ash*” develops this notion of the ocean as a liminal space by connecting it to the metaphor of the house. Constructed entirely of syntactic parallelisms, every sentence begins with the word *house*. This repetition reflects the structural erasure of humanity during the Middle Passage. From their own perspective, Africans boarded the ships as human beings, yet from the perspective of their White captors, they gradually lost that humanity and became property in chains. At sea, White supremacy completed the transformation, retaining the enslaved body’s labor value while stripping away its human qualities. In this way, Smith ties the architectural metaphor of the *house* to the history of possession, displacement, and the erasure of the enslaved self.

In “*Ash*,” Smith connects the metaphor of the house to the erasure of agency and identity under slavery. Twelve of the poem’s fourteen lines list natural urges and biological textures of the body, but the last two lines break the pattern, emphasizing external forces that damage both body and mind: “House the seasons singe and douse. / House that believes it is not a house” (Smith, *Wade* 60). Here, *house* becomes synonymous with *slave*. Enslaved Africans worked under every weather condition and, over time, internalized White supremacist doctrines that branded them as inferior. The poem’s structure underlines this condition of captivity. Most sentences lack verbs altogether, or they omit grammatical forms of *to be*. By withholding verbs, Smith highlights the enslaved individual’s loss of agency. Without the verb *be*, the slave lacks the linguistic privilege to state what or who they are. The house-as-slave metaphor thus portrays captivity as both physical and ontological erasure.

Smith deepens this portrayal by drawing on what Walcott identifies as “relations of capital and service, the relation of racial hierarchy and subordination, the global relations of white supremacy and black subjection” (69, 71). In this light, the title “*Ash*” refers to the bodily remains of Africans who boarded slave ships as human beings but were reduced to economic shells. Walcott suggests that such poetry “bear[s] witness to [our] dead in the contemporary era in a way that we were not able to do in the era of transatlantic slavery” (71). By invoking the Black aquatic, Smith reconstructs the Middle Passage as the moment of transformation from human to servant, a process memorialized by the Atlantic itself as a repository of both death and survival.

The concept of the Black aquatic also explains what Ketelaar calls the “founding trauma” of Black Americans (58). Because the Black aquatic memorializes the countless fates of enslaved Africans, it establishes storytelling as a central method for preserving the roots of Black cultural memory. To connect those origins with the work of the contemporary New Black Aesthetic poet, Smith assumes the role of a griot—an African oral storyteller entrusted with carrying forward communal history. As the author of *Wade in the Water*, Smith positions the entire volume as a metaphorical griot, a container of curated archival materials that retell Black history. Through this framework, she proposes a twofold approach to identity formation: distinguishing traits that are already present and recovering those that remain hidden.

Smith underscores this dual task by insisting that “we’re constantly being reached . . . by history” (“Art” 00:05:00-03). Her phrasing emphasizes the persistent

clash between Black and White legacies that continues to shape cultural expression. To show how the New Black Aesthetics are themselves shaped by prior artistic movements, *Wade in the Water* echoes the interracial aesthetics of the 1920s. Specifically, it mirrors what Walter Benn Michaels terms “nativist modernism,” a phenomenon that “describ[ed] the projects not only of Black writers of the period but virtually all of that moment’s major writers” (Warren 373). Nativist modernism “made identity ‘an *ambition* as well as a *description*’” (ibid.; my emphasis). Accordingly, beyond introducing the figure of the griot in general, Smith offers distinct griot-like figures across her poems—each one embodying the dual work of describing and enacting historically shaped Black identity.

The title poem “*Wade in the Water*” commemorates a gathering of griots whose role is to address generational trauma through love and communal memory. Smith draws inspiration from the Geechee Gullah Ring Shouters, a contemporary group that preserves the memory of enslaved ancestors through music and dance. In dedicating the poem to them, Smith aligns their performance with Hughes’ vision of the Black artist as embodied in “Negro dancers who will dance like flame and the singers who will continue to carry our songs to all who listen” (Hughes 308). By invoking this tradition, Smith situates the New Black Aesthetics within a lineage of cultural preservation and renewal rooted in artistic performance.

Smith further personalizes this tradition by recalling her own attendance at a ring shout. The lyrical speaker remembers receiving a gesture of unconditional love from a stranger, describing that “a terrible new ache / Rolled over in my chest, / Like in a room where the drapes / Have been swept back” (Smith, *Wade* 13). Here, the metaphor of the house as the Black body reappears, as in the poem “*Ash*.” Unlike “*Ash*,” however, “*Wade in the Water*” portrays the house as whole and hospitable, symbolizing an identity unified through love. The ache does not come from trauma but from relief—what the poem calls “pillars of heavy light” (ibid.), a metaphor for healing and illumination. Sweeping back the drapes captures the moment of revelation and transformation for the lyrical speaker and for Smith herself, who recalls the ring shout as an experience that enabled her to confront and soften the weight of generational trauma.

This poem, “*Wade in the Water*,” appears as a paradigm of exemplifying the interplay of sound, rhythm, and enjambment, which are central to the formal strategies of *Wade in the Water*. They function both as aesthetic devices and as carriers of cultural

memory. Smith often employs rhythm to echo the sonic patterns of spirituals and ring shouts, thereby situating her poems in the context of African American oral traditions. The recurrence of these sonic patterns—such as the anaphoric repetition of consonants—grounds the poems in historical resonances and insists on their continued relevance in the present. These rhythms serve to recall collective practices of survival and worship, stressing how poetry operates as a form of embodied memory within the New Black Aesthetic framework.

“*Wade in the Water*” further exemplifies Smith’s use of enjambments, which extends her lyric rhythms beyond line breaks and asks the reader to maneuver between fragmentation and continuity. Enjambment lines often delay completion of meaning, forcing the reader into moments of unresolved closure that mimic the historical ruptures Smith’s work addresses—ruptures caused by slavery, war, and racial violence. The tension between the enjambment’s implication of process and the pauses created by these line breaks enacts the back-and-forth of historical memory—or a call-and-response-pattern: it is unfinished, ongoing, and demands attention. In this way, sound, rhythm, and enjambment merge to transform the reading process into an embodied experience of both disruption and continuity, mirroring the fractures and survivals of Black history and identity.

Smith’s engagement with history in *Wade in the Water* reflects this call-and-response structure across timeframes, where past trauma and present love interact. While researching the antebellum South, she admits she was

deeply troubled by what I knew I would find . . . in a physical archive of enslaved existence. . . . That gesture of love [from the ring shouter] transformed all of those feelings. It didn’t erase the fact of the past, but . . . I just needed to write the poem to go back into that space . . . Render something of it that might also invite a reader to see . . . the beautiful life-enlarging choice that love is. (“Art” 00:16:54-17:47).

Here, Smith emphasizes that love—experienced in the ring shout—is not a means of forgetting history but a way of reentering it with openness and resilience. This transformative love also becomes a structuring theme in her poetry, where interpersonal bonds bridge the historical past and the lived present.

Beyond the gestures of love exchanged between strangers, Smith projects this theme onto her intimate bond with her four-year-old daughter. In the poem “4½,” the child becomes a symbol of survival and continuity, linking the legacy of the ring shouts and the Geechee Gullah to the persistence of Black cultural memory. The poem frames motherhood as a life-enlarging choice, as the daughter embodies both strength in

shaping her own present and future and reliance on ancestral guidance as a token of the past.

Like the young son in the poem “*Annunciation*,” the lyrical speaker’s daughter in “4½” struggles with an urgent bodily need—peeing. Although she knows how to relieve herself, she insists on first informing her mother. This hesitation frames her action as a search for ancestral guidance, relying on her mother’s authority to confirm whether the situation is as urgent as she believes. In this way, the daughter casts her mother in the role of a ring shouter, an educator who connects the present generation to ancestral wisdom. The child’s bodily urgency is symbolically transformed into a ritual of performance. By chanting and hopping, she performs her own improvised ring shout. The lyrical speaker describes the moment in vivid, natural imagery. Barely able to control her urge much longer,

. . . she sings [‘Pee! Pee!’], hopping in place, trying
to staunch off the wild ravenous river
she carries . . .
.
And then . . .
. . . a pool trickles out
Around her feet. She’s like an island
Made of rock, with one lone tree at the top
Of the only mountain. (Smith, *Wade* 64)

Smith’s portrayal of her daughter as a “singing island” links the child to the Geechee Gullah heritage, whose people historically lived on islands off the coasts of Georgia, the Carolinas, and Florida. These communities, somewhat shielded by geography, preserved their traditions and cultural memory while resisting the full force of Western supremacist influence³⁹.

She emphasizes that the New Black Aesthetics grapple simultaneously with the weight of the past and the promise of the future. Though unable to change history, poets of this movement reflect on historical facts while appropriating them to imagine future possibilities. According to Smith, contemporary Black poetry achieves its transformative impact only through “mental rigor” and is expressed through “questions, conflicts, dilemmas, possibilities” (Lee 13). *Wade in the Water*

³⁹ Cf. Brame, Karen D. “Gullah Geechee Ring Shouters.” *Blacklisted Culture*, vol. 2, no. 16, 15 Aug. 2021, blacklistedculture.com/gullah-geechee-ring-shouters/.

communicates this rigor both through content and also through graphic strategies such as the vignette titled “*Realm of Shades*.” This vignette exemplifies the synthesis between form and content that Komunyakaa highlights (cf. 7). Just as griots like the Geechee Gullah Ring Shouters preserve cultural memory, New Black Aesthetic poets extend this practice by using memory to envision their community’s future. Smith underscores this dynamic in “4½” where the daughter’s search for ancestral guidance demonstrates how the past functions as “a living moral presence” (Ketelaar 58).

The vignette translates this intergenerational sense of love—publicly experienced during the ring shout and privately felt with her daughter—into a defense against the darkness of historical trauma. Smith layers words of sight and light, such as “windows,” “moon,” and “eyes,” against terms of obscurity like “dark,” “clouds,” and “unseen” (Smith, *Wade* 11). The opposition suggests her attempt to counteract historical erasure through illumination. At the same time, the lyrical speaker struggles with being suspended between temporalities: “There was still a here, but that’s not where we were, continually turning / our backs to something unseen, speaking with just our eyes, getting on / with work” (ibid.). Here, the speaker acknowledges the disjunction between the present and an inherited past that resists full comprehension. The collective “we” identifies the new generation learning about history through cultural memory and thereby continuing the work of their ancestors.

To reinforce her archival purpose in *Wade in the Water*, Smith deliberately engages memory texts as instruments of identity formation. As Ketelaar explains, “To stay (or become) living, memory texts have to be taken possession of as one’s own (appropriated)” (62). Smith’s poetry enacts this process by incorporating archival materials that, once recontextualized, grant agency and identity to their inheritors. Her poem “*I Will Tell You the Truth About This*” exemplifies this method. Beyond its epistolary structure, the poem culminates in a separate archival section that collages Civil War Pension Files⁴⁰ of Black veterans and their families. Structured as an erasure poem, this section foregrounds the practice of “[c]onstructing and reconstructing archival memory and social memory . . . [as] a political act, an act of memory politics”

⁴⁰ In the poem “*I Will Tell You the Truth About This*,” Smith creates another erasure poem that draws on archival sources, specifically the pension files of Black Civil War veterans and their families. These records, collected in *Voices of Emancipation: Understanding Slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction through the U.S. Bureau Pension Files* by Elizabeth A. Regosin and Donald R. Shaffer (2008), document the claims of African Americans seeking federal benefits in the aftermath of Reconstruction and into the early twentieth century. Smith highlights how White bureaucrats deliberately falsified or distorted Black identities, a practice reflected in the fact that “half of African American pension files contain at least one instance of ‘special examination’” (Regosin and Shaffer 3).

(68). In doing so, Smith underscores that after centuries of bondage, Black Americans assert the power to define their own identities.

The final section of “*I Will Tell You the Truth About This*” begins with veterans’ pension files, where Black soldiers disclose their exact or approximate ages. By using the repeated anaphora “I am,” these speakers assert individuality and claim personhood:

I am 60 odd years of age –

I am 62 years of age next month –

.....

I am on the rise of 80 years of age – (Smith, *Wade* 33; original italics).

This declarative rhythm grounds their self-representation in the present before turning toward memory. Through the refrain “I was,” they reconstruct their lives before emancipation:

I was a man stout and healthy

.....

*I was a green boy right off the farm and did
just what I was told to do –”* (34; original italics)

By emphasizing their health and labor, the speakers highlight central identifiers of Black life before and during the Civil War, where bodily strength defined both survival and exploitation.

Beyond bodily descriptions, the poem incorporates pension file lines that extend identity into ancestry and community. Naming parents—

I am the son of Solomon and Lucinda Sibley –

I am the only living child of Dennis Campbell –

My father was George Jourdan . . . (35; original italics)

—the speakers demonstrate self-possession and an awareness of origin. These genealogical claims signal continuity and cultural rootedness, while the speakers also insist on political recognition. By filing for compensation under the general pension law, they transform bureaucratic language into an act of resistance. They state that “*I filed my claim . . . – / . . . / I claim pension under the general law*” (33; original italics). In this way, Smith highlights the paradox of emancipation. though legally free, Black veterans still faced systemic denial of their self-developed identities as citizens.

Smith also demonstrates how White authority deliberately stripped Black soldiers of their individuality during the Civil War, turning enlistment itself into an act of erasure. The report by Robert Harrison captures this practice, recalling:

*When I went to enlist the recruiting officer
said to me, your name is John Wilson.
I said, no, my name is Robert Harrison,
but he put me down as John Wilson. I was
known while in service by that name – (34; original italics)*

By recalling this incident, *Wade in the Water* critiques the systematic falsification of Black names as a deliberate attempt to suppress identity and deny personhood. Even after the Civil War amendments had legally granted Black Americans civil, human, and voting rights, White supremacists continued to undermine these rights by refusing to acknowledge Black individuality. Their fear that the Black ballot would disrupt White political dominance fueled this ongoing denial of identity. From their perspective, “this is identity politics . . . misusing cultural memory and cultural heritage” (Ketelaar 67).

This closing passage of “*I Will Tell You the Truth About This*” therefore emphasizes rectification by truthfully reasserting who Black speakers were before White interference corrupted their names. By exposing these falsifications, Smith highlights the combative nature of Black identity forged during the Civil War, where survival itself becomes a metaphorical war against racial oppression. In this way, the poem illustrates how naming, memory, and identity are central to the broader archive of the New Black Aesthetics.

Smith’s archival poetics also emphasize rectifying the falsification of Black names during the Civil War by connecting cultural identity to memory work. In *Wade in the Water*, she demonstrates how archival practice serves not only as preservation but also as invention. As Ketelaar explains, discovery and invention form the two foundational pillars of archival labor. On one hand, the archive recovers forgotten or neglected historical records; on the other hand, it invents meaning, since archival material “acquires new meanings that help in structuring and restructuring the relationship between the self and the world” (Ketelaar 63). Smith situates her poetry within this dual process, using memory work to both reveal erased identities and shape new frameworks of cultural selfhood.

The poem “*Ghazal*” functions as the centerpiece of this archival project, directly addressing the “fraught, fraught name” of Black people (Smith, *Wade* 36). By adopting the ghazal form, Smith signals her intent to work across traditions and genres,

emphasizing the transhistorical nature of Black naming practices. Originating in Arabic literature and carried through Persian, Urdu, and Islamic traditions, the ghazal typically consists of couplets and “assume[s] the contours of a fixed form, later defined as a monorhyme poem (aa ba ca, etc.) of 5 to 14 lines, incl. a line, usually the last or penultimate, mentioning the poet’s pen name” (Lewis 571). Yet Smith’s use of the ghazal modifies this form. Rather than repeating rhymes, her couplets close with an identical word or phrase. This stylistic decision intensifies the poem’s focus on repetition, inheritance, and the weight of names.

In “*Ghazal*,” Smith follows the traditional rhyme pattern of the form but adapts it to reflect her archival and communal project. Instead of closing with her own name, as the ghazal conventionally requires, she ends with “our name” (*Wade* 36). By doing so, she shifts the focus away from her individual authorship and toward her representational role for Black Americans. The lyrical speaker insists on establishing Black people’s name as a recognized social asset and emphasizes the fierceness of their claim, which “[has] risen from moan to growl, growl to a hound’s low bray” (*ibid.*). This progression outlines three stages of Black identity formation: the moan of enslaved people asserting their humanity under captivity; the growl of Black radicalism, particularly the Black Power Movement’s ballot-or-bullet ideology; and the bray of the New Black Aesthetic poets, who imprint their presence onto public consciousness.

Smith’s appropriation of the ghazal also underscores its cross-cultural adaptability and its resonance with the New Black Aesthetics. As Gopi Narang argues about the Urdu ghazal, “to escape from the prison of ignorance, humans need to get back to their inner self, their essence” (178-79). In this sense, the ghazal becomes a fitting form for Smith’s meditation on names, identity, and belonging. From a New Formalist perspective, the ghazal as a form “can organize both social and literary objects” (Levine 13). Smith leverages this organizational capacity to enter into interracial dialogue and to highlight the multicultural dimensions of American poetry. For her, poetry has the power to bridge racial divides entrenched in “a mindset that says privilege and even a sense of superiority can be designated by race” (“Art” 00:05:46-53). Thus, when the lyrical speaker laments that “No priest, no sinner has yet been taught our name” (Smith, *Wade* 36), Smith points to the persistent erasure of Black contributions within American literature. By incorporating the ghazal into *Wade in the Water*, she “refute[s] the very cultural logic that opposed self and community,

art and politics,” achieving “a powerful and empowering transformation of US poetry – in its social and aesthetic forms” (Leonard 19). In this way, the ghazal becomes a tool of resistance, transformation, and affirmation within the mission of the New Black Aesthetics.

The question of the self is central to the ghazal form and becomes particularly significant in its adaptation within the New Black Aesthetics. Narang explains that

when poets talk about the limited ego or I-ness, they compare it with . . . the metaphor of a river or an ocean. . . . When the ego is dissolved, the feeling of separation is replaced by the thought of oneness with the universe and the Absolute. Many distinctions, such as past and present, known and unknown, right and wrong, lose their significance and the feeling of oneness brings an end to all binary hierarchies. (188-89)

Smith’s Black ghazal, therefore, not only critiques the falsification of Black identities but also extends into the realm of the Black aquatic, where water becomes both a literal and metaphorical container of cultural identity. As Walcott observes, “[t]ides and waves both bring in and take out elements from the shore to the sea, but, importantly, tides and waves leave elements behind as well, resulting in new and different formations” (66-67). The aquatic metaphor, then, frames Black identity as both historically displaced and constantly re-formed through the interplay of memory, trauma, and survival.

Wade in the Water also reflects on these shifting formations through its social function as a text. In this regard, the poetry volume resonates with DuPlessis’ account of how poems act “as a ‘*reflection*’ or a refraction of the socioeconomic, a ‘*symptom*’ of it, ‘a characteristic *manifestation* of it,’ a ‘*by-product*,’ a *coming to consciousness* of it, and ‘an imaginary or symbolic *resolution*’ of real forces in literary form” (56; original italics). Within African American history, Smith highlights how the earliest Black social formations emerged aboard the vessels of the Middle Passage, where Africans—stripped of home and freedom—built bonds grounded in shared suffering. Plantation life nurtured the next stage of formation, embodied in the ring shouts, whose rhythmic performances laid the groundwork for communal memory and survival.

As DuPlessis’ framework implies, these collective rituals became a poetic manifestation of identity that allowed subsequent generations to come to consciousness of their shared history. Building on these foundations, later upheavals—during the Civil War, the New Negro Movement of the 1920s, the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, and the New Black Aesthetics today—extend this tradition by transforming cultural memory into artistic response. In this way, Smith situates her

work within a lineage of Black poets who preserve the memory of racial trauma while also reconfiguring it as a resource for renewal and future possibility.

The poem “*The Everlasting Self*” presents Smith’s vision of the aesthetic self as inherently tied to Black political activism. The lyrical speaker asserts that “*The Everlasting Self // Comes in from a downpour / Shaking water in every direction – / A collaborative condition: / Gathered, shed, spread, then / Forgotten, reabsorbed*” (Smith, *Wade* 69; original italics). In this passage, Smith positions the Black individual as representative of the larger collective, suggesting that endurance and political engagement are sustained by a shared cultural consciousness. This ancestral awareness, rooted in the individual, nourishes the drive for communal survival and expression, with the poet serving as the catalyst through language. Smith highlights the transformative power of poetry as “its emphasis upon feeling, association, music and image – [with] things we recognize and respond to even before we understand why” (“*Staying Human*”). Through this formulation, she juxtaposes childlike innocence, which preserves the purity of poetic vision, with the mature recognition of external threats facing the Black poetic community.

The poem “*Dusk*” extends this tension between innocence and vulnerability by focusing on Smith’s daughter. Observing her child’s naivety, the lyrical speaker notes with concern her “shoulders / Still so naïve as to stand squared, erect, / Impervious facing the window open / Onto the darkening dusk” (Smith, *Wade* 67). Here, the daughter appears unguarded in a world still dominated by racial hierarchies and supremacist ideology. While “*Dusk*” does not adopt the ghazal form, the girl’s characterization resonates with the literal meaning of the Arabic term *ghazal*, which translates to “doe.” Like the doe, she embodies agility, grace, and sensitivity, yet remains most vulnerable in her formative years when these qualities are still developing. Smith’s maternal anxiety reflects this fragility, as she fears for her daughter’s safety in a hostile environment. A parallel image surfaces in “*The Angels*”, where Smith evokes “Mounds of earth mistaken for dead // Does, lions in crouch” (5), symbolizing the omnipresent threat of White supremacist violence. In this way, Smith situates her daughter within a broader critique of racial oppression, one echoed by other contemporary poets such as Trethewey, who likewise adapt the ghazal to confront social injustice.

Like Smith, Trethewey employs the ghazal form as a mode of social criticism, particularly in her poem “Miscegenation”⁴¹. This poem foregrounds the origins of racial discrepancy in the United States by focusing on Trethewey’s own parents, a racially mixed couple. Because her mother was a Black woman and her father a White man, their marriage was considered a criminal act of miscegenation in Mississippi, forcing them to leave the state and wed in a more liberal region of the North. In this respect, Trethewey’s ghazal demonstrates the form’s capacity to contest historical racial laws and expose the violence of segregation. Smith, too, frames the Black ghazal as an effective vehicle for political activism. Her approach aligns with Narang’s hypothesis that the ghazal historically

def[ies] all efforts of the colonial establishment to be pushed to the sidelines . . . [T]he ghazal became the poetry of social unrest and political struggle with subjects like the country’s freedom, cultural awareness, social reform, women’s rights, the fight against colonialism, and oppression and exploitation. It was a period of great turmoil and turbulence. (231)

By adopting this tradition of resistance, the ghazal functions in *Wade in the Water* as a poetic form for articulating both historical memory and contemporary demands for justice.

With the poem “*Unrest in Baton Rouge*” Smith exemplifies this fusion of form and political activism by staging a direct confrontation between Black subjectivity and White state power. She bases the poem on Jonathan Bachman’s⁴² widely circulated photograph of Ieshia Evans, a young Black woman who stands peacefully before a line of heavily armed police officers. While Evans wears a simple black-and-white checkered dress, the police face her in full body armor, their appearance signaling an intent to suppress rather than protect. Smith uses this juxtaposition of vulnerability against militarized force to challenge the binaries of Black and White, love and violence. Like “*Ash*,” which metaphorically depicts the Black body as a house struggling for racial self-consciousness, “*Unrest in Baton Rouge*” insists that Black subjectivity persists even in the face of systemic repression. By adopting the ghazal as

⁴¹ “Miscegenation” is a part of the “On Being” project, 2020. For further information, see onbeing.org/our-story/.

⁴² The photograph by Jonathan Bachman, which Rankine incorporates into *Just Us*, was recognized as a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. In 2016, the police killing of Alton Sterling, a Black man, led to protests in Baton Rouge. Reuters commissioned Bachman to document the ensuing protests, during which he captured the now-iconic image. For further information, see www.pulitzer.org/finalists/jonathan-bachman-freelance-photographer.

the art of social unrest, Smith situates her work in a tradition of poetic forms that articulate protest through both structure and image.

In contrast to the aggressive posture of the police, Evans communicates peace and non-aggression in both the photograph and Smith's poem. Her black-and-white checkered dress, showing symbolic multicolor patterns, functions as a visual metaphor for interracial harmony. When two officers advance to handcuff her, she remains motionless, resisting not with force but with composure. Smith's lyrical speaker captures the tension of the moment by observing:

Even the men in black armor, the ones
Jangling handcuffs and keys, what else

Are they so buffered against, if not love's blade
Sizing up the heart's familiar meat? (Smith, *Wade* 44)

This juxtaposition reveals how Evans' stillness unsettles the officers, who are conditioned to anticipate violence from Black individuals. Her refusal to embody that expectation transforms the confrontation into a critique of systemic racial suspicion.

Smith frames this poem as a message of love rather than confrontation. She explains that "the language of poetry is a radically re-humanizing force, because it is one of the only generally accessible languages that rewards us for naming things in their realness and their complexity" ("Staying Human"). Narang similarly supports this perspective, noting that the ghazal form frequently intertwines love and creativity (see 32). *Wade in the Water* thus resists narratives of violence by returning to love as a poetic and political strategy.

As the collection demonstrates more broadly, Smith situates interracial conflict within a historical continuum while also envisioning a utopian future of racial equality. Drawing on the legacy of the Black Arts Movement, the New Black Aesthetics empower contemporary poets to imagine transformations of "Western racial logic" through "assertions of black being" (Leonard 22). Smith implies that White supremacy thrives on fear—fear of physical and emotional vulnerability, fear of compassion as an ethical demand, and fear of losing racial, social, and political dominance. By re-centering love in her poetics, Smith destabilizes these fears and presents interracial harmony as both an aesthetic and ethical prospect.

Smith uses the figure of the Black woman in "*Unrest in Baton Rouge*" as a central image for imagining interracial agreement. Confronting a heavily armed mass of police alone, the woman becomes a metaphorical island, recalling the lyrical speaker's daughter in the poem "4½" who is likewise depicted in an insular position.

In both cases, the figures are surrounded by a pool of violence and racism, yet their isolation transforms into a symbol of resilience. Through these parallels, Smith aligns herself with them as an archivist, since all three embody what Schwartz and Cook describe as “unique records that are created and then kept by microcosmic centres of power (i.e., by resisting individuals or groups) pending a future with a more visible, public place for them” (15).

This insular positioning reflects Smith’s broader archival strategy in *Wade in the Water*, but it also extends beyond the volume. Her poetry functions as an individual act of Black resistance that simultaneously participates in the collective artistic force of the New Black Aesthetics. In this larger context, institutions such as Cave Canem and the Dark Room Collective operate as microcosmic centers of power, preserving cultural memory and cultivating poetic activism. By linking the solitary figure of Evans to these collective networks, Smith underscores how Black poets enact both personal and institutional forms of archival resistance against racial oppression.

Overall, a short comparison of Smith and Hayes shows their differing but representative approaches to the New Black Aesthetics. They share a deep investment in history, but their roles differ significantly: Smith frames herself as a lyrical archivist and curator, while Hayes identifies as an “apprentice to history.” In *Wade in the Water*, Smith actively selects, arranges, and revoices archival materials to create what she calls a “third text” that preserves marginalized voices excluded from official narratives. Her authority as a curator positions her between master and slave, mediating history with agency. Hayes, by contrast, places himself within a lineage: in *American Sonnets*, he embraces apprenticeship to earlier traditions, particularly the New Negro Movement and the Black Arts Movement. Rather than curate, his task is to inherit and transform—revising the sonnet to reflect contemporary racial realities. Thus, while Hayes embraces history as a teacher, Smith reconstructs history through her archival approach, embodying different models of poetic authority within the New Black Aesthetics.

Chapter 3

Documentation

Claudia Rankine and her husband John Lucas direct *The Racial Imaginary Institute*, which they describe as *An Interdisciplinary Cultural Laboratory*. The name underscores its interracial purpose. The institute follows the path of earlier central institutions of the New Black Aesthetics, including Cave Canem and the Dark Room Collective. Its mission is twofold: to create art that resists racial stereotypes and to reshape the racial imaginary itself. As the founders explain, they are “committed to the activation of interdisciplinary work and a democratized exploration of race in our lives” (*Racial Imaginary*). The institute also stresses inclusion. It cultivates racially diverse contributors and embraces a polygeneric approach, collaborating “with other collectives, artists, and organizations towards art exhibitions, readings, dialogues, lectures, performances, and screenings that engage the subject of race” (ibid.).

Claudia Rankine’s 2020 *Just Us: An American Conversation* exemplifies the strategy and agenda of the *Racial Imaginary Institute*. Rankine models polyvocal and polygeneric texts that evoke the historical impact of racial constructions, especially contemporary constructions of Whiteness within U.S. society. As a reflection of the current racial landscape, *Just Us* investigates the connections between American constructions of Whiteness as a perpetuation of racial imbalance and seeks to transform the social habits and practices of the U.S. By calling her book *An American Conversation*, Rankine inscribes her poetic collage into the conversation. Approaching *Just Us* through *creative non-poetry*, she negotiates how White privilege enhances America’s social and political consciousness. She examines the historical foundations that formed the haunting racist mindset of White supremacy.

In *Just Us*, Rankine also turns to *poetry of social engagement* to illuminate interracial relations in the United States and to model how poetic practice can work to overcome racial barriers. Central to this effort is the text’s polygeneric form, a key characteristic of creative non-poetry, which provides allegorical insight into America’s racial diversity and positions the book as emblematic of the New Black Aesthetics. Rankine frames her project through a postcolonial lens while also adopting a pluralist perspective that allows the work to mirror contemporary society in its multiplicity. Through this approach, she seeks to identify the roots of ongoing racial disparities and

to foster greater social engagement by exposing and correcting historically rooted but false perceptions of racial stereotypes.

To address the persistence of the racial divide, Rankine positions herself as an interracial mediator, strategically navigating between Black and White perspectives. This role of mediation aligns her with Tracy K. Smith, who likewise considers the mediator as a bridge builder. As the book jacket of *Just Us* poses, “[i]n such partisan conditions, Rankine asks, how can humans best approach one another across our differences?” (Rankine, *Just Us*), a central question Smith explores as well. Within the New Black Aesthetics, the role of the mediator extends beyond individual encounters to a broader cultural mission, which is “to breach the silence, guilt and violence that surround whiteness” (ibid.). Alongside Rankine and Smith, Terrance Hayes takes up this charge by exposing White violence and forcing a recognition of guilt within White consciousness. In this way, poets of the New Black Aesthetics take on the task of rendering interracial exchange less about correctness than about truth (see ibid.), seeking to unearth what lies beneath entrenched social divisions. Hayes emphasizes the physical violence historically inflicted on Black bodies, while Smith highlights the enduring psychological consequences of such violence for contemporary American society. Rankine synthesizes these perspectives, weaving them together to examine how violence functions ideologically, sustained by the presumption of Whiteness as a superior category over racial minorities.

As a collage of interpersonal and interracial exchanges, *Just Us* foregrounds the social function of contemporary poetry. Rankine constructs her text on two levels: she voices her outrage at the persistence of social injustice rooted in race and gender, while simultaneously adopting a neutral vantage point from which to observe the dynamics between Black and White, female and male, in order to analyze how racism and sexism sustain White supremacy. This dual approach aligns with what Cathy Park Hong terms the “poetry of social engagement,” a mode she identified in her 2015 essay⁴³ as central to contemporary practice. For Hong, “[p]oetry . . . is becoming progressively fluid, merging protest and performance into its practice” (qtd. in Dowdy 4), or what Hayes has described as a poetics of practice (Hayes, “Poetics”). Hayes enacts this fluidity by reshaping the sonnet form to dialogue with U.S. society on issues of race and Americanness. Rankine pursues a similar objective, but her American

⁴³ Hong, Cathy P. “There’s a New Moment in American Poetry and It’s Not Kenneth Goldsmith.” *The New Republic*, 1 Oct. 2015, newrepublic.com/article/122985/new-movement-american-poetry-not-kenneth-goldsmith.

conversations expand the experiment beyond a single form. Rather than restrict herself to one inherited genre, she assembles multiple literary forms—poetic fragments, essays, dialogues, images—to mirror the diversity of her interlocutors and the racial and social contexts they embody.

Regarding the social function of Rankine's work, DuPlessis highlights the significance of her polygeneric strategy, noting that “[u]nderstanding of the mobile uses of genre enriches analyses of the linkage between the literary and the social. Genre is one site at which ‘social evaluation’ . . . takes precise shape” (57). Read alongside Hong's notion of poetry of social engagement and Hayes' practice of poetry, DuPlessis' claim underscores how literary form itself functions as a site for negotiating interracial and social dynamics in the United States. Rankine's *Just Us* makes visible this convergence of aesthetics and politics: the formal, rhetorical, and stylistic diversity of her work creates a flexible medium through which to engage multiple audiences. As a representative figure within the New Black Aesthetics, she exploits this diversity to adapt the shape and tone of the text to the needs of her interlocutors. By tailoring her polygeneric approach to specific social circumstances, Rankine demonstrates how genre mobility can serve as both a diagnostic tool and a critical practice for analyzing—and intervening in—the conditions of contemporary racial life.

Particularly with regard to race, the New Black Aesthetics exemplify a progressive cultural project. In *Just Us*, Rankine turns her attention to Whiteness, focusing not on avowed supremacists but on White progressives, since, as she admits, she could not imagine writing “with those other [supremacist] people . . . They won't even share a space with me” (“Claudia Rankine, DiAngelo” 00:55:31–35). The conversations that structure her book are therefore anchored in exemplary encounters that function as forms of protest, allowing her to comment on the offenses her Black protagonists endure in “the dramatically unequal, and unjust, social reality for people of color . . . in the United States” (Dowdy 4). By adopting a dialogic format, Rankine emphasizes her commitment to interracial exchange within American society and highlights the role of conversation itself as a medium for critique and transformation. Each chapter concentrates on a particular instance of how White supremacy infiltrates the daily realities of Black lives, whether through racism in public spaces, political structures, children's education, interracial marriage, or the persistence of racial violence.

Since every chapter in *Just Us* turns to a particular instance of interracial or social disruption, Rankine's polygeneric method itself disrupts the convention of attaching a text to a single literary genre. In her poetry statement, where she defines her fundamental understanding of what poetry must accomplish, Rankine describes "contaminated fields of possibility" that emerge when genre boundaries are crossed ("Poetry Statement" 141). She clarifies that contamination occurs when

the habits of that genre are disrupted and generative because the perceived sense of unity contained in the habits of that genre are disrupted. (ibid.)

This philosophy informs the structure of *Just Us* from the outset. Even before the reader begins the conversations, the table of contents enacts a visual disruption. A white vertical column divides the black chapter numbers, aligned on the right, from the chapter headings on the left (see "contents")⁴⁴. The gap reads as a metaphor of racial division, a formal echo of how White supremacy enforces separation within American society. In this sense, *Just Us* is both a book *about* disruption and a book designed *as* disruption. Moreover, because Rankine frames her American conversation around progressives rather than supremacists, she acknowledges that the foundation of her dialogue is already fractured. To address this fractured position, she refuses the margins of a purely liminal identity and instead occupies a doubled space: as both a Black poet shaping the aesthetic field of the text and as the moderator of its ongoing national conversation.

Rankine opens her second chapter, "liminal spaces i," by introducing herself to both her reader and to America not through self-identification but through the racial profile imposed upon her as a Black woman. Almost apologetically, she admits,

. . . [white people] couldn't know what it's like to be me, though who I am is in part a response to who they are, and I didn't really believe I understood them, even as *they determined so much of what was possible in my life and in the lives of others*. But because I have only lived as me, a person who regularly has to negotiate conscious and unconscious dismissal, erasure, disrespect, and abuse, I fell into this wondering silently. (*Just Us* 21, 23; my emphasis)

Here, Rankine positions herself as the protagonist of her narrative, grounding her authority in lived experience. She makes her own body and memory the site through which the workings of America's racial machinery are revealed. Yet the emphasis falls less on personal confession than on exposing the broader social structure that enforces

⁴⁴ The exemplary pages of *Just Us* I refer to can be found in the 2020 Penguin Random House UK edition.

her racialization. Instead of simply blaming White individuals for perpetuating disadvantage, she introduces distinction, suggesting the possibility of White innocence while insisting that racism is a system that indoctrinates both Black and White. She acknowledges that stereotypes shape the social mindset but insists on the individual Black subject's agency to accept or resist those stereotypes. Her strategy of self-defense emerges from what she calls "the fact that I can refuse the white man's stereotypes of blackness, even as he interacts with those stereotypes. What I wanted was to know what the white man saw or didn't see" (31, 32). In this way, Rankine makes her racial liminality visible, not as passive confinement but as a conscious space of negotiation where she simultaneously exposes systemic racism and claims her right to self-definition.

Rankine frames *Just Us* on the interplay between author and social environment, making this dynamic the theoretical foundation of the book. In her poetry statement, she explains that her use of multiple literary genres derives from "[Roland] Barthes' notion of the text as plural . . . The idea that speech acts have double destinations, and that words are alive in their proximity to other words and images, makes working across genres generative for me as an artist" ("Poetry Statement" 141). For Rankine, these "double destinations" provide a strategy to cultivate a literary space of social engagement, where words function both in relation to their interlocutors and in relation to the broader racial and cultural landscape. This pluralistic approach also reflects her method of shielding herself from the weight of racial stereotypes while simultaneously confronting them in public discourse. In *Just Us*, she makes racial profiling not only a subject of analysis but a shared site of conversation. The work thus becomes an aesthetic bridge between Black racial minorities and White structures of power, staging dialogues with interlocutors from both groups. Through this dual movement, Rankine positions her text as a performative act of mediation, one that both critiques racial hierarchy and insists on the possibility of communication across it.

In *Just Us*, Rankine creates a deliberately hybrid form in which visual images and textual materials are placed in dialogue, disrupting the expectation that poetry or prose should operate independently of other media. Photographs, screenshots, and reproductions of charts and documents do not merely illustrate the text but intervene and equal voices in the narrative of her work. Placed alongside essays and lyric fragments, they create a polyvocal structure that mirrors the fragmented nature of racial discourse in the U.S. For instance, statistical tables on incarceration or

screenshots of political figures visually manifest the arguments Rankine develops in her prose sections, refusing interpretations of her work that are not connected to documented proof. This intermedial form exemplifies the New Black Aesthetics' engagement with multiplicity, where art is not limited to a solely lyrical expression but also incorporates multiple media to reflect the complexity of Black experience and identity.

The interaction between pictures and text also challenges the reader's role, insisting on constant shifts between visual evidence and verbal reflection. Photographs of social interactions accompany Rankine's intimate textual mediations, emphasizing the struggle between public representation and individual perception. This interplay represents a formal double consciousness: the visual record insists to be objective while the textual commentary focuses on subjectivity and affect.

Here, Barthes' distinction between the *Work* and the *Text* becomes evident. The *Work* suggests an artefact that is closed in itself while the *Text* remains open, plural, and intertextual. The *Work* corresponds to the individual and mirrors the poet's ideological stance toward social constructs. In Rankine's case, it explains how poets shape collective thought, particularly through their interventions in race relations, as *Just Us* demonstrates. Second, the *Text* functions as an abstract synonym for U.S. society itself, highlighting the social role of poetry and connecting it to the liminality central to the New Black Aesthetic text. While liminality suggests constraint and in-betweenness, Barthes' concept of pluralism emphasizes movement and expansiveness. He writes that the "Text is plural. . . . The Text is not coexistence of meaning, but passage, traversal" (Barthes 59). Rankine applies this principle by refusing to treat *Just Us* as a static juxtaposition of essays. Instead, she organizes its chapters and interlocutors into a dynamic dialogue, creating what she explicitly calls "an American conversation." In this way, Rankine appropriates Barthes' notion of textual passage, transforming plurality into a poetics of exchange. Barthes' framework of *Work* and *Text* thus enables Rankine to redefine contemporary Black poetry not as bound to a single form, but as a polygenre—an aesthetic of multiplicity that resists containment.

Her combination of pictures and words resists closure, instead crafting a *Text* in Barthes' sense, one that is constantly in the process of mediating between multiple discourses and perspectives. By merging visual and textual materials, she embodies the New Black Aesthetics' mission to produce hybrid, cross-genre works that resist singular and limiting categorizations. The images interrupt, destabilize, and demand

recognition, extending what DuPlessis calls the “social life of a poem” into a multimedia sphere. Thereby, *Just Us* demonstrates how contemporary Black poetics move beyond language, using the correlation of visual and textual forms to reframe national conversations about race, belonging, and justice.

Considering *Just Us* as the *Work* reveals Rankine’s effort to resist what Orlando Patterson terms “social death”⁴⁵ and instead claim a place within America’s interracial society. When she writes that “[i]t’s hard to exist and also accept my lack of existence” (*Just Us* 33), she “explain[s] [her] there-but-not-there status in a historically antiblack society” (ibid.). This in-betweenness makes her emblematic of the liminal space to which society confines her as a Black woman. To resist this confinement, Rankine expands the *Work* into a vocal and interracial plurality. She draws on Barthes’ assertion that “[t]he work is caught up in a process of filiation. What is postulated are a *determination* of the world (of the race, then of History) over the work, a *consecution* of works among themselves, and an appropriation of the work to its author” (Barthes 61; original italics). For Rankine, this process of filiation becomes a way of escaping social death: she inserts her voice into history, situates herself within a lineage of Black writing, and reframes race from a distinctly Black perspective. Her method combines the cumulative weight of her dialogues with progressivist interlocutors, her retrospective commentary on those conversations, and epitextual rather than paratextual elements. By appropriating these materials, she defines her role as both poet and citizen, claiming authority to position herself within her social environment rather than being passively defined by it.

Rankine participates in what Barthes describes as appropriation. First, she elaborates on her dual function as an independent poet and a representative of a racial minority being confined to the liminal space White supremacy imposes. Second, she frames this through the concept of *ethical loneliness*, borrowing Jill Stauffer’s definition of it as “isolation one feels when one, as a violated person or as one member of a persecuted group, has been abandoned by humanity, or by those who have power over one’s life’s possibilities” (qtd. in *Just Us* 201). Rankine responds to this condition by dedicating the chapter “ethical loneliness” to making Black poetry visibly occupy space within the whiteness of the physical page.

⁴⁵ Patterson creates the term *social death* in his sociological work *Slavery and Social Death* (1982) to describe people whom society denies recognition as human beings.

One illustrative moment occurs when she invites a White female friend to attend the play *Fairview*⁴⁶, a production that stages both Black and White perspectives on race. At one point, an actor breaks the fourth wall and instructs all White members of the audience to step onto the stage, leaving the auditorium to Black visitors. The staging dramatizes a social reversal unlikely to occur in everyday life. Yet Rankine's friend refuses to comply. Her refusal enrages Rankine because even in this simulated environment—where Whiteness is made visible and Blackness dominant—the friend resists. In that refusal, Rankine's sense of ethical loneliness intensifies: she feels abandoned by someone she expected to stand beside her.

The moment becomes reciprocal. Rankine experiences betrayal because she assumed her friend would take her side in matters of race, but her assumption collapses under the weight of the friend's refusal. At the same time, the friend experiences her own betrayal, feeling reduced to a symbol of White privilege and forced to embody the very structures that caused Black suffering. Rankine structures the chapter as both prose narrative and poetry, turning it into a poetics of recognition—at once self-recognition and mutual recognition, fraught with disappointment. What emerges is not triumph but confrontation with failure. In this way, Rankine expands the scope of poetry of social engagement: it does not only reflect triumphs or moments of hope (see Dowdy 11) but, as Dowdy argues, also insists on “failure as the ground of writing, social life, and ultimately political possibility” (ibid.).

The chapter “ethical loneliness” is structured in three parts, each designed to capture both the Black and White motivations behind the conflict between Rankine and her friend, while also offering a shared space for justification. Part i recounts Rankine's experience during the play and her sense of disappointment at her friend's refusal to act. Part ii responds directly, allowing the friend to articulate her reasoning: “*I know I shrink . . . from scenes where I'm asked . . . to feel bad as a white person*” (*Just Us* 209; original italics). The friend claims that she, too, feels exhausted by the way racism continues to organize social hierarchies, suggesting her burden is parallel to Rankine's as a Black woman. Rankine, drawing on Lauren Berlant, reflects: “To be forced into thought is to begin to formulate the event of feeling historical in the present,” a description that aptly captures her friend's confrontation at the play (qtd. in *Just Us* 329). By refusing to step on stage, the friend resists the implication that Whiteness is inseparable from White supremacy. She refuses to publicly embody the

⁴⁶ *Fairview* is a play by Jackie Sibblies Drury, which premiered in 2018 at the Soho Repertory Theatre.

inherited guilt of her White ancestors, aware of the historical resonance of such a symbolic gesture.

Part iii transforms the exchange into an erasure poem. Rankine selects phrases from parts i and ii and constructs a sparse text that envisions an unrestricted space for Black presence, a space not bound by White refusal. The poem emphasizes the actor's failed request while also embodying exhaustion and void through the deliberate emptiness on the page:

A charac-

ter asks the white members of the audience to get up

The

black actor wishes the space to hold black people
– what

if

The white woman remains in her seat. (213)

The visual bleakness of the page mirrors the depletion both women feel, while the highlighted conditional “what if” extends beyond the moment itself. It links the erasure poem “ethical loneliness” back to the opening poem “what if,” establishing continuity across the text and reinforcing Rankine’s strategy of beginning and ending with unanswered possibilities.

De facto, the White friend answers the central question *Just Us* raises in its opening chapter: “What does it mean . . . / to feel bullied / by the call to change?” (5). The moral dilemma Rankine stages in “ethical loneliness” captures the mutual anger of both women—anger born of exposure and rejection. Rankine frames this dilemma through her concept of ethical loneliness, but she also draws on Audre Lorde, who defines race-induced anger as “[a]nger [being] the grief of distortions between peers,

and its object [being] change” (qtd. in *Just Us* 200)⁴⁷. In this context, the peers are the interracial audience members at *Fairview*, confronted by distortions created through difference in racial identity. Lorde further explains that “peers meeting upon a common basis to examine difference, and to alter those distortions which history has created around difference” must expose themselves to each other, compelled to overcome their barriers (ibid.). Rankine’s account of visiting *Fairview* with her friend is thus a paradigmatic real-life enactment of Lorde’s theorization of anger as both a product of history and a catalyst for change.

Rankine’s erasure poem reinforces this enactment by echoing her verso-recto technique, a method she employs when weaving her interlocutors’ voices together with epitextual sources. She describes this technique as working across the page, aligning distinct textual layers (see 316–17). In practice, she distinguishes between two textual types: (1) epitextual sources, and (2) dialogic exchanges between her interlocutors and herself. This creates a structural binary that juxtaposes U.S. society with Rankine’s personal position within it. As a contribution to the New Black Aesthetics, *Just Us* foregrounds precisely this challenge to binaries. It resists the traditional separations of self versus community and art versus politics. As Leonard argues, such works are “challenges to the binaries of self versus community and art versus politics. [They are] enacted by self-determination thus call[ing] for a thorough revision of traditional ways of reading of the relationship among blackness, form, and political meaning in all contemporary verse” (25).

In general, Rankine’s use of the verso-recto structure in *Just Us* can be read as a contemporary adaptation of the African American call-and-response tradition, a practice rooted in spirituals, sermons, and communal performances. In this context, the recto page often presents Rankine’s lyrical pondering, while the opposite verso page provides footnotes, citations, or visual materials that “respond” to the main text. This formal strategy echoes call-and-response by creating dialogues across and beyond the page: one voice initiates the conversation, another one answers, commenting on or reframing the given issue. The reader, positioned between these pages, becomes an active participant in Rankine’s negotiations that are similar to the communal audience in African American oral traditions. By connecting the verso-recto structure with the call-and-response tradition, Rankine transforms her pages into a site of interaction,

⁴⁷ Rankine draws her quotations on anger and change from Audre Lorde’s *Sister Outsider*, published by Crossing Press in 2007.

where history, testimony, and personal reflection communicate with each other. This hybrid form embodies the New Black Aesthetics by reimagining inherited cultural practices within innovative literary structures.

More specifically, the recto (right) page of *Just Us* contains Rankine's own writing: poetry, personal reflections, conversations with interlocutors, and commentaries on historical documents. To give the page the appearance of a collage, she separates each paragraph with a spare line, leaving them visually unconnected. This fragmented layout reflects the temporal gaps of conversation and relates to her concept of liminal time. Rankine explains that these spaces visualize the moment in which "we travel toward trust in a person or intimacy with a person or simply the decision to run from our interlocutor. Our retorts hold the calculations arrived at in the liminal space between utterances" (Barnett). The formal arrangement thus mirrors her shifting responses to her interlocutors. In addition, red dots frequently punctuate the right margin. They mark her marginalized position as a Black poet within U.S. society but also signal power. As Beth McCoy observes, these dots are "spaces of repetition progressively shaped to accumulate and increase knowledge, property, and power" (160). For Rankine, the dot amplifies her authority. Its visual prominence directs the reader's attention to key statements, while its link to epitextual material strengthens their credibility.

The red dot also functions as a transitional device, moving the reader from recto to verso. The verso (left) page carries epitextual materials—citations, excerpts, and external sources—that contextualize and support the recto text. McCoy argues that "[t]he added paratextual material indeed appeared to buffer and shape the fraught discursive space between image and spectator" (164). While McCoy distinguishes between text and paratext, her insight clarifies how Rankine uses epitext in *Just Us*. Because these excerpts are drawn from outside sources rather than Rankine's own commentary, they could be read as paratext. Yet their role goes further. They are integral to her argument, taking an active part in shaping meaning rather than passively framing it. In this way, the verso and recto pages form a dynamic: Rankine's voice in dialogue with external voices, her lived experience set against historical and cultural documentation.

Tracy K. Smith uses a related technique in *Wade in the Water*, though she hides her epi- and paratextual references in the Notes section rather than on the page itself. Rankine, by contrast, makes the connection visible. In *Just Us*, the red dot flags

sentences on the recto page that reappear as expanded references in the corresponding epitext on the verso page. The visual gaps between Rankine's recto paragraphs further slow the reader, inviting a pause of reflection before moving forward. The verso page then performs this buffering function by supplying context, evidence, or amplification. Together, these design elements train the reader to read both across the page and between pages, moving from text to commentary, from claim to supporting material.

McCoy's description of the relation between "image and spectator" clarifies how this process works. For Rankine, the "image" includes not only her written text but also the photographs, screenshots, and other media she inserts alongside it. The reader, therefore, is not only a reader but also a spectator—someone who must engage visually as well as verbally, processing the text and its accompanying epitextual materials as a unified experience. Rankine's page design enacts her theoretical commitment: poetry as a space of mediation where language and image, personal voice and documentary evidence, all intersect to reshape the racial imaginary.

In *Just Us*, the constant movement between verso and recto pages illustrates what DuPlessis terms "the social life of a poem" (58). While DuPlessis emphasizes the reader's agency in determining how a text is received, Rankine complicates that assumption. The structure of *Just Us* itself "train[s] [them] for how to receive [the] given work" (ibid.). Readers are not left to wander freely but are directed and guided to read in the rhythm Rankine intends. She animates this back-and-forth by reprinting recto lines on the verso, prefaced by the word "Text" in the same red as the marginal dot. This signals the connection and forces the reader into the relational mode of her collage.

Because *Just Us* is built out of conversations, its very form reflects Rankine's authorial approach. Her words appear alongside excerpts from scholarly sources that anchor her claims and fortify her credibility as a Black poet addressing a largely White readership. The section titled "Notes and Sources" makes this explicit. Here, she reveals on "what facts [Rankine] was actually relying . . . [She] needed to come up with a structure that could hold the facts and . . . the essay equally" ("Claudia Rankine, DiAngelo" 00:03:32-54). These notes elaborate on her thought processes, showing that personal reflection and documented history cannot be disentangled. The title itself, printed in black, mirrors the black title of *Just Us*, whose near-homophone is "justice." The parallel insists that justice emerges from the interplay of lived voice and documented evidence. By situating her personal reflections alongside generically

diverse sources, Rankine breaks out of the margins, positioning herself at eye level with her interlocutors in a collage that is both interracial and intertextual.

The polygeneric design of *Just Us* underscores another defining feature of Rankine's work: confession. Her use of confession situates contemporary race issues in a lineage of artistic movements that shaped both Black and American art. The Black Arts Movement of the 1960s created a space for African American poets and musicians to produce self-defined, self-expressive work outside of White cultural control. At the same time, the rise of *confessional poetry* tied poetic voice directly to lived experience. When Macha L. Rosenthal coined the term in 1959⁴⁸, he marked a turn in American poetry—the merging of poet and lyrical speaker. This shift became crucial not only for postwar poetry but for the later practices of the New Black Aesthetics.

Confessional poetry introduced a double innovation in the 1960s: “poetic style as well as specific subject matter and the relationship between a poem’s speaker and self” (“Confessional Poetry”). These qualities parallel the experimental spirit of the Black Arts Movement and extend into the aesthetics of today’s Black poets. Within the New Black Aesthetics, confession functions as a connective principle. It builds community by insisting that the poet’s personal voice can also be the lyrical speaker’s voice. For poets like Terrance Hayes, Tracy K. Smith, and Claudia Rankine, that overlap matters. They often describe themselves as confined by a social environment shaped by White supremacy, and confession becomes a tool of resistance. By merging their personal voice with the lyrical speaker’s, they situate their art in continuity with Black poetic ancestry. Each poem becomes both an act of survival and a way of processing inherited trauma, reviving a lineage while speaking to the present.

Black poets write under the impact of ancestry. Their art is marked by the history of their ancestors. For this reason, poets of the New Black Aesthetics continue to adapt confessional poetry, showing how U.S. history presses on the present. Hayes merges his personal I with his lyrical I, underscoring that his work carries forward the legacy of the Black Arts. Smith turns toward an ecocritical frame, mapping race onto questions of environment and health. Rankine, like them, writes to cross racial boundaries. Yet her focus falls on righteousness and truth. She exposes Whiteness as racist but also insists on showing how stereotypes act differently in Black and White

⁴⁸ In his essay “Poetry as Confession,” poet and literary critic Macha Louis Rosenthal reviewed Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* in *The Nation*. What distinguishes Lowell from other poets, Rosenthal argues, is that he does not veil the personal but openly grounds his poetry in his own life experiences and the innermost drives of the self. For further context, see “*Confessional Poetry*” (*Poetry Foundation*).

bodies. In this way, she confirms that the confessional mode “helped inaugurate a range of social and artistic practices [which] aimed at uncovering, exposing, confessing, and sharing new, more intimate versions of disparate selves” (ibid.). She too shifts between the personal I and the lyrical I, refusing to fix her voice in one position.

Rankine’s path into confession began with the poet Robert Hass⁴⁹, whom she cites as a model. Hass is neither Black nor formally confessional, yet his work shaped her interest in the interplay between imagination and reality. She admires how “he allows you to sit in the mind of the speaker, and understand the ways in which that mind has to negotiate the reality of a thing” (Sharma). That balance informs *Just Us*. In it, Rankine unites narrator and lyrical speaker, giving herself the largest share of speech across the book. Her voice dominates, but she stages conversations with friends and strangers, men and women, Black and White. The result is a collage of confessional Black poetry, filled with confession, inquiry, and exchange. These interlocutors reveal the shifting shapes of White privilege, each instance an example of how racial power still structures American life.

The form and structure of *Just Us* stand out as singular within Black poetry. “For Rankine,” Lisa Sewell and Kazim Ali note, “it is moving beyond genre’s limits that produces the possibility of the communal voice” (11). Her representative task, then, is to track the physical and oral oppressions of Blackness back to the founding era of the United States. She insists that America as an interracial society “. . . ha[s] no practice actually talking about the construction that is under everything that happens in this country. It’s at the beginning of the formation of this country – slavery” (“Claudia Rankine, literaturfestival” 00:23:14-35). *Just Us*, as a collection of conversations, negotiates those origins, revealing how White supremacy became embedded in the nation’s social fabric.

Dorothy Wang critiques contemporary “[p]oetry studies . . . suffer[ing] from an inability to engage with concrete materialities and structures of power so as to fully look at the topic of race and colonialism and its relationship to the cultural artifacts that are produced and received in the habitus . . . of these ideologies” (223). Rankine

⁴⁹ Appointed U.S. Poet Laureate in 1995, Robert Hass established himself as a poet who became a recognized public figure by incorporating the political environment more prominently into poetry. Beyond raising public awareness of the significance of poetry, he is described as “the most active Poet Laureate of the United States,” particularly for his reflections on the self in relation to its environment (“Robert Hass”). This focus connects him to Robert Lowell, with whom he shares an emphasis on exploring the individual within broader cultural and political contexts.

responds to that gap directly. Although her work spans genres, she names it poetry, asserting the form's capacity to hold political negotiation and historical memory. For her, poetry is the means to register how White supremacy works as both ideology and lived structure, shaping the persistence of Black oppression.

Rankine suggests that her use of multiple genres mirrors the different participants in her American conversation. In her poetry statement, she explains that

[t]he text that extends its conversation across genres both embraces and resists the history of its genre in order to accommodate its marriage to another way of seeing. Its conversations must be constantly renegotiated between distinct sets of expectations, both in terms of form and content. (140)

What she pursues in *Just Us* is a practice of *creative non-poetry*. Joseph Harrington defines this form as one that “borrows and burrows from the traditional conventions of the poetic; or mashes them up; or disclaims them altogether, by turns. It can contain verse, prose, dialogue, pictures” (qtd. in Dowdy 8). Sewell and Ali note that Rankine “intentionally troubles generic distinctions” (3). Through this hybrid strategy, she seeks to unsettle the racial division of society into Black and White and instead affirm the equal acknowledgment of all races, symbolically uniting them under the capacious label of Black poetry.

She also frames the American conversation as a process. First, the speakers contribute intellectual acts in the form of statements or opinions. Second, interlocutors listen, process, and generate a response. Third, they situate themselves in relation to what has been said. Rankine highlights the second stage—processing—because it implies understanding and toleration, even without agreement. To illustrate these phases, she explains that she intends “the book *Just Us* to perform thinking” and “open out as a process, not as a history book” (“Claudia Rankine, literaturfestival” 00:50:57-51:02, 00:51:59-52:04). The performance of thinking begins even before the first page. The book cover and jacket⁵⁰ invite the reader into this process. The cover of *Just Us* displays a photograph of blond hair framed by a raised border. This design engages both sight and touch: the reader traces the frame with their fingers toward the hair, encountering its texture as the book's first act of embodied reflection.

As a result, *Just Us* opens with both a visual and textual inquiry into what makes the forbidden or unreachable object desirable, drawing on people's instinct to pursue ownership of what they want. Rankine hints at this strategy throughout the

⁵⁰ This dissertation focuses on the United Kingdom hardcover edition of *Just Us* published by Allen Lane and Penguin Random House, 2020.

book, but she states it plainly near the end. On the second-to-last page of the main text, she defends the book's design against an interlocutor's claim that it lacks a strategy, because "*response is my strategy*" (*Just Us* 334; my emphasis), she insists. First, she responds to racial oppression and the misleading ways Whiteness presents itself. Second, she responds to the recurrence of racism, explaining "that it's the not newness of white supremacy and the not newness of my inquiry that returns me to the page to reengage" (ibid.). This persistence comes with a cost. Exhaustion and fatigue mark her voice throughout *Just Us*. The book makes clear that despite decades of political reform and social movements, including the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, racial attitudes between Black Americans and White supremacists remain unchanged.

Just Us underscores that the racial imbalance of U.S. society creates disadvantages for Black people in legal, financial, and health contexts. The book's cover mirrors this imbalance. The photograph of blond hair, framed at the center, becomes a metaphor for how Whiteness frames Black Americans to damage their reputation and limit their social standing. The shading in the photograph moves from dark/black to bright/blond through a bluish transition zone. This gradient corresponds with the white space surrounding the photograph, where the title and author appear in black letters. Above Rankine's name, the publisher's imprint is printed in gray, creating another zone of transition that mirrors the bluish shading in the photograph. Allen Lane, as an imprint of Penguin Books, stands as a global publishing authority and reinforces Rankine's credibility as a Black writer. The gray imprint thus symbolizes her commitment to interracial dialogue, contrasting Black and White while placing them on equal ground. At the same time, the red subtitle *An American Conversation* stresses Rankine's focus on interracial dialogue about the physical and mental violence Black people endure. The overall design reinforces this message. The white book jacket, the red hardcover, and the black final pages enclose the content of *Just Us* in the same palette of colors that structure the national conversation about race.

The strict sectional coloring of *Just Us* mirrors Rankine's collage method, with each color representing a distinct facet of the whole. The book's formal structure employs collage as its central aesthetic form, underscoring that *Just Us* remains a book of poetry despite its polygeneric character. In this sense, Rankine becomes a paradigm of the twenty-first-century female poet, as suggested by two major anthologies of

contemporary poetry⁵¹. Her approach to form is rooted in documentary poetry. Lisa Sewell defines this practice through its content and generic construction, noting that the poet

engage[s] the documentary collage form [by] mixing text with photographs, reproductions of historical documents, reported speech, artwork, and original news footage, . . . [and] the essay form. (263-64)

Mark Nowak, by contrast, emphasizes the role of the poet, proposing that contemporary writers use

documentary poetry as a set of aesthetic practices with a range of tools, most prominently appropriation, quotation, and the use of multiple media. . . . [T]hese practices can be placed along a continuum from “subjective” first-person auto-ethnographies to “objective” third-person “documentarian tendencies.” (qtd. in Dowdy 8)

In *Just Us*, Rankine demonstrates her expertise as a documentary poet in her sustained discourse on the construction of Whiteness in contemporary U.S. society. The term discourse deliberately echoes her subtitle, *An American CONVERSATION*, highlighting her intent to shape poetry into a public dialogue. By relying on the diverse techniques of documentary poetry, she distances herself from conventional poetic forms. In this approach, she aligns with Natasha Trethewey, who “not only uses . . . photographs [for example,] to complicate a progressive historical narrative about race in the United States, but also subverts formal modes, using the apparent constraints of formalism to frame her rewriting of history” (Queen 315). For Rankine, the adoption of multiple literary genres both disrupts traditional poetics and also reflects the variety of human characters who populate her conversations on race and privilege.

From a New Formalist perspective, the question of form in *Just Us* asks, “[w]here . . . can we locate the best opportunities for social change in a world of overlapping forms? Can we set some form against another or introduce a new form that would reroute a racial hierarchy or disturb exclusionary boundaries?” (Levine 22). Sewell, Nowak, and Rankine collectively affirm Levine’s hypothesis: yes, merging forms destabilizes racial hierarchies and resists social exclusion. Sewell and Nowak’s elaborations on New Formalist theory underscore how overlapping forms metaphorically represent the racial diversity of U.S. society. Rankine exemplifies this

⁵¹ Sewell, Lisa, and Kazim Ali. *North American Women Poets in the Twenty-First Century: Beyond Lyric and Language*. Wesleyan UP, 2020.

Rankine, Claudia, and Michael Dowdy, editors. *American Poets in the Twenty-First Century*. Wesleyan UP, 2018.

As part of the editorial team, Rankine is responsible for defining the role and identity of the Black poet in the twenty-first century.

principle by demonstrating how literary forms, when “set . . . against another” (ibid.), can harmonize in documentary poetry as the “new form” (ibid.). Each chapter merges multiple modes, making form itself a site of resistance. Across *Just Us*, hybrid forms complement one another to clarify the roots of interracial disparities. In doing so, they create a formal saferoom—an imagined space that models peaceful interracial coexistence.

As the following analysis demonstrates, Rankine incorporates every element of the documentary collage into *Just Us* as defined by Sewell. The opening poem, “what if,” frames the broader concerns that structure her national conversation on race. Beginning with a poem, she establishes *literary artwork* as the first category of the documentary collage. At the same time, “what if” confirms Nowak’s hypothesis: as a persona poem, it privileges the subjective voice—Rankine’s voice—through the form of a dramatic monologue. This poem serves as a preface to the three larger sections of the book, each introduced by a chapter titled “liminal spaces.” By doing so, Rankine signals her reflective stance toward social change and addresses a collective, though unnamed, audience⁵².

The form of the poem mirrors its content. The shifting line lengths in “what if” suggest that change, especially in matters of race, is both inevitable and ever-present. The lyrical speaker asks,

What does it mean to want
an age-old call
for change
not to change

and yet, also,
to feel bullied
by the call to change? (*Just Us* 5)

With these opening lines, Rankine frames the dilemma that threads through *Just Us*. She builds another structural frame at the other end of the book with the final chapter, “liminal spaces iii,” which responds to the questions posed at the start. The conclusion insists that if racial matters do not change, U.S. society “forfeit[s] the ability to attempt again, to converse again, to speak with, to question, and to listen to, [which] is to be complicit with the violence of an unchanging structure contending with the aliveness and constant movement of all of us” (334). The first section of “what if” explores how

⁵² In an interview with Toby Ashraf on her then recent publication of *Just Us*, Rankine states that she did not compose the book with a specific audience in mind. Instead, she intends to let “the work . . . find its people” (“Claudia Rankine, literaturfestival” 00:44:48-50).

change might be sparked, while the second section shifts into a collective first-person voice that advocates for Black Americans, who feel “historied out” (7). That phrase captures the exhaustion of those consigned to an oppressed role in the story of American racism. Turning directly to the conscience of Whiteness, the speaker insists on a cooperative path forward: “I could build a container to carry this [tired, exhausted] being, / . . . though we were never / about completeness; we were never to be whole” (ibid.). The prospect of better race relations, Rankine suggests, depends on White supremacy reckoning with the trauma racism inflicts not only on Black people but also on White Americans themselves.

Rankine employs the rhetorical device of *pars pro toto* to dramatize America’s fractured social state, mirroring the fragmentary aesthetic of her collage form. In section iii of “what if,” she directs her readers toward racial consciousness by layering conditional sentences that force them to imagine the consequences “if nothing changes” (9). Section iv turns to speculation, considering what society might look like if change eventually does occur. In sections v and vi, the poem builds into a collage of activism, its momentum driven by an accumulation of active, self-centered verbs. The speaker closes by attempting to map the logic of White thought, wondering “how what I want / and what I want from you run parallel —” (11). This effort reflects Rankine’s larger project: to establish an interracial American conversation that reduces conflict in negotiations about race. She pairs her earlier cascade of *what ifs* with imperatives directed at White readers, demanding that they recognize and confront the weight of their racial position. They must “[k]now what it is to be white. Know what it is to expect what white people could have whether or not luck or economics allow you to have it. . . . Know what it is to be white” (47). Only such recognition, she argues, can open a space for dismantling racial injustice.

Rankine extends her collage with a *historical component*, which Sewell identifies as the second category of documentary poetry. As a subgenre of creative non-poetry, documentary poetry turns to historical records as both source and frame. Rankine reaches back to the early years of the United States, exposing the roots of racial injustice embedded in foundational texts. To confront the White mindset and press for a cooperative interracial society, she begins by unmasking Whiteness as a self-appointed position of superiority—an authority that long styled itself as an intellectual guide for Black people. *Just Us* embodies Joseph Harrington’s claim that “documentary poetics challenges the subjective individual experiences that are the

realm of lyric by engaging collective histories, which are often bound up with the forces of alienation and oppression related to conquest, colonization, and global capitalism” (Dowdy 8).

Just Us identifies all of these forces in Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781)⁵³. To her, Jefferson’s treatise becomes a key document in which White supremacy is articulated as natural law, rendering the possibility of racial coexistence in America structurally impossible. She devotes an entire chapter of *Just Us* to Jefferson, reproducing excerpts from *Notes on the State of Virginia* as part of her documentary collage. By juxtaposing these passages with her own voice, she demonstrates that her collage draws not only from multiple literary genres but also from divergent perspectives on race, including both pro- and anti-Black positions. Titled “notes on the state of whiteness,” the chapter recasts Jefferson’s portrait of social order through a postcolonial lens and situates it within the contemporary New Black Aesthetics. Rankine directly confronts Jefferson’s infamous assertion that Black people lack the capacity to produce literature, and especially poetry (see Rankine, *Just Us* 117).

Rankine’s work clarifies how Whiteness and White privilege were historically constructed and embedded in the American social mindset. To explain why her poetry helps dismantle racial barriers and enables an equal interracial dialogue, this analysis turns to Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* as a theoretical framework. Reading Rankine through Césaire shows how she frames dialogue across racial lines by grounding it in the genre of poetry. Her work sketches the historical trajectory of U.S. society while emphasizing the poet’s role as racial mediator and curator. Robin D. G. Kelley describes “Césaire’s embrace of poetry as a method of achieving clairvoyance, of obtaining the knowledge we need to move forward” as a strategy for transforming society’s mindset into a racially open and more just condition (17). Césaire’s discourse insists on breaking with a colonial past—a past largely shaped by Anglo-Saxon colonizers through territorial annexation and the subjugation of foreign peoples. Rankine draws on this critique to interrogate Whiteness in the U.S. context. His hypotheses allow her to expose the weight of White privilege in contemporary America, both for those who openly rely on their racial status and for those who unknowingly benefit from it.

⁵³ Apart from listing the natural resources and livestock of the State of Virginia, Jefferson dedicates his work to his view on slavery, also in connection to its impact on a (dys-)functional American society.

The chapter “notes on the state of whiteness” is Rankine’s central example of how she appropriates creative non-poetry. By including Jefferson both as a historical reference and as a prose component, she makes his *Notes on the State of Virginia* part of her American conversation. Rankine works with form to visually juxtapose herself, as the Black poet, with Jefferson, as the White supremacist, assigning both an equal amount of space on the page. Her choice to reproduce Jefferson’s text almost verbatim confirms Lisa Sewell’s claim that “reproductions of historical documents” form a key element of documentary poetry (264). Yet Rankine transforms Jefferson’s White text into a Black reproduction by constructing a palimpsest. Through changes to the visual design of the printing, she highlights how Black people were denied recognition and overlooked by White society throughout U.S. history. Incorporating Jefferson’s text in this way turns *Just Us* into an act of historical inscription. The “[p]oetic form itself becomes historical inscription, . . . challenging the authority of traditional historical knowledge by making self-critical poetic interpretation at least as legitimate” (Leonard 23). This strategy is emblematic of the New Black Aesthetics, which turn archival recovery into both a literary practice and a political act.

The visual layout of the chapter “notes on the state of whiteness” illustrates how Rankine selects and reframes Jefferson’s words. She chooses passages central to his perception of Black people and prints them in bold black font, a move that highlights both his authority and his prejudice. Rankine notes that she admires Jefferson, yet she directly confronts his racism⁵⁴ (cf. “Claudia Rankine, literaturfestival” 00:29:18–30:23). She begins with Jefferson’s legalistic reduction of slaves to property: “[t]o make slaves distributable among the next of kin, as other moveables” (sic *Just Us* 110). She also cites his occasional acknowledgment of Black humanity, such as his remarks on emancipation (111), his admission of Black beauty as superior to White beauty (113), and his recognition of Black bravery (114). But the structure of the chapter makes clear that these gestures are overshadowed by his refusal to acknowledge any poetic capacity in Black people.

Rankine’s visual adjustments transform Jefferson’s non-poetic historical document into a work of New Black Aesthetic poetry. Printed excerpts from *Notes on the State of Virginia* resemble stanzas, separated by bold black lines and expanses of

⁵⁴ In particular, she explains her dual perception of Jefferson as follows: “Thomas Jefferson . . . is not in support of slavery but had slaves . . . In *Notes to Virginia*, he says some of the most racist things but also some of the most true things . . . I have a great fondness for Jefferson, for being able to be complicated, racist, but also telling the truth” (“Claudia Rankine, literaturfestival” 00:29:18-30:23).

white space. The gaps on the page function as sites of critique, spaces in which Rankine overrides Jefferson's racist dismissal of Black creativity. Jefferson insists that

[m]isery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. ----
 - Among the blacks is misery enough . . . but no poetry. *Love is the peculiar oestrum of the poet. Their love is ardent; but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately; but it could not produce a poet.* (sic qtd. in *Just Us* 117; my italics)

Rankine italicizes his words to stress their violence, but she also embeds her own counter-message in the visual field. In faint gray text, nearly invisible to the reader, she critiques Jefferson for reducing Black people to physical passion while denying them imagination. This faint text turns absence into presence, making the white space itself a site of resistance.

This excerpt from *Just Us* reveals a key parallel between Rankine and Trethewey. Both poets “remain . . . mindful of realities under the surface of cultural and personal memory as she palimpsestically re-surfaces visual art and historical documents with hidden narratives” (Queen 317). Rankine demonstrates this through her visual strategy. The bold sentences frame and summarize the meaning of the bla(n)ck space. Jefferson's words reduce nature to a metaphor of White supremacy, which refuses to acknowledge Black art as part of American culture. The bold print itself functions as confinement. Rankine subverts it by obscuring parts of Jefferson's phrasing, trapping him in his own text. In doing so, she mirrors the Kafkaesque situation that readers recognize: “there is no escape inside a world built on white supremacy,” neither for the oppressed nor for those who enforce the system (Rankine and Schwartz).

The result is a layered critique of Jefferson's legacy. On one hand, Rankine highlights how his words helped codify the view of Black Americans as intellectually inferior, incapable of transforming emotion into poetry. On the other hand, she admits her respect for Jefferson's contradictory honesty, noting his ability to “be complicated, racist, but also telling the truth . . . Saying what it is he sees before him and also saying his own self or interests overrides whatever he might believe morally” (“Claudia Rankine, literaturfestival” 00:30:17–34). Houston A. Baker reinforces this view, arguing that Jefferson's dismissal of Black literature reflects not just personal prejudice but the broader ideology of Whiteness. As Baker observes, Jefferson's views matter precisely because “they capture a prevailing American attitude” (Baker, “On the Criticism” 116). In *Just Us*, Rankine uses this doubleness—Jefferson as Founding

Father, coauthor of the Declaration of Independence, and slaveholder who despised yet maintained slavery—to expose Whiteness as a system that imprisons itself in its claim of superiority.

In *Just Us*, the chapter “evolution” introduces the core concept of Whiteness from both Black and White perspectives. Rankine counters Jefferson’s claim that Black poets cannot exist because of their Blackness and ridicules his belief that the White body represents the ideal human form. Although she works as a mediator between Black and White, Rankine also affirms Black ideological positions that elevate the social standing of Black people today. To validate her stance, she draws on a range of Black authors who critique the White civilizing mission, often exposing its absurdity.

Rankine’s commentary unfolds through a dialogue between James Baldwin and Aimé Césaire. Baldwin asserts that “Whites sought to civilize black people before civilizing themselves”⁵⁵ (qtd. in *Just Us* 65). Césaire, writing a decade earlier, describes colonization as a process that dehumanizes not only the colonized but also the colonizer. He states that

the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as *an animal*, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform *himself* into an animal. It is this result, this boomerang effect of colonization that I wanted to point out. (41; original italics)

For Rankine, this boomerang effect illuminates how Whiteness undermines itself by asserting racial dominance. She applies Césaire’s model to the setting of contemporary diversity workshops, questioning their effectiveness in teaching White participants to recognize racism—especially when these workshops are led by White facilitators. The diversity workshop becomes a *pars pro toto*, a miniature version of society itself, revealing the persistence of racial tensions and the structural mindset that continues to shape race relations in the United States.

Rankine’s clash of forms in *Just Us* mirrors the interracial conflicts she depicts. Although *Just Us* is structured as a collage of documentary poetry, it also functions as

⁵⁵ Including Baldwin as a central voice in racial discourse, Rankine engages his concept of social change in her introductory poem “what if.” To her underlying question *What is change?*, Baldwin responds by exposing the racial bias embedded in the American imagination of progress. He argues, “[w]hen Americans say change in the generality, they really mean progress. And when they say progress, they really mean – and they don’t know they mean this – they really mean how quickly and to what extent and how profoundly a black person becomes white. They take themselves quite helplessly as the only possible model of what they call change” (qtd. in *Just Us* 64).

a narrative. Levine's New Formalist framework clarifies why. The narrative form "best captures the experiences of colliding forms" (19), just as Rankine's narrative captures colliding races in U.S. society. For Levine, "[n]arratives are especially appealing for a skeptical formalist reader because they tend to present causality metonymically, through sequences of events" (ibid.), and Rankine adopts this same strategy. Each chapter of *Just Us* serves as a discrete "event," and the entire book becomes a sequence of encounters, tracing the ongoing friction of racial life in America.

In dialogue with Levine, Rankine's skepticism emerges in her treatment of these interracial "events." She exposes the Césaireian phenomenon of collective hypocrisy, especially in settings like diversity workshops that claim to address race but often reproduce racial inequities. Césaire warned that "the commonest curse is to be the dupe in good faith of a collective hypocrisy that cleverly misrepresents problems, the better to legitimize the hateful solutions provided for them" (32). Rankine echoes this warning by showing how workshops often reinforce internalized racism rather than undo it. She offers a sharp resocialization critique, insisting that Whites are "given their socialization in a culture that is set up to keep them ignorant of their ignorance of the violence committed against people of color . . . Their socialization fundamentally affects people of color, whether or not individual whites are present for the institutionalization of racist decisions and omissions" (*Just Us* 59). Her irony is pointed: diversity workshops, designed to address racial ignorance (see ibid.), are not only led by White people but often attended primarily by Whites—an arrangement that further underscores the persistence of White blindness to its own privilege.

The chapter becomes another instance of a poetics of recognition, exposing how White people often position themselves in activist work on race. Rankine critiques diversity workshops as settings where White participants assume other races already know how to handle diversity, and therefore treat "diverse" as synonymous with "non-White." In this framework, White workshop leaders imagine themselves "without race," placing themselves outside the problem they claim to address. Rankine's Black interlocutor captures the irony bluntly: "Who will represent that reality if a black person isn't in the room?" (ibid.). Without racial diversity present, the workshops devolve into Whites educating Whites about diversity—an arrangement that undermines their stated purpose.

In the chapter "evolution," the speaker develops this critique by placing Rankine's conversations with both a Black and a White friend in dialogue. Instead of

reproducing these conversations directly, she responds in poetry, sharpening the irony of Whiteness. She likens it to her “lawn . . . covered by fallen leaves,” where “[f]or all its apparent beauty, the dead leaves were rotting” (67). The metaphor maps neatly onto the workshop setting: what looks like progress is already decaying beneath the surface. By excluding the voices of Black Americans, these workshops are as lifeless as rotting leaves, exposing Whiteness’ tendency to control the terms of diversity while silencing the very people it claims to include.

The diversity workshop Rankine recalls exposes racism in the classroom. An instructor shows a photo of an African, and a student remarks on the figure’s resemblance to a monkey. White students laugh; Black students feel insulted (see 61). Rankine underscores the moment with poetic language, treating such incidents as a “site of contention” (Sewell and Ali 5). The contention is deliberate: White workshop leaders refuse to identify the race of the student, thereby protecting Whiteness from entering the conversation. As Rankine argues, “[w]hite people understand themselves as the people that matter and that what makes a thing good and essential and not broken is their presence” (Barnett). The implication is clear—the student was White, shielded by the unspoken logic of White instructors and their internalized defense of Whiteness.

Rankine turns again to Baldwin to frame this contradiction, drawing on his work *The White Man’s Guilt* to both accuse and excuse Whites for their claims to supremacy. Incorporating Baldwin’s poetry into her prose, she adds another layer to her documentary collage, echoing Césaire’s belief that “it is a good thing to place different civilizations in contact with each other; that it is an excellent thing to blend different worlds” (33). The result is a dialogue across time. Baldwin captures the ongoing dilemma:

what [whites] see is an appallingly oppressive
and bloody history . . .
What they see is a disastrous, continuing, present

condition which menaces them, and for which
they bear an inescapable responsibility.

But since, in the main, they seem to lack the energy
to change this condition,
they would rather not be reminded of it. (qtd. in *Just Us* 68)

Through Baldwin’s refrain “what they see,” Rankine underscores the generational guilt Whites inherit, set against the generational trauma that haunts Black Americans.

Baldwin's excerpt implies that White guilt justifies the presence of White diversity workshop leaders. By confronting other Whites, they attempt to process America's bloody racial history and raise awareness of inherited crimes against humanity. Yet in doing so, they exempt themselves from acknowledging their own ancestral complicity. Baldwin observes that Whites "refuse to recall history," and this refusal shapes their pedagogy. They feel obligated to address race, but convinced they cannot change the ideology of an entire race. The result is avoidance. Instructors refuse to disclose the race of the student who made the monkey reference, preserving Whiteness from scrutiny even in spaces seemingly designed for its exposure.

Rankine questions the effectiveness of such workshops when led by Whites. She recalls an encounter with a White woman whose activism in antiracist work had taught her its futility. The woman's resigned reflection makes Rankine "laugh . . . with my full face" (69), prompting her interlocutor "to laugh as well. What were we laughing about?" (ibid.). For Rankine, the exchange underscores the instability of White allyship. The woman's admission exposes a paradox. Her work is well-intentioned but ineffective, and its failure does not cost her anything. Rankine asks implicitly—did this resignation mark the end of her activism, or does she persist despite her disbelief in its impact? Either way, the episode captures the fragility of White commitment to racial justice.

She argues that White supremacy sustains itself by adopting a Darwinist logic, both natural and social. Through cultural evolution, Whiteness has internalized the belief in its own superiority. Diversity workshops expose this hypocrisy: Whites present themselves as "the people that matter" (Barnett), claiming the authority to solve race issues while exempting themselves from racial classification. In doing so, they reestablish Whiteness as an elitist group positioned above the very discourse they are supposed to engage. The irony deepens when workshop leaders assign disciplinary responsibility not to themselves but to the participants—placing all White attendees, along with a single Black participant, in charge of deciding how to educate the student who made the racist remark.

Rankine responds with outrage at the deliberate concealment of the student's race. She wields repetition as her primary device, asking again and again, "(is he/she/they white?)" (65, 67). This question, always bracketed in parentheses, creates a rhythmic pattern that underscores the student's racial anonymity. For Rankine, the parentheses themselves become symbolic: a cage of black letters surrounded by the

whiteness of the page. She pushes the metaphor further by enclosing the feminine pronoun with slashes, intensifying her sense of confinement within racial and gendered categories. Beginning each question with a verb signals her assumption of agency—she is compelled to act, to educate, to demand. By equating every form of sexual orientation with every form of racial identity, Rankine insists that Whiteness cannot remain outside the narrative but must be named and included in the discourse of race.

Rankine channels her anger at the ideology of Whiteness through repetition, giving it poetic form in the chapter “sound and fury.” This chapter consists of a single poem dedicated to the fractured, architectural structure of Whiteness itself. By framing Whiteness as an architectural design, she makes visible the imbalance that sustains racial hierarchy. The choice of form distinguishes this chapter from “evolution.” Whereas “evolution” is set in justified text and stages dialogue between Black and White perspectives on diversity, “sound and fury” narrows the focus. Here, Rankine abandons balanced exchange in order to target the foundations of White supremacy.

She does so through formal experimentation. “sound and fury” echoes the experimental tendencies of the New Black Aesthetics, marked by uneven line lengths, unpredictable stanza breaks, and frequent enjambments. The poem resists strict meter or rhythm, favoring run-on sentences that spill across lines. In this, Rankine parallels the structures of Terrance Hayes, who also privileges “the sentence as the basic unit of the poem, over against the syllable, image, or line” (Dowdy 9). Her refusal of traditional form identifies her with the twenty-first century moment of Black experimental poetry, where the sentence becomes the primary unit of meaning. As Dowdy observes, this shift reflects a broader trend in contemporary poetics, one that Rankine uses to critique Whiteness while situating herself within the evolving field of Black aesthetics.

In “sound and fury,” the sentence itself becomes a metaphor for legal order, holding its parts together like the clauses of a contract. Syllables stand in for the individual members of society, images represent the ideological frameworks they carry, and lines signify the structures that contain them all, establishing hierarchies. Because this chapter addresses the architecture of Whiteness rather than Blackness, those syllables, images, and lines represent *White* members, *White* ideology, and *White* models of hierarchy. If Rankine had chosen a justified prose format for this poem, she would have undermined her fury at racial erasure. Continuous text obscures the visual

force of accentuation. By contrast, the irregular line lengths of “sound and fury” enact emotional disturbance, mirroring the outrage the poem conveys.

Rankine distinguishes between the restrained conversations that shape much of *Just Us* and the emotional soliloquy that drives “sound and fury.” The latter resembles John Winthrop’s *A Modell of Christian Charity* (1630), a sermon structured by questions and answers and directed toward building a community grounded in mutual dependence. Winthrop stresses that each person “might haue need of other, and from hence they might be all knitt more nearly together in the Bond of brotherly affeccion” (sic Winthrop). His metaphor of embroidery, tied to women’s domestic labor, resonates with Rankine’s role as a female poet of the New Black Aesthetics. She stitches together the poetic fabric of American conversations in an attempt to model a charitable, racially equal society. Yet she insists this vision remains utopian. The poem opens with the bleak declaration that “The gloom is” Whiteness (*Just Us* 179). For Rankine, Whiteness blocks the possibility of harmonious interracial coexistence. Her fury sharpens into language as she repeats interrogatives built on the sound “wh”—“who,” “what,” “when,” “why.” The sound itself destabilizes the legitimacy of Whiteness, exposing the homophonic proximity of “White” and “why.”

“Why Whiteness?,” Rankine asks, and follows with a chain of questions that press on the link between life, right, and White supremacy (cf. *ibid.*). In doubting its legitimacy, she turns again to Winthrop’s sermon and ties the construction of a society to the architecture of Whiteness. She writes:

At the bone of bone white breathes the fear of being,
the frustration of seeming unequal to white. (*ibid.*)

For Rankine, Black people are the marrow of the national body—its life source—while White people form the enclosing bone. She is not alone in drawing on skeletal imagery. Terrance Hayes, in *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*, employs the same metaphor to expose the way poetic form mirrors social form. In the sonnet “I lock you in an American sonnet that is part prison,” his lyrical speaker declares, “I lock you in a form that is . . . part meat / Grinder to separate the song of the bird from the bone” (11, ll. 3-4). If Whiteness is the skeleton giving society its form, then Blackness is the marrow that keeps it alive, generating the blood cells of new cultural and artistic life.

Winthrop’s *A Modell of Christian Charity* offers a precursor to this imagery. In envisioning the building of community, he proclaims that

bone came to bone, it gathers together the scattered bones . . . and knits them into one body againe . . . whereby a man is become againe a liueing soule. (sic)

Rankine's use of this metaphoric structure suggests that the work of the New Black Aesthetics—like marrow within bone—is to restore vitality to a body politic fractured by Whiteness. Her poetics transform skeletal confinement into the potential of regeneration.

Just Us gathers the scattered bones of the nation and sets them into conversation, asking how a strong social skeleton might sustain a united American soul. Rankine draws on Winthrop, who insists that “the Condicion of mankinde, as in all times some must be rich some poore, some highe and eminent in power and dignitie; others meane and in subieccion” (sic Winthrop). She accepts his premise that social and economic difference is inevitable, but critiques how Whiteness has been shaped into the stereotype of racial domination. Against the claim that Whiteness is only ever motivated by suppression, she voices her exhaustion in *Just Us*: “If people could just come clean about their lives, / even as poverty exists inside white walls, / and just being white is what's working” (*Just Us* 181). The poem “sound and fury” casts Whiteness as gloom itself, a structure that fails to balance the racial equation of U.S. society (179). In naming this imbalance, the poem operates as Rankine's valve, a space to vent her emotional turmoil while exposing the malfunctioning skeleton of race relations.

In *Just Us*, Whiteness' gloom first appears as latent racism, framed by the line, “White portraits on white walls signal[ing] ownership of all, / even as white walls white in” (179). Rankine links this mania for expressing White supremacy in art back to the aesthetics of the Third Reich. On the verso page, she contextualizes her “white walls” with the art-historical concept of the white cube. In the “Notes and Sources” section, Elena Filipovic explains that

[p]articular to the white cube is that it operates under the pretense that its seeming invisibility allows the artwork best to speak; it seems blank, innocent, unspecific, insignificant. Ultimately, what makes a white cube a white cube is that . . . *ideology and form meet*, and all without our noticing it. (qtd. in *Just Us* 178; my emphasis)

Once an allegory of racial purity, the white cube becomes a target of Rankine's appropriation as she blackens it, claiming ownership in her poetic architecture.

Timo Müller calls this method *thematic camouflage*⁵⁶, a strategy that surfaces as well in Hayes' sonnets. Rankine turns the physical white paper of *Just Us* into a metaphorical white cube, deploying the book's material form as a racialized surface. The separation between recto and verso pages heightens this effect: the poem on the recto side is written in the first person, aligning with what Nowak lists as one category of documentary poetry (see Dowdy 8), while the epitext on the verso side assumes an objective voice. As McCoy observes, this arrangement illuminates "the [epi]text as a site of extraordinary ambivalence" (162). Rankine exploits that ambivalence to press against the supposed neutrality of White forms, rewriting them into charged racial commentary.

Rankine turns Filipovic's white cube against itself, exposing Whiteness rather than masking it. On the page, *Just Us* becomes a cube reimaged as dice: black lines inscribed on white paper. She asks, "[i]s coincidence a thing?" (*Just Us* 263), pressing whether America's interracial condition is a matter of chance or of predetermined fate. It is not the whiteness of the dice that matters but the number of black pips, whose markings signify the weight of Blackness in shaping interracial futures. This metaphor culminates in fury. In the final stanza, rage erupts: "In *daylight* white's right to righteous rage / doubles down on the supremacy / of white in our way" (*Just Us* 181; my emphasis). The insistent rhymes and alliterations double the force of her outrage, refusing containment.

Just Us becomes a saferoom where Rankine admits the "times when I get stalled in conversations, because I am emotionally overwhelmed . . . or disappointed . . . or exhausted" ("Claudia Rankine, DiAngelo" 00:25:23-40). Yet she does not remain singular. Although her book abounds with personal encounters with racism, Rankine speaks as a representative voice, carrying the weight of collective Black experience.

The dice become an allegory in *Just Us*, objectifying Rankine's American conversations. She asks,

Are conversations desire projected? Is conversing a dance? The back
and-forth, a chance? To take? Or be taken? To be taken away? Taken
out? (*Just Us* 223)

The dice mirror this "back-and-forth," the stake implicit in dialogue. Each exchange begins with desire: one speaker initiates, the other responds, and the rhythm of give-

⁵⁶ According to Müller, Black poets use thematic camouflage to turn an originally White art form into a Black artwork by "choosing topics whose racial and political relevance outweigh the association of the form with whiteness" (95).

and-take determines whether the dialogue endures or collapses. This analogy circles back to the chapter “notes on the state of whiteness.” There, Rankine dices verbally with Jefferson, reformatting his words in alternating black or faint gray print. His speech remains visible, but her hand determines how it is framed, emphasized, or obscured. He is the white cube, rolling the conversational dice. She is the black pips, shaping what counts, what lands, what survives.

This act of obscuring passages from *Notes on the State of Virginia*⁵⁷ renegotiates the very idea of the liminal space. In “notes on the state of whiteness,” Rankine replays Jefferson’s eighteenth-century racial logic against twenty-first-century White supremacy. Opening the chapter “liminal spaces ii,” she asks, “[w]hat lives in the encounter” between herself and a Founding Father (219), then presses further: “[i]s the important thing what’s said or what goes unsaid?” (ibid.). Does it matter most that Jefferson openly declared Black people incapable of poetry (117)? Or is the weight carried by what she obscures—the passages in which he insists that Black emotions do not transform into art in the way White ones supposedly do?

In *Just Us*, the chapter “liminal spaces ii” shows Rankine’s poetics as “an indeterminate space where the histories of genres clash, combine, morph, or dissolve” (qtd. in Dowdy 8). This description points to another facet of creative non-poetry: collision. Here, Rankine stages conversations between herself and archival sources, testing what happens “[t]o live only in the archives of conversations . . . to see what the culture has formed” (*Just Us* 219). She appropriates historical and political documents, placing them directly in dialogue with her voice. In doing so, she ties herself to Smith, another poet-curator who treats the archive as a living interlocutor. Rankine’s lines—often brief, one to three lines long—pose an issue or a claim, while excerpts from the archive respond.

This back-and-forth raises the question of how these conversations are formed, and how their meaning emerges. Houston A. Baker names such situations inherently obscure: “When one arrives at a speaking situation, the origins of the conjunction between word and object are already obscured. To discuss ‘meaning,’ therefore, is to

⁵⁷ Rankine’s decision to hide and delete selected passages from Jefferson’s original text turns “notes on the state of whiteness” into an erasure poem that underscores his effort to suppress the aesthetic potential of Black people. While Rankine highlights erasure as a tool of White supremacy, Smith employs erasure poetry in the opposite way: to stress Black aesthetic richness and to recover overlooked historical documents written by and about Black individuals. Through this practice, Smith rewrites Black history and reveals hidden truths about its past. This shared concern with exposing and portraying truth marks an important intersection between Rankine’s and Smith’s poetic intentions.

find oneself, . . . detailing an event dominated by language usage, by the user and his physical behavior” (“On the Criticism” 122). Rankine enacts precisely this obscurity in “liminal spaces ii.” Each exchange traces how language and culture form one another, even when the original conjunction has been lost. *Reported speech*—another tool of documentary poetry, as Sewell observes (see Sewell 264)—becomes her way of animating these sources. The archival voice joins her conversation, becoming interlocutor as much as record.

Rankine illustrates this conversational risk with historical examples. She first cites Lyndon B. Johnson, who reveals Whiteness’ impulse to elevate itself by looking down on racial minorities. Then she turns to Eartha Kitt, who openly challenged Johnson at a White House luncheon, accusing him of “*send[ing] the best of this country off to a war . . . [where] they get shot and maimed*” (*Just Us* 219; original italics). Kitt’s words—and her race—led to her blacklisting and social exclusion⁵⁸, a moment Rankine places in her poem to expose the personal cost for a Black person who speaks directly to White power. Rankine makes the risk explicit, stating that

To converse is to risk the unraveling of the said and the unsaid.

To converse is to risk the performance of what’s held by the silence. (ibid.) With this anaphora, she underscores the precariousness of every Black speaker who enters such a dialogue. Rankine then extends this reflection by citing Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*, highlighting his grim prediction of a race war should Black Americans ever fully reckon with White crimes. Jefferson frames coexistence as impossible: “[d]eep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations” (qtd. in *Just Us* 221; original italics). His conclusion—that Black people must remain under White jurisdiction to suppress their anger—exposes the ideology of containment that continues to shape racial power dynamics.

The White House event shows how Rankine close-reads the historical material she incorporates into *Just Us*. As DuPlessis observes, she follows “a close reading ethos with a commitment to uncovering . . . the inflection of social materials and ideologies, along with some plausible historical and political meanings” (65). This

⁵⁸ Rankine includes a White House luncheon during the Johnson administration as a paradigmatic example of everyday racism, showing how *Just Us* exposes the machinery of contemporary racism in the U.S. At this luncheon, Eartha Kitt was asked for her opinion on the Vietnam War and, after giving an honest critique, was subsequently blacklisted. Reflecting on the incident, Kitt observed that “if you tell the truth – in a country that says you’re entitled to tell the truth – you get your face slapped you get put out of work” (“Eartha Kitt”).

same ethos guides her reading of Jefferson. His posture toward Black Americans is contradictory. He claims affection, even protection, yet insists their pursuit of equality is unrealistic. To secure his own authority, Jefferson reduces them to their Blackness and frames their supposed inferiority as a natural condition requiring White supervision. Rankine captures this paradox, exposing how his guidance was simply another form of control.

Here, her work resonates with Césaire, who insists that colonization does not ennoble the colonizer. Instead, he states, “we must study how colonization works to *decivilize* the colonizer, to *brutalize* him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism” (35; original italics). Rankine’s portrayal of Jefferson reflects precisely this moral collapse. The connection between Black poetry and violence emerges as crucial here, though, as Dorothy Wang notes, “poetry scholars do not like to think of poetry in relation to violence and power” (224). *Just Us* confronts this reluctance. It presents poetry not as an extension of violence but as a counterweight to it, a non-violent space of reckoning with the brutality of White supremacy. In this way, Rankine’s work parallels Hayes’ reflections on “Black male hysteria” in his article “Poetics of Practice,” where he stresses that Black responses to White violence have historically been non-violent. By holding violence in view but refusing to reproduce it, *Just Us* urges readers to reconsider the interracial experience that still shapes America’s conscience.

The second half of “liminal spaces ii” turns from archives to the street, to the ordinary stage where Blackness meets the police, a body coded as White. The police emerge as a paradigm: Whiteness armed, Whiteness authorized, Whiteness institutionalized. Rankine sketches their drives as instinct, almost automatic—first, to side with the White caller, the pseudo-victim; second, to fuse Blackness with crime, granting Whiteness the *benefit of the doubt*. She states that

[m]ore often than not the police back up support reinforce the claims of the person who calls called them in the whiteness of truth the whiteness of victimhood in the whitening benefit of the doubt in the whiter-than-white explanation of. (*Just Us* 227)

The syntax doubles back on itself, mimicking the self-reinforcing loop of racial logic. Whiteness names itself truth, victimhood, explanation. This logic echoes the chapter “evolution,” where the benefit of the doubt again protects Whiteness. The student who calls an African bust a monkey—presumably White, never named—escapes

punishment (see 67). Silence shelters them. Rankine links classroom and street, pedagogy and policing, as parallel grounds where Whiteness secures its immunity.

Parallelism, in *Just Us*, is not a lyrical ornament but a driving force. Rankine introduces each issue—social, historical, racial, political—on its own terms, then threads them together later, weaving separate strands into one line of argumentation. A discourse on diversity workshops circles back, unexpectedly, to police aggression against Black children. The earlier classroom insult—the African bust, the monkey comparison—returns as prologue to the street.

In the chapter “boy will be boys,” Rankine names the police as the inheritors of that same logic, the escalation of stereotype into force. Her verso-recto method layers her own account with epitextual proof: *The Essence of Innocence: Consequences of Dehumanizing Black Children*⁵⁹. The study confirms what her poetry stages—“the Black/ape association predicted actual racial disparities in police violence toward [Black] children” (*Just Us* 264). Guilty or not, Black boys are considered guilty. White boys, guilty or not, are considered innocent. The benefit of the doubt tilts, always, toward Whiteness.

Read across Rankine’s fragment—first words, last words of the lines—the statement emerges: *More of whiteness claims the doubt*. What doubt? She breaks it down: the doubt of the person, the doubt of truth, the doubt of victimhood. Each repetition widens the gap between perception and reality. For Rankine, these encounters reveal White people and police as “the epitome of liberal interactions” (“Claudia Rankine, DiAngelo” 00:37:06-23). Liberal, that is, from the White perspective only. To “assume ownership of space . . . and the ability to *weaponize their grievances by pulling in the structures of power*” is not liberty but domination (ibid.). The logic is simple: a White emergency call does not need proof, only Whiteness. Whether the threat is exaggerated or invented dissolves into irrelevance. Whiteness itself guarantees victimhood. Guilt, if it exists, is doubted. But only if it is White guilt.

What marks the New Black Aesthetics for Rankine is her refusal to rest inside the word *racism*. The term bears its historical weight: the old stereotype of Blackness as violence and aggression. Césaire names it bluntly—“American racism” is bred into the White psyche, a “domination from which one never recovers . . . unscarred” (77). Rankine lives in this scarred terrain. In *Just Us*, she circles the word endlessly,

⁵⁹ See Goff, Phillip A., et al. “The Essence of Innocence: Consequences of Dehumanizing Black Children.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 106, no. 4, 2014, pp. 526-45.

writing around it and writing through it. To say *racism* outright risks confirming the trope she dreads: “the angry black woman” (*Just Us* 149). The trap is Kafkaesque—naming the structure makes her complicit in the caricature it projects. To critique Whiteness is to become its target.

Michelle Obama echoes this bind. In the White House, each of her expressions of frustration could be dismissed as temperament: “If a Black woman expresses anything resembling anger, people are more likely to view it as a general personality trait . . . which makes her easier to marginalize, and easier to write off” (Obama 269-70). Rankine names the cost. White audiences code Black critique as fury and barbarism, no matter the inciting damage.

In this way, White people attempt to disguise their own anger at being confronted by a racial minority that dares to question their supremacy. Rankine’s resistance to the term *racism* is not merely semantic but historical. She insists that

[a]ngry black people are the old black . . . The new black is accomplished, assimilated, and integrated. . . . The old black is positioned in a no-win situation where to express an opinion based on what you see, experience, feel or deduce risks falling right into some white folk’s notion of black insanity. (Rankine, “Open Letter”)

Just Us dramatizes this hypocrisy, rendering visible the racial double-bind. Whiteness cloaks itself as discipline rather than discrimination, reframing critique as deviance. Drawing on Césaire’s framework, Rankine underscores how White supremacy naturalizes its domination—claiming racial hierarchy as both inevitable and divinely sanctioned (see Césaire 73). The cost, she stresses, is centuries of exhaustion for Black communities, who are forced to endure subjugation masked as providence. Rankine channels this exhaustion herself through parallelism, stating that

I am saying this and I am saying that, and, as if I have suddenly become too much, a metaphorical white hand reaches out to pull me back into the fold from the perilous edge of angry black womanhood. (*Just Us* 151)

Here, the White gaze patrols the limits of expression, denying validity to the Black voice, especially in political grounds. Rankine recalls the case of Eartha Kitt, who was blacklisted after denouncing the Johnson administration for sending the nation’s strongest citizens to die in Vietnam—a critique that exposed how even liberal Democrats, embodied by Johnson himself, perpetuated racist structures of silencing dissent.

To draw historical parallels to the contemporary Trump administration, Rankine ultimately demonizes the entire political apparatus as the embodiment of the

metaphorical White hand. She designates Republicans as outright terrorists in their relation to race. Johnson, in her account, acted as a single White man wielding the institutional power of his office. Trump, however, becomes a virus that spreads through the body of White supremacy, openly infecting it with “the outright language of white supremacy and nationalism” (“Claudia Rankine, DiAngelo” 00:46:35–38). Rankine condemns Trump for his “refusal to name white nationalist groups and white supremacist groups as terrorist groups” (00:46:40–48). In the chapter “big little lies,” she recasts Trump as an allegorical figure of the racial barrier produced by White supremacist ideology. He denies Black Americans the possibility of achieving their “essential desire for equity and the ability to live freely without the fear of white terrorism [which] literally trumps everything” (*Just Us* 189). On the facing verso page, Rankine includes a photograph, another element that Lisa Sewell identifies as a hallmark of documentary poetry. The image serves as both witness and supplement, reinforcing her claim that White terrorism has not diminished but has intensified, haunting the Black imagination with renewed urgency (see Rankine, *Just Us* 188).

The photograph shows a Black woman striding with determination past a phalanx of shielded police officers. Both subject and officers are captured in profile. The woman’s gaze fixes on an unseen point off-screen to the right, while the majority of the officers look leftward, apparently amused by something outside the frame. Only one officer meets her directly, his posture relaxed, baton loosely held as his arms rest on his shield. Each shield bears a blue rectangle with the word *POLICE* painted in bold gold letters, visually echoing the blue of the uniforms and the yellow of the woman’s blouse and pants. The chromatic harmony creates a formal connection between the figures, but not an actual equality. For Rankine, the image dramatizes the larger point that racial equality cannot be achieved until U.S. society is willing “to disregard history and the institutional structures put in place to predetermine” interracial relations (187).

To “disregard history,” Rankine redefines the term *historical artifact* by contrasting its material and abstract meanings in the photograph. Materially, an artifact is “an object that has been made by a person, such as a tool or a decoration, especially one that is of historical interest” (“Artefact”). Given the historical objectification of Africans as slaves and their reduction to “tools,” the officer who watches the woman sees in her the beginnings of America’s history—her presence recalling the enslaved ancestors she represents. In an abstract sense, Rankine employs the artifact as “something that is seen in a scientific . . . study that does not exist naturally, but has

been caused by the way the . . . study is done” (ibid.). As a study of racism, *Just Us* insists that the phenomenon is not natural but constructed by ideology. Rankine “disregards history” by shifting focus away from the physical image of slavery and toward the abstraction of racism as a systemic artifact. Both the text and the photograph foreground Whiteness. The officer’s curious gaze at the woman does not signal equality, only fascination. The static posture of the police manifests White disregard, while the woman’s determined stride past them embodies Black progress.

This visual scene connects to the chapter “evolution” and its critique of White-led diversity workshops. With her interrogative syntax, Rankine pushes against passive modes of addressing racism. In “evolution,” her questions often begin with a verb, urging action rather than detachment. Diversity workshops may appear active, yet they remain passive because they often exclude racial minorities from their design and leadership. As a Black poet, Rankine critiques this failure and claims the authority to restructure such approaches. In this sense, she mirrors the woman in the photograph—an active agent moving past the stillness of White police officers, embodying forward motion against inaction.

Instead of promoting a society grounded in racial equality, Rankine turns to affiliation through individual preference—relationships formed without race—as a path toward a peaceful society based on mutual acceptance. She engages with the concept of alterity, which Dowdy identifies as central to the twenty-first-century poet. He argues that “[the poets’] shared ‘center’ is largely a function of affinity and affiliation rather than of shared identities or aesthetics” (3). In response, Rankine asks

why . . . translate ease with each other into a state of sameness?

If no sameness of status is possible, how to account for closeness?

If similarity and sameness are essentially impossible, how is
“difference” recouped and aligned with closeness? (*Just Us* 189)

Her questions highlight the difficulty of building intimacy in a society where sameness of status is structurally impossible. Rankine first outlines, through references to influential politicians, that Whiteness historically sustains its hegemony by oppressing racial minorities, originally for economic benefit during slavery. This racial discrepancy hardened into a social divide that persists until Whiteness abandons its presumed superiority. The photograph on page 188 visualizes this divide: the shields of White police officers form a barrier, separating them from the Black woman in the foreground.

Reflecting on the photograph in relation to diversity workshops underscores White ignorance of racism and violence against racial minorities as a central obstacle to improving race relations. Césaire captures the postcolonial patterns that Rankine dramatizes in *Just Us*, noting that “[a] civilization that chooses to close its eyes to its most crucial problems is a stricken civilization. A civilization that uses its principles for trickery and deceit is a dying civilization” (31). Rankine’s text asks how stricken and dying U.S. society already is, focusing further on the operations of White privilege, with particular emphasis on male White privilege as the sustaining force of White supremacy.

In the chapter “study on white male privilege,” she interrogates “White male rage” as the counterpart to the “angry Black person” trope, thereby destabilizing the stereotype that Black people who critique racial injustice are irrationally angry. Just as she critiques the failures of diversity workshops in the chapter “evolution,” she approaches gendered injustice in “study on white male privilege,” linking both chapters through their shared attention to systemic inequity. Yet, she deliberately stages them in different textual forms, highlighting the multifaceted character of her creative non-poetry. Whereas “evolution” adopts a justified prose layout to narrate her interlocutors’ experiences, “study on white male privilege” is presented as a theater script. This formal shift visually emphasizes the constructed and performative nature of White privilege, while also satisfying what Sewell identifies as the last criterion of documentary poetry: reliance on *original news footage* (see 264). Rankine frames the dialogue with her own passages as narrator, providing introductory and concluding reflections that contextualize the scripted exchange within her broader American conversation.

In “study on white male privilege,” Rankine turns again to the setting of a diversity seminar, this time centering on White police officers “discussing the treatment of transgender people” (*Just Us* 137). The chapter underscores that transgender people are equally vulnerable to police violence as Black Americans, foregrounding how systems of White supremacy are also structured by unjust gender hierarchies. By highlighting the gender binary alongside the racial binary, Rankine identifies another problematic opposition that sustains inequality. Her focus on dismantling such binaries connects to New Formalist thought: poets of the New Black Aesthetics, Levine argues, “look for places where the binary breaks down or dissolves, generating possibilities that turn the form into something more ambiguous and ill-

defined – formless” (9). Rankine seizes on this formlessness, presenting it as a space in which racial and gender distinctions blur and the rigid color line begins to dissolve.

For this reason, she uses the terms White supremacy and White male privilege interchangeably. The seminar she recounts dramatizes how privilege operates within these structures: a White male officer denies awareness of violence against transgender people, insisting on his innocence. A White female colleague challenges him, attributing his lack of awareness to his “white male privilege, so you wouldn’t know” (137). His response is not self-reflection but retaliation—he files a complaint, leading to her suspension with administrative leave and a formal letter of reprimand (141). Through this incident, Rankine demonstrates how White privilege not only blinds individuals to systemic violence but also punishes those who attempt to name it.

Her situation mirrors that of Black Americans, who likewise cannot voice critique without risking punishment, as Eartha Kitt’s blacklisting makes clear. By implicitly comparing the female officer’s experience with Kitt’s, Rankine stages another instance of poetics of recognition. From the perspective of White supremacy, “female” and “racial minority” occupy the same precarious social standing, both subject to the disciplinary power of White men. Within the chapter, the term “privilege” consistently appears in connection to acts of knowing and understanding. Recognition produces understanding, and understanding, in turn, becomes a tool for dismantling the invisibility of privilege. Rankine presses her readers to notice such parallels across different marginalized groups in U.S. society, insisting that they grasp how the operations of hierarchy victimize both those at the bottom but also destabilize those within structures of power.

Therefore, Rankine explains the officer’s outrage as rooted in his sudden awareness of a privilege he never asked for. He resents being judged for it by those marked as social and racial minorities—Black people and White women—yet cannot deny the system that favors him. His rage stems from

the laws favor[ing] him as a white male [which] must remain a known unknown. He cannot bear to know it and know that he accommodates and makes visible all that has been redirected toward him. He cannot bear the burden of what was taken to be given to him. *He cannot know himself as the embodied space of privilege even as he becomes its evidence.* (ibid.; my emphasis)

A Césaireian reading of this chapter resonates with his postcolonial critique of colonization’s twin logics of racial and gendered privileging. In *Just Us*, the accused becomes a figure reduced to the brute terms of “violence, race hatred, and moral

relativism” (Césaire 35). Rankine neither excuses nor condemns him. Instead, she frames him as both beneficiary and casualty of White supremacist law: privileged without consent, yet bound to embody the very institution that oppresses others.

The officer’s outrage at being confronted with his privilege signals his awareness of the racial and gendered hierarchies that structure his position. Yet, he insists he remains unbiased when on duty. By juxtaposing race and transgender discrimination, *Just Us* aligns with Rankine’s impulse “to construct the poem beyond and despite the limits of gender,” as Sewell and Ali note (7). “[M]oving beyond genre’s limits” becomes her means to “produce[. . .] the possibility of the communal voice” (11). Through this move, Rankine expands her focus to other marginalized “liminal spaces” and incorporates them as supporting lyrical elements. These liminal spaces work to bridge the racial divide and enact the subtitle’s promise of *An American Conversation*. As the example of the male officer shows, the privileged are unwillingly confronted with generational guilt (in contrast to generational trauma). His sense of offense mirrors the judgment Rankine’s friend experiences at the *Fairview* performance. In both cases, the reaction reflects indignation and a defensive instinct—a way of shielding the self against a perceived threat.

Instinctive reactions to racial or gendered confrontations connect directly to affect, a concept Rankine illustrates with a photograph on page 140. The image shows a White man holding a sign that reads, “I am not ashamed / afraid to be white” (*Just Us* 140). Unlike the defensive police officer, he openly asserts his White male privilege. Rankine stresses that Whiteness is not inherently racist; rather, many acts that appear racist function as defense mechanisms to shield White Americans from the burden of generational blame for Black trauma. In this respect, the photographs in *Just Us* operate less through explicit content and more through affect. As Rankine explains, “content is . . . often the least important thing. But the affect of it, the emotional resonance” ensures fluidity between image and text and between Black poets, who perceive their environment visually and then translate the image into words (“Claudia Rankine, literaturfestival” 00:49:31-43).

Rankine links both rage at being labeled privileged and pride in White individualism to slavery, the historical foundation of the United States. Against Saidiya Hartman’s claim that educating White people about racism is futile (see *Just Us* 145), Rankine partly disagrees. By foregrounding time, she urges Whiteness to confront the historical roots of Black suffering. This historical awareness, she argues, is essential

for processing the afterlife of slavery—a trauma that haunts both Black and White communities. Hartman defines this as “temporal entanglement, where the past, the present and the future, are not discrete and cut off from one another, but rather that we live the simultaneity of that entanglement. This is almost common sense for black folk” but not for Whites (qtd. in *ibid.*). Rankine echoes this insight by documenting public encounters that expose the normalized oppression Black Americans have endured for centuries. Yet, she underscores that contemporary White people largely refuse responsibility for the violence of their ancestors, thereby failing to perceive the temporal entanglement Hartman describes.

In *Just Us*, institutional Whiteness is inseparable from institutional racism, a result of the historical trajectory of U.S. race relations. Rankine shows how Whiteness sustains a racial imagination projected onto every Black body in daily life. She observes, “I have watched white people reduce black people not to a single black person but to a single imagined black person, imagined animal, imagined thing, . . . imagined criminality, imagined aggressor” (259; my emphasis). This projection is reinforced by “perpetuating [white] master narratives . . . killing imagined me” (*ibid.*). Rankine thus exposes Whiteness as both an ideology and a system of repetition that denies individuality.

Her critique aligns with, yet also complicates, Césaire’s postcolonial thesis. Césaire names White supremacy a political farce, a pseudo-humanism that has long “diminished the rights of man . . . narrow and fragmentary, incomplete and biased and, all things considered, sordidly racist” (37). While Césaire condemns White supremacy as a collective ideology, Rankine instead frames it as a form of idiocy—an active but uneven ignorance enacted by individuals. Together, their perspectives highlight how *Just Us* attempts to transform U.S. race discourse: first, by dismantling the barriers that perpetuate conflict between Black communities and White power; second, by clarifying which social groups Rankine marks as agents of White supremacy.

Just Us contends that White supremacy operates through intentional racism, White pride, and Whiteness as a historical burden. These dynamics circle back to Rankine’s White friend in the chapter “ethical loneliness,” who refuses to be placed on stage and yield the auditorium space to Black visitors. Her resistance to being exposed as a White specimen becomes a rebellion against the racial privilege into which she was born and for which she is nonetheless held accountable. This refusal parallels the White police officer who likewise resists embodying a historical guilt

inherited by birth. Both figures—Rankine’s friend and the officer—perform in public the psychological weight of Whiteness when confronted with responsibility for racist structures they did not personally create. Their rejection of this inheritance underscores a paradox: while distancing themselves from historical complicity, they simultaneously assert pride in their individual Whiteness. In doing so, their gestures echo Audre Lorde’s call to “alter those distortions which history has created around difference” (qtd. in *Just Us* 200).

The perspective of Rankine’s White friend gives White supremacy an allegorical function in the materiality of *Just Us*. The book itself becomes a space where Whiteness is portrayed in its entirety and where Rankine negotiates how White supremacists oppress not only Black people but also White progressives. Her friend’s refusal to be exposed on stage is an effort to prevent Black audiences from reading her as a stereotypical White supremacist. In this sense, Whiteness itself becomes a liminal space. It is both supremacist and progressive, yet it can be neither exclusively one nor the other. Like Blackness, Whiteness is shaped by history and has become subject to its own set of stereotypes: supremacist, racist, oppressive. Rankine’s epitext brings Audre Lorde back into the conversation to frame this ambivalence. Lorde argues that “responding to racism means . . . responding to anger, the anger of exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, of racial distortions, of silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, betrayal, and coopting” (qtd. in *Just Us* 196). Each of these emotional reactions surfaces in Rankine’s encounter with her friend at the theater.

Rankine remains skeptical about the encounter at the theater and what it reveals about the prospects of race relations in the United States. She values her friend’s honesty but cannot move on. She asks, “[w]hy does the memory continue to infuriate and perplex me? Why am I not able to read this moment? Why am I not able to stop reading this moment? Why am I unable to settle it down and file it away?” (*Just Us* 199). The chapter “liminal spaces iii” takes up this dilemma. Rankine turns to Ta-Nehisi Coates, who frames reparations as a necessary path to reconciliation. Coates argues that

. . . [r]eparations – by which I mean the full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences – is the price we must pay to see ourselves squarely.

. . . . What is needed is . . . a settling with old ghosts. What is needed is a healing of the American psyche and the banishment of white guilt. . . . Reparations would mean a revolution of the American consciousness, a reconciling of our self-image as the great democratizer

with the facts of our history. (qtd. in *Just Us* 320)

For Coates, reparations are an interracial project. White people must confront and compensate for their historically entrenched superiority. Black people, in turn, must allow their oppressors to show repentance and cease to induce guilt for crimes committed by earlier generations. When Coates speaks of “our collective biography” (ibid.), he suggests a shared national story. The races that make up contemporary U.S. society have lived the same history from different vantage points.

Alongside her poetry of social engagement, Rankine develops a poetry of racial engagement. Dowdy even suggests that *social* is simply another word for *racial* or *ethnic* (see 5). Rankine cites Coates because he speaks to the broken state of the American psyche, fractured by racism, and to the need for repair. In framing her work this way, she echoes Winthrop’s vision of a society grounded in morality and equality. Winthrop writes:

[i]s not this the fast I haue chosen to loose the bonds of wickednes, to take off the heavy burdens to lett the oppressed goe free and to breake every Yoake . . . then shall thy light breake forthe as the morning, and thy healthe shall growe speedily . . . (sic Winthrop)

By juxtaposing Coates, Winthrop, and others, Rankine layers multiple voices and perspectives. This collage invites readers to see both the visible structures of racism and the subtle, personal ways those structures shape lived experience. In doing so, *Just Us* aims to recalibrate the reader’s social vision and mental health—healing by listening across divides. Through its polyphony, the book connects readers of any racial background, urging them to “forever remain in relation to everyone else” (*Just Us* 333). Yet this relation is haunted. Rankine acknowledges that America’s present is tethered to its past; the ghosts of slavery and supremacy remain. For her, following Coates, those ghosts must finally be buried in the nation’s conscience if interracial life is ever to move forward.

The social role of *Just Us* can also be read through Barthes’ distinction between the Work and the Text. As the Work, *Just Us* allegorically embodies Rankine herself—her singular vantage on the racial hierarchies structuring U.S. society. As the Text, its written content interrogates those hierarchies, taking on a “‘social’ function” (Barthes 58). The Text becomes a mirror of the social body, while Rankine emerges as its mouthpiece. This metaphor aligns her with Winthrop’s communal model:

the mouth is at all the paines to receiue, and mince the foode which serues for the nourishment of all the other partes of the body, . . . first,

the other partes send backe, by secret passages a due proporcion of the same nourishment in a better forme for the strengthening and comforteing the mouthe. (sic Winthrop)

Here, Rankine is the mouth, receiving her “food for thought” from interlocutors who form the body of society: Black and White, female and male, American in their plurality. Their experiences of Whiteness and supremacy flow into her work through “secret passages” (ibid.). These passages take multiple forms, such as the interviews Rankine conducts herself; the reports she gathers from friends; and the epitexts she weaves in as counterpoint or evidence. Each passage circulates nourishment—voices, perspectives, data—that strengthens her own speech while returning sustenance to the body she represents.

Through each mode of interaction, Rankine enters into America’s multi-faceted conscience. The conversations she gathers expose why dismantling White supremacist structures faces deep resistance. One such obstacle is the tacit social contract. In her eponymous chapter “social contract,” she writes: “white people don’t really want change if it means they need to think differently than they do about who they are. . . . Whiteness wants the kind of progress that reflects what it values, a reflection of itself” (*Just Us* 151). This “progress” does not mean White progressivism. White progress promotes supremacists as a self-aggrandizing elite. White progressivism advocates equality in principle but recoils when Whiteness is made visible, when it is forced into the open.

As a poet of the New Black Aesthetics, Rankine insists on “resist[ing] the false singularity of lyric subjectivity and the cultural construction of the raced . . . self” (Sewell and Ali 11). She positions herself as part of U.S. society while rejecting the reduction of identity to racial category. Yet in *Just Us*, the refrain “Am I being silenced?” haunts her, surfacing again and again (*Just Us* 151). For Rankine, “repetition is insistence” (ibid.), and repetition becomes her method of breaking silence by naming it. Silencing is itself a racial act. To call attention to it risks further ostracism. When Rankine names how Whiteness suppresses her speech, White listeners feel exposed, even threatened. The discomfort becomes its own form of punishment, reminding her of the stakes of speaking out (see 155).

To resist lyric subjectivity and the construction of the raced self (see Sewell 264), Rankine recalls a soiree where she is the only Black guest. She confronts the room directly, asking whether her presence and her Blackness are being silenced on purpose. The confrontation secures its own answer: she knows she will not be invited

back. Exclusion proves the point. She reflects that “[a]ll the perceived outrage at me, the guest who brings all of herself to dinner, all of it – her body, her history, her fears, her furious fears, her expectations – is, in the end, so personal” (*Just Us* 151). To counter this subjectivity, Rankine turns outward, focusing on how Whiteness responds when challenged by Black critique. She notes that “[a]mong white people, black people are allowed to talk about their precarious lives” (ibid.). White guests recognize the threats Black Americans endure under White supremacy. Yet recognition does not translate into solidarity. They hesitate to protect racial minorities because doing so would risk betraying their own race. Thus, “[Black people] are not allowed to implicate the present [white] company in that precariousness” (ibid.). The soiree becomes a case study in failed solidarity, a gathering where social engagement collapses into silence.

The soiree demonstrates that the Text of *Just Us* mirrors contemporary American society. The White guests ignore Rankine’s individuality. They see her only through her Black body and the history of racial violence that body symbolizes. Their reaction exposes how White supremacy relies on stereotypes to sustain its worldview. To deepen this point, Rankine turns to an epitext on the verso page of “social contract.” Barbara Johnson argues that “what we can see in a text the first time is already in *us*, not in *it*; in us insofar as we ourselves are a stereotype, an already read text” (qtd. in *Just Us* 318; my emphasis). The White guests read Rankine in this way. They do not see her but the stereotype they carry within themselves. Barthes makes a similar claim. In his view,

[t]his is what happens in the Text: it can be Text only in its difference . . . ; its reading is . . . yet entirely woven of quotations, references, echoes. . . . The intertextuality in which any text is apprehended, since it is itself the intertext of another text, cannot be identified with some *origin* of the text: . . . the quotations a text is made of are anonymous, irrecoverable, and yet *already read*: they are quotations without quotation marks. (sic 60; original italics)

Both Johnson and Barthes use the phrase “already read texts.” Johnson’s theory maps onto Rankine’s lived experience at the soiree. Regardless of her personality or intentions, she is read in advance as Black, already interpreted through the archive of other Black bodies. The White guests’ perception is not new—it is programmed, rehearsed, and repeated.

Barthes’ idea of the Text as a mirror of society suggests that U.S. society itself is defined by difference. In *Just Us*, the Text becomes a field that embraces racial diversity and resists the dominance of any single race. Rankine builds this mirror

through quotation and reference. External sources crowd the page. Their presence projects racial diversity into the very structure of the book. When Barthes rejects the notion of a single textual origin, Rankine takes up that rejection. Her sources interact, overlap, and contradict. Yet she also veils her method. The reader cannot always tell which sources anchor the work and which are merely supportive. The result is an American conversation about America. Rankine’s dialogue with her interlocutors, paired with the epitext, echoes issues that have long circulated in the national race debate. As Barthes would say, these words are “already read.” The voices appear personal, but they are also haunted—repetitions of arguments and tensions that preceded them.

Consequently, these voices overwrite the social Text, turning *Just Us* into a palimpsest of America’s ongoing social engagement. The chapter “complicit freedoms” acts as a palimpsestic double of the soiree described in the chapter “social contract.” In that earlier scene, Rankine dined with White guests. There, she confronted their latent racism and their attempt to silence her. In “complicit freedoms,” the scene shifts. She attends another formal dinner, this time with Black colleagues. Here, she is the one confronted. A guest asks how she responds to Black students who bleach their hair. The difference matters. The first example shows Rankine pressing against White denial. The second shows her own vulnerability—called to answer for the choices of Black students.

Though drawn from her personal life, “complicit freedoms” highlights the representational weight of the personal for a racial group. Her account underscores how her voice is received not just as Claudia Rankine’s, but as a voice defining the contours of the New Black Aesthetics. Leonard elaborates that

[e]ven when writing the personal, . . . contemporary poets engage directly with how being interpellated into dominant ideologies of race creates all manner of tensions between that social constitution of identity and their self-perception. Part of contemporary poetic freedom has come from directly confronting the effects of these social forces outside of both self and community by seeking to constitute in their own terms that complex and inchoate entity called blackness . . . (18)

Rankine confronts another kind of conflict: being a Black individual who does not agree with every racial concern voiced by other Black people. Even in a group that shares her racial identity, she feels cornered. “Instead of answering, I found myself identifying with the scolded and falling into a defensive posture” (*Just Us* 271). A colleague presses her if blond hair signals a desire to appear more White, or if it is

simply fashion? This time, the roles reverse. Rankine speaks, and the colleague falls silent. When she insists that “[s]ome things should matter more [than fashion], no matter the law, no matter our individual freedoms . . .” (ibid.), the silence deepens. Her colleague feels doubly betrayed. First by students who imitate Whiteness, second by Rankine, who refuses to share her indignation.

Rankine uses silence as a deliberate strategy to assert visibility and control, transforming it into a space where her interlocutors must feel the same discomfort she experiences. She explains, “[k]nowing that my silence is active in the room, I stay silent because I want to make a point of that silence”⁶⁰ (155). In both chapters, “social contract” and “complicit freedoms,” the dinners function as a farce, “a disguised Q&A slotted into the dinner hour” (269), in which Rankine’s presence as a Black woman becomes the object of interrogation. These settings force her into a Kafkaesque position: on one hand, White supremacy expects her silence on racial issues; on the other, Black colleagues expect her agreement regardless of the question. By refusing to respond, Rankine reverses the dynamic, compelling others to experience the unease of silence themselves.

Throughout *Just Us*, Rankine pushes readers toward her conclusion that “there is no escape inside a world built on white supremacy” (Rankine and Schwartz). This insight resonates with ongoing political debates over racial identity and appearance, particularly regarding hair. In March 2022, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the CROWN Act, which makes discrimination based on hairstyle illegal. Even Michelle Obama has reflected on how hair shapes politics, noting that “[s]he opted out of wearing braids, . . . because she felt at the time that the American people needed first to adjust to having a Black family in the White House” (Azaldin). Obama’s comment underscores a paradox: while politics dictate what counts as a “suitable” public appearance, they also attempt to legislate against discrimination and protect individual expression. Rankine closes *Just Us* with a similar tension, turning to Black pride and epitextual commentary to grapple with her colleague’s skepticism about Black students who bleach their hair. Rather than viewing this choice as a desire to appear White, she insists it is simply a matter of fashion (see *Just Us* 305)⁶¹.

⁶⁰ Dorothy Wang argues likewise when she states, “[s]ilence is not neutrality but an active position one has chosen” (230).

⁶¹ Rankine ponders, “[w]hat’s difficult to reconcile is the notion that a hair color can be a lifestyle choice, a bit of fun, but can also be in line with a long-standing commitment to white supremacy” (*Just Us* 305).

Rankine responds to her colleague's concern with an epitextual reference that reworks the language of consumer safety. She reproduces the warning label from a hair dye package, which cautions that the product "MAY CAUSE SKIN IRRITATION ON CERTAIN INDIVIDUALS" and may even lead to "BLINDNESS" of color (296). The advisory closes with the words "Head Turner Temporary Color Spray package warning" (ibid.). Rankine plays on the phrase "head turner," linking it to the brainwashing effect of White supremacist propaganda that relegates racial minorities to second-class citizenship. The implication is that Black people can neither change nor conceal their racial identity, even metaphorically, with a "temporary color spray." By placing the warning on a verso page—just as advisories usually appear on the back of consumer packaging—Rankine grants the text a marginal but deliberate place in *Just Us*. While on a literal level the advisory protects the consumer's health against irritation or blindness, she uses it metaphorically to comment on how racial difference cannot be erased or hidden, regardless of attempts to conform.

Unlike Rankine, McCoy frames the issue in terms of survival rather than health, noting that "spaces dismissed by whites as marginal," such as the verso side of a package, ". . . would take on great importance to African Americans, who frequently had no choice but to apprehend them as key to individual and collective survival" (159). Building on this perspective, Rankine acknowledges her colleague's concern, agreeing that Black people should not adopt White characteristics in an effort to appear White. Instead, she suggests they ought to affirm their Blackness—whether through physical appearance or intellectual work such as *Just Us*. By including the epitext of a usage advisory as a metaphorical warning about Blackness, Rankine both channels the pressures of White supremacy and resists Whiteness as the imposed paradigm of beauty (see ibid.).

Another reference to Winthrop's social model underscores Rankine's emphasis on the future role of Black Americans as a vital asset of U.S. society. Winthrop envisions that "wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty vpon a Hill, the eies of all people are vpon us; . . . wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world" (sic Winthrop). Rankine adapts this vision by urging her readers to see Black Americans through the eyes of the Black poet. In contrast, her White friend in the chapter "ethical loneliness" demonstrates the privilege of choice when she refuses to be exposed on stage because of her Whiteness. Rankine critiques that her friend can

choose either to reveal or to conceal her White privilege, whereas Black people do not have the privilege of hiding their Blackness.

In light of what has been said in this chapter, Rankine proves to be as essential to the development and representation of the New Black Aesthetics as Hayes and Smith. Compared to the approaches by Hayes and Smith, she complicates the distinction between history and poetic authority by interrogating the poet as a “raced self.” Marked by intertextuality and visual-textual layers, her work foregrounds the ways Black subjectivity is always already read through racialized lenses. In contrast to Hayes’ sonnets, which situate the lyrical speaker in dialogue with ancestors and historical forms, Rankine resists stable subjectivity. The lyrical speaker in *Just Us* is fractured and dialogic—defined as much by interlocutors and paratexts as by interior voices. Compared to Smith, who curates communal history into an archive, Rankine dismantles coherence, presenting instead a palimpsest of voices, images, and citations. Yet, all three merge through their concern with how Black subjectivity is historically and socially mediated: Hayes as an heir, Smith as an archivist, and Rankine as an exposé of demeaning race politics.

Her difference is particularly evident in how she addresses the “raced self.” Hayes’ lyrical speakers, though haunted by assassins and shaped by history, still articulate a coherent voice negotiating between White form (the sonnet) and Black innovation. Smith similarly constructs a lyrical self that mediates between personal memory and communal history, often rooting subjectivity in the archive. Rankine, however, refuses the coherence of such a self. Her verso-recto form, photographs, and dialogic interruptions present subjectivity as relational, constantly contested by racialized perceptions. This aligns with the New Black Aesthetics’ embrace of hybridity but also radicalizes it: where Hayes and Smith position themselves within or against history, Rankine shows how history, society, and Whiteness continually inscribe the Black subject. In doing so, she makes the raced self both visible and unstable, creating a critical tension that challenges both lyric tradition and the possibility of a unified Black poetic subject.

Chapter 4

Visuality

The poets of the current Black Renaissance embody Maya Angelou's metaphor of the "caged bird / [who] sings of freedom"⁶² in their pursuit of individualism and unbound aesthetic expression (Angelou). Among them, Amanda Gorman stands out as the first youth Poet Laureate and the youngest inaugural poet in U.S. history, appearing as an embodiment of the Black Renaissance. At Joseph Biden's presidential inauguration in 2021, she used the national stage to present her vision of a peaceful, interracial, and human-centered community. By reciting her poem "The Hill We Climb," she became a symbol of hope for the nation. Extending this mission in her poetry collection *Call Us What We Carry* (2021), Gorman encourages readers to reflect on systemic oppression and work toward collective healing and interracial unity through resilience.

Racism and pandemics serve as the central leitmotifs of *Call Us*, where Gorman presents racism as a tumor corroding the body of American democracy. She highlights the repetitive nature of history by drawing parallels between global health crises and race riots throughout U.S. history. As a black artist, she focuses on generational recall to raise her readers' awareness of the intersections of global health crises, war, and racial conflict. Her work acts to validate their collective experiences and support them in developing coping mechanisms. In this context, Édouard Glissant's theories of cultural memory help clarify how Gorman reconstructs African American memory to create a dialogue between the nation's past and present. Through this lens, she emphasizes the power of lyrical language as a means of navigating and overcoming crises. In *Call Us*, such crises often intersect with race and function as rhetorical devices—particularly similes—that expose the corrupt nature of American racism. As an icon of prospective Black art, Gorman portrays interracial development by determining a person's Americanness through shared national and social identification rather than their identity. This allows escape from racial marginalization, in which postcolonial ideology continues to confine Black Americans.

Gorman frames *Call Us* around the central obstacles that prevent peaceful interracial coexistence—most notably racism and pandemics—and develops poetic strategies to overcome them. In the poem "MONOMYTH," the lyrical speaker

⁶² Angelou, Maya. "Caged Bird." *Poetry Foundation*, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48989/caged-bird.

encapsulates the range of social and political crises she addresses, observing that “Obstacles bloom at every step, curved outward like weeds. We must / adapt or fail” (Gorman 185). Gorman situates her voice within a lineage of Black cultural resistance, declaring herself “the daughter of Black writers . . . descended from freedom fighters who broke their chains and changed the world” (229). This personal mantra aligns her with the Black Arts Movement’s mission to create a Black art that is both iconic and responsive to its historical moment. Her poetry, in turn, encourages various perspectives on momentary challenges. These perspectives, both masked and unveiled, include the abuse of presidential power and the crisis of a pandemic. Thus helping the reader determines how they shape, destabilize, and transform the social environment.

Moreover, *Call Us* invites readers to view American society through the lens of a young Black woman. Gorman uses a simile to portray obstacles as weeds, turning her words into a dynamic ecosystem and suggesting that individual members of society determine at what point social or racial issues become obstacles. In this respect, she indirectly connects her poetic vision to Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, the novel that shaped her development as a writer more than any other work. When Morrison’s protagonist Pecola asks why people consider dandelions weeds⁶³ (Morrison 35), she juxtaposes individual and collective perspectives in a manner that echoes Gorman’s own approach. The title of Gorman’s poetry collection underscores this duality as well, for the struggles people “carry” gesture toward both personal and communal burdens. Identifying herself as a descendant of her artistic ancestors and a harbinger of a new generation of Black poets, Gorman positions herself in Pecola’s youthful role as a still-developing voice, which she sets in contrast to the “adult” or more poetically mature perspectives of earlier Black writers.

As the first National Youth Poet Laureate and the youngest inaugural poet in U.S. history, Gorman emphasizes the importance of having received poetic mentorship in shaping her role as a representative of the New Black Aesthetics. Guided by predecessors, she explores the interpersonal and interracial relationships that *Call Us* foregrounds. Her poem “MONOMYTH” and the structure of the volume itself parallel Joseph Campbell’s concept of the monomyth⁶⁴, which narrates a hero’s journey of

⁶³ In Morrison’s original passage, Pecola “wonders, [why] do people call [dandelions] weeds? She thought they were pretty. . . . Nobody loves the head of a dandelion. Maybe because they are so many, strong, and soon” (35).

⁶⁴ This chapter’s analogies to the monomyth draw on Joseph Campbell’s concept in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949).

growth and transformation. Traditionally, the hero is called to a mission, supported by guardians, and tested through challenges.

In 2017, when Gorman was appointed Laureate, the American literary community effectively called her to such a mission, leading her to craft a body of poetry that resonates with Campbell's framework. Yet she flips the rhetoric when she introduces the concept of a female poet as our hero, disrupting the monomyth's traditionally male orientation. While Campbell outlines universal mythic structures, Gorman adapts the form to interrogate the causes of racial conflict and to imagine possible resolutions. Like Terrance Hayes, Tracy K. Smith, and Claudia Rankine, she critiques contemporary racial injustice; at the same time, she situates her critique within the global context of pandemics. For Gorman, pandemics function as equalizers: they erase racial boundaries by exposing entire societies, regardless of racial makeup, to the same collective threat.

Due to her youth and her role as an interracial mediator, Gorman emerges as a beacon of hope for Black communities and a symbolic figure for the broader American public. She mirrors the Black Renaissance, which carries forward the legacies of the New Negro Movement and the Black Arts Movement. In doing so, she connects to Hayes, Smith, and Rankine, who also draw inspiration from these artistic traditions. As an embodiment of the Black Renaissance, Gorman demonstrates the transformation of a Black poet who initially represents Black Americans into a poet who speaks for the entirety of U.S. society and its political institutions. This trajectory parallels a stage of the monomyth in which the hero receives guidance from mentors who prepare them for public recognition. On her path toward becoming a national voice, Gorman recalls that "[a] teacher appears, bone-deep with knowledge" in the form of former U.S. Poet Laureates and inaugural poets (Gorman 184), such as Tracy K. Smith (Poet Laureate from 2017 to 2019) and Maya Angelou (inaugural poet in 1993).

In her poem "Caged Bird," Maya Angelou contrasts captivity with freedom, declaring that

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom. (Angelou)

Like Angelou's caged bird, Gorman experiences fear as she emerges as a public figure in both American society and on the global stage. She has spoken of an "inner terror" when facing public audiences, a fear intensified by the sudden attention she received at President Biden's inauguration⁶⁵. Such public appearances were situations previously unknown to her. Yet it is these new and frightening public appearances of a young, Black woman turning her into a symbol of hope for an entire nation, "Where a skinny Black girl, / Descended from slaves and raised by a single mother, / Can dream of becoming president" (Gorman 206–07). *Call Us* embodies this "call" as the initial stage of the monomyth by reflecting on the human crises that have shaped American history, including the Covid pandemic, racial struggles, and political upheaval. Through her lyrical speaker, Gorman both shares her thoughts on contemporary events and also bears witness to history as it unfolds.

Moments of political unrest catalyze Gorman's decision to act as a vital public figure. As Yusef Komunyakaa observes, "[p]oets are the ones . . . who can articulate what ordinary people cannot or are too timid to articulate. This is part . . . of the poet's calling" (15). Gorman responds to this calling most visibly in the wake of the national turmoil caused by President Trump's incitement of supporters to storm the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. In her poem "MONOMYTH," the lyrical speaker reflects on such crises: "The hero clenches their fist. Something tightens inside us like a / muscle, a trembling memory reminds us of who & what we are" (Gorman 187). This recognition moment emphasizes *Call Us* as a volume of poetics of recognition, one that identifies and affirms a communal identity forged in political upheaval. In this political dimension of her work, Gorman uses poetry to challenge the marginalization of Black people, whose current political standing remains shaped by historical invisibility and the enduring legacies of racial injustice.

Gorman uses poetry to situate herself within the legacy of the Black aesthetic. She aligns with contemporary figures such as Komunyakaa and Tracy K. Smith while also acknowledging the formative influence of predecessors like Sonia Sanchez and Maya Angelou. These poetic lineages underscore her dual position as both protégée and peer within Black literary traditions. At the same time, Gorman frames poets of the New Black Aesthetics as writers of history in the making. She embraces her role as a living witness, emphasizing that history is not a fixed record but an evolving

⁶⁵ Gorman notes that the "writing process is its own excruciating form, but as someone with a speech impediment, speaking in front of millions of people presents its own type of terror" (Alter).

process. Like Smith in *Wade in the Water*, Gorman views history as a dynamic continuum rather than a static artifact. This perspective informs her understanding of the current Black Renaissance as a multifaceted movement, one in whose “historical record” she actively participates (Gorman and Obama 62).

She describes the Black Renaissance as a movement that extends beyond poetry into fashion, visual arts, dance, and music (see *ibid.*). She emphasizes that “[i]n all the forms of expression of human life, we’re seeing that artistry be informed by the Black experience” (*ibid.*). For her, fashion becomes an integral extension of poetic performance. She frames it as “not just as an expression but as weaponry,” a medium for “demanding humanity by communicating that humanity through your body” (“Amanda Gorman with Elizabeth Alexander” 00:12:14–33).

This fusion of poetry and fashion reaches symbolic intensity in TIME magazine’s double issue of February 15 and February 22, 2021. The editors cast Gorman as an allegorical embodiment of Maya Angelou’s “Caged Bird” (see time.com/5933596/amanda-gorman-michelle-obama-interview/). Awol Erizku’s⁶⁶ photograph captures her steady, self-assured gaze, accentuated by a striking pink dress that directs attention to her face. Her slight turn leads the viewer’s eye to her right arm, where she holds a white cage with a yellow bird inside. Resting on a nearly invisible black pillar, the cage evokes Angelou’s poetic metaphor. The pillar symbolizes the grounding force of Black poetry and the promise of eventual liberation. The bird’s confinement reflects White supremacist ideology, which restricts racial minorities yet awakens their longing for free intellectual space. The galaxy in the background projects an Afrofuturistic vision, positioning Gorman as the mediator between past and future who carries Black poetry forward.

In the poem “MONOMYTH,” she frames interracial conflict as “a battle between opposing forces. Armed / with sword, saber, wands & words, [she] must defend what [she] / believe[s] in” (Gorman 188). She links this conflict not only to race but also to political ideologies. One side upholds American democracy, while the other storms the Capitol and attacks the symbolic core of democratic ideals. Through *Call Us*, Gorman opposes Trump supporters while affirming the activism of Black Lives Matter. In this stance, she embodies the kind of poet Dorothy Wang identifies as

⁶⁶ Frequently promoted by the Ben Brown Fine Arts gallery in London, Ethiopian-born Awol Erizku is introduced as a Los Angeles-based “multidisciplinary artist working in photography, film, sculpture and installation, creating a new vernacular that bridges the gap between African and African American visual culture. Erizku’s work . . . reject[s] Eurocentric notions of art and beauty in favour of building [an] Afrocentric aesthetic, something he refers to as ‘Afro-esotericism’” (sic “Awol Erizku”).

the future of American poetry. Gorman experiments with language to address urgent issues that shape U.S. society. As Wang argues, contemporary poets “[q]uestion . . . supposedly ‘neutral,’ ‘objective,’ and ‘universal’ concepts and assumptions of poetics” (230). Gorman exemplifies this role as a paradigm of twenty-first-century experimental poets. Her approach balances innovation with tradition. On one hand, she learns from her aesthetic ancestors; on the other, she adapts their styles, such as Tracy K. Smith’s, incorporates archival research, and integrates those findings into her poems.

At the same time, Gorman embodies the new generation of poets by rejecting conventional forms such as stanzas or rhyme schemes. As a representative of the future of Black poetry, she reflects the call to

an urgent need to decolonize and desegregate poetry studies and literary studies in general. . . . *A radical* revolution of aesthetics and politics is needed, a wholesale overturning and rethinking of English-language poetry and poetics from the foundations up, taking into account the ongoing and long-lasting effects of colonialism and racial capitalism and the racial ideologies they have produced. (Wang 230; original italics)

For Gorman, poetic form becomes a vehicle to mirror the shape of contemporary social and political challenges in U.S. society. Like Hayes, Smith, and Rankine, she applies a New Formalist approach “by moving back and forth across aesthetic and social materials” (Levine 5). This strategy encourages her to experiment with “futuristic” forms that depart from convention. One example is “CODA IN CODE,” a poem that resembles a hangman game (see Gorman 192–93). What begins as a playful format transforms into a coping mechanism to process loss and despair. Despite her young age, Gorman stresses the urgency of her time, pointing to “not just the urgency but the emergency of the moment” (“Amanda Gorman on Being a Young Poet” 00:08:10–14). Her poetry confronts a threefold crisis of racial violence, political upheaval, and a global pandemic, weaving these pressures together in *Call Us*.

I will briefly comment on Gorman’s stylistic and formal approaches to clarify how they echo her lyrical art as social criticism. In *Call Us*, her style is characterized by intersecting linguistic clarity and the art of poetry. On one hand, she often adopts clear language that makes her work accessible to broader audiences. On the other hand, she adds layers of metaphor, anaphora, and allusion, producing a textured style that encourages an immersive close reading of her poetry. This duality reflects her position as both a public poet, whose work is to communicate in social and ceremonial contexts,

and a literary poet, who deeply engages with questions of history, identity, and artistic heritage. The stylistic interplay between accessibility and poetic complexity ensures that her poems operate on various layers: it inspires live audiences (cf. Biden's inauguration ceremony) but is formally intriguing to encourage scholarly engagement.

Formally, Gorman embraces hybridity by combining poetic, narrative, and performative modes. Many of her poems move fluidly between first-person confessions and collective addresses, blurring the line between private voices and public proclamations. She frequently employ lists, refrains, and fragmented structures, situating her work within a wide intertextual field. As a result, her poetry resists confinement to a single genre, embodying the New Black Aesthetics' emphasis on multiplicity and innovation. This hybridity is essential: by weaving together varied forms, Gorman creates a poetics of inclusivity that mirrors her broader social vision of a nation formed of multiple voices in dialogue.

Through this polyvocal dialogue, Gorman's poetry highlights the intersection "of aesthetics and politics" as a defining feature of twenty-first-century Black poetry, even though she has not participated in large-scale political activism (Wang 230). *Call Us* nonetheless raises the question of her political engagement, as critiques of U.S. politics dominate several of her poems. From Rachel Blau DuPlessis' perspective, Gorman clearly writes political poetry because her work "is a key site at which the aesthetic/formal and the social/statement slang each other with binarist weapons" (59). She experiments with poetic structures to give each text a distinct form that visually conveys racial, social, and political critique. In doing so, she constructs a deliberate binary between form and content.

Beyond form as a vehicle for social critique, Gorman grounds her poetic activism in language that seeks communal healing and awareness of interracial struggles. She integrates personal experience into her verse while also giving her generation a platform to process change, loss, and isolation during the Covid pandemic. Caroline Levine asks in a New Formalist context, "[h]ow should we understand the relationship between literary and political forms?" (22). Gorman addresses this question through her experimental style. By extending the legacy of her aesthetic ancestors, she continues their lyrical negotiation of sociopolitical issues, which intersect with the ongoing racial and postcolonial oppression of Black Americans.

In addition, reading Gorman through Levine's lens highlights how her use of rap-like rhythms also function as a formal improvisation. Levine emphasizes that forms are no fixed structures but flexible frameworks that can be reshaped across contexts. Gorman's incorporation of beats, rhyme schemes, and call-and-response-structures demonstrates how rap's performative characteristics can be reflected in printed poetry without losing their political and cultural significance. This transposition exemplifies Levine's claim that forms endure while being recontextualized: the sonic structures of rap turn into a poetic form that shapes both aesthetic experience and social meaning. By translating the improvisatory character of rap into literature, Gorman expands the sonic richness of poems and emphasizes the adaptability of Black expressive traditions. Rhythm represents cultural inheritance but also a formal strategy that intervenes in literary traditions, destabilizing elitist and popular forms and affirming the multiplicity of Black voices in American poetry.

As Levine argues, Gorman adapts form to her intended message, "reading aesthetic forms as indexes of social life" (ibid.). In *Call Us*, she employs the monomyth as both a recurring technique and the organizing principle of the volume. The book itself reflects the seven stages of a hero's journey through its seven chapters. The opening chapter, "Requiem," situates Gorman at the intersection of racial injustice and the Covid pandemic. Here, she introduces the mental, social, and political struggles that shaped her writing. At the same time, she locates herself within a global crisis, presenting a new world that she and her readers must learn to navigate. This gesture recalls the first stage of the monomyth. In the second chapter, "What a Piece of Wreck Is Man," Gorman turns to grief and trauma tied to the exploitation of Black bodies. She proposes compassion as the pathway toward interracial reconciliation. Chapter three, "Earth Eyes," addresses the psychological toll of the pandemic. Gorman portrays people confined to their homes, consumed by fear of an uncertain future, and links this fear to the historical weight of racial oppression.

Revelation defines the fourth chapter, "Memoria," which explores ways of coping with traumatic memories of grief and pain. It also presents the Black poet as a vessel of memory and highlights language as a tool for both personal and communal transformation. The next chapters, "Atonement" and "Fury & Faith," align with stages five and six of the monomyth. In "Atonement," Gorman turns to erasure poetry to confront the suffering of victims of racial violence and the pandemic. While she first

frames social distancing as a byproduct of Covid, she ultimately redefines it as a metaphor for the distancing rooted in racial prejudice.

The chapter “Fury & Faith” responds directly to “Atonement” by confronting racial erasure and focusing on Black Americans engaged in an ideological battle against the White supremacist notion of “dispensable bod[ies]” (Gorman 154). Here, the lyrical speaker portrays the ideological transformation of Black communities, expressed through activist movements such as Black Lives Matter. Gorman employs poetry as revelation, sketching a communal struggle that unites people and strengthens their resilience. The final stage of her monomyth arrives in the seventh chapter, “Resolution.” This chapter contains the poem “MONOMYTH,” which itself includes a stanza titled “Resolution.” Poet, lyrical speaker, and reader alike emerge from this final stage empowered and hopeful, with their “Head held high & bowed at / the same time, [since] they will never forget what happened here” to honor the victims of past struggles (189).

Gorman concludes by presenting herself as prepared for the unknown challenges of the future, casting Black poets in particular as interpreters of sociopolitical struggles. *Call Us* further illustrates the role of Black poets as interracial bridge builders, a term Tracy K. Smith also uses to describe the function of the New Black Aesthetic poet⁶⁷. In this sense, the volume deconstructs the traditional monomyth, since Gorman’s work does not center on a conventional hero figure. Instead, her poetic structure moves from a world of despair toward a renewed state.

As bridge builders, Black poets must develop a universal understanding of both racial perspectives. They engage with Black and White histories, memories, and racial consciousness. In doing so, they embody a form of double consciousness. W. E. B. Du Bois defines this concept as viewing Blackness through the White gaze. In contrast, the New Black Aesthetics reframe double consciousness as perceiving both races through the Black gaze, which remains tied to historical and generational trauma. This perspective enables Black poets to act as interracial mediators. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Paul Gilroy notes the “[t]he idea of tradition [as] a strange, mesmeric power in black political discourse. Considering its special force and usage seems an appropriate operation with which to begin the end of a book

⁶⁷ In a comment on *Wade in the Water*, Smith states that “speaking about our political situation in the vocabulary of politics was in some ways exacerbating that sense of division . . . , [which] made me really want to return to that idea that maybe poetry could do this bridgebuilding” (“Art Works” 00:30:27-31:06).

about blacks and modernity” (187). In *Call Us*, Gorman substitutes modernity with progress and change. Yet Gilroy’s theoretical framework clarifies how she draws on the Black Atlantic and the Black aquatic to imagine dismantling traditional racial hierarchies in the United States.

Gorman explores the Black Atlantic and the Black aquatic through frequent references to memory, creating the “new cultural combination[s]” Trey Ellis identifies as central to the New Black Aesthetics (243). She portrays these combinations in temporal and transcontinental contexts by linking events outside U.S. borders to their lasting effects on American society. For instance, she recalls the Great Influenza pandemic of 1918⁶⁸ to illuminate parallels with her own time. Through this comparison, she processes the challenges of the Covid pandemic both personally and communally across temporal boundaries. *Call Us* thus becomes her vehicle for situating present struggles within a larger historical continuum. By drawing on archival materials, she uses poetry to transmit experiences that are at once individual and collective. The brevity and precision of her verse sharpen the emotional force of these crises for the reader. In this way, she demonstrates how poetry contributes to both physical healing and mental recovery from trauma.

To combat crisis situations, Gorman engages her readers in a dialogue which echoes the tradition of call-and-response, specifically regarding her rhythmic choices. As implied in the context of rap and Levine’s formal approach, sound and rhythm are foundational of Gorman’s work, where she employs techniques associated with rap and spoken word performance. Her use of alliteration and internal rhyme patterns, for instance, gives her poems rhythmic qualities that connect them to hip-hop traditions. These sonic elements establish a sense of immediacy and urgency, emphasizing the embodied act of speaking and performing poetry rather than reading it. Gorman’s cadences often echo rap’s rhythmic patterns, where stressed syllables represent rapped beats, creating a tension that both captivates audiences and stresses the political significance of her message. Her deliberate sound experiments reflect what Gilroy identifies as a diasporic mode of cultural expression, in which sound becomes a vehicle for transmitting memory and solidarity across historical spheres. By using rap as both a popular form and diasporic inheritance, Gorman embodies the New Black Aesthetics’

⁶⁸ For a detailed discussion of the Great Influenza crisis, see pp. 183-84 of this dissertation. Gorman links the end of the First World War with the onset of the Great Influenza pandemic, which enabled Black nurses to serve in the U.S. Army for the first time.

blending of “high” literary forms with popular traditions that are rooted in communal resonances.

At the same time, her rhythmic choices position her work in a context of Black performance that connects the griot tradition to contemporary rap. By manipulating rhythm—for instance, accelerating her poetry with quick rhythms or creating pauses with longer phrases—she mirrors rap verses that merge storytelling and protest. As a result, she transforms her pages into a stage for a national dialogue, echoing Gilroy’s notion of Black Atlantic cultural practices: Gorman’s rhythms are shaped by African American traditions but remain part of a diaspora that links Black sonic patterns globally. Just as rap artists remix cultural memory through rhythm, Gorman reconfigures poetic sound to embody resilience, solidarity, and resistance. In doing so, she makes rhythm a container of transnational memory, where each beat and pause resonates as both personal expression and collective call.

Gorman combines the personal and the collective through call-and-response to guide her readers through upheaval and crisis while evoking a sense of unity. By referencing pandemics and, at times, war, she frames *Call Us* as poetry with a unifying purpose. Her advocacy for unity and humanity includes the integration of war imagery, which counters what she identifies as the “toxic mob mentality” of groups lacking “a sense of justice, equality and fairness” (Gorman and Obama 63). For her, “[u]nity that actually moves us toward the future means that we accept our differences – we embrace them and we lean into that diversity. It’s not linking arms without questioning what we’re linking arms for. It’s unity with purpose” (ibid.). Through this vision, she challenges embedded racial divisions and positions herself within a Black aesthetic tradition by extending the history and legacy of her artistic ancestors.

Two central questions frame the introductory poem “SHIP’S MANIFEST” and guide *Call Us* as a whole: What is a Black historical record, and what role does the Black poet play in compiling it? The lyrical speaker reflects, “For what is a record but a reckoning? / The capsule captured? / A repository, / An ark articulated? / & the poet, the preserver / Of ghosts & gains, / Our demons & dreams, / Our haunts & hopes” (Gorman 2). The three containers—capsule, repository, and ark—become the pillars of *Call Us*. The capsule marks time within human historiography, the repository gathers sources with a shared focus, and the ark functions as a mythical artifact that safeguards human records from erasure.

In this context, *Call Us* recalls the book of Genesis, where God commands Noah to build an ark to preserve life from destruction. Together, these images form a metaphorical container of narratives that Gorman selects according to her preservative aims. She chooses histories that both haunt and inspire her, such as pandemics and war. This passage also defines the Black poet's task as narrating history through questioning. Gorman's approach aligns with Lucille Clifton, who understood the poet's responsibility not as providing answers but as posing the right questions (see Holladay).

Gorman precedes her introductory poem "SHIP'S MANIFEST" with an epigraph from Anne Carson's elegy *Nox*⁶⁹, which defines "history" as the practice of "asking questions" (Gorman)⁷⁰. Because *Call Us* opens with foundational questions about the Black historical record and the Black poet's role in it, Gorman uses her introductory poem to emphasize testimony: "This book is a message in a bottle. / This book is a letter. / This book does not let up. / This book is awake. / This book is a wake" (2). The anaphoric repetition highlights the book's mission to anchor Black identity in historical records and clarifies what her art *is* rather than what it *does*. "SHIP'S MANIFEST" also recalls the Cambridge Dictionary's definition of a manifesto as "a written statement of the beliefs, aims, and policies of an organization, especially a political party" ("manifesto"). At the same time, the passage reflects Gorman herself, who shapes her public self-representation less around activism than around her identity as a Black poet. She explains that her introductory poem was meant "to visualize . . . a thesis for the book that I could . . . follow and map the rest of the poems," a gesture that aims both to represent humanity as a whole and to locate her own place within it ("Amanda Gorman with Elizabeth Alexander" 00:13:32–38).

By examining the entangled histories of human relations, Gorman emphasizes the ship's metaphorical function as an aquatic reference. Her treatment of human connection recalls Édouard Glissant, who describes the "trace" as key to understanding intergenerational ties: "the thought of the *trace*, as opposed to systematic thought, acts as a wandering that guides us. We know that the trace is what puts us . . ., wherever we come from, in Relation" (sic *Treatise* 9; original italics). *Call Us* reflects this idea by

⁶⁹ Both a book of poetry, an epitaph, and an elegy, *Nox* gives Carson a space to commemorate and grieve her brother's death. Combining poetry, photographs, and translations, she creates a multifaceted approach to working through grief.

⁷⁰ Apart from Carson, Gorman also acknowledges the influence of Lucille Clifton. Clifton views poetry as a genre meant to ask questions rather than provide answers. She explains, "[p]oetry and art are not about answers to me; they are about questions" (Holladay).

appearing chaotic in its chronology, as Gorman continually shifts between historical eras. She uses this format when examining her present social and political environment with earlier ones. Through this strategy, she forges a dialogue between her contemporary moment and her ancestors' past.

In Gorman's work, order does not rely on historical coherence. In "SHIP'S MANIFEST," the lyrical speaker asks, "& what exactly are we supposed to be doing [as poets]? / . . . / We are writing with vanishing meaning, / Our words water dragging down a windshield" (Gorman 1). To resist erasure from cultural memory, Black poets must return to their roots and preserve the legacy of their aesthetic ancestors. Gorman's metaphor of water running down a windshield suggests both fragility and resilience. The implied "wipers" reposition Black poetry so that it continues to nourish American literature. In this way, Black poetry reconnects to its cultural origins, metaphorically waters them anew, and fosters the growth of new artistic sprouts—young and influential poets such as Gorman herself.

Call Us develops its natural imagery of roots growing into trees—and metaphorically into Black poetry—through three eponymous poems titled "ARBORESCENT." The first, "ARBORESCENT I," reflects on self-recognition and Gorman's search to understand the artistic roots that shape her own poetry. The lyrical speaker declares,

We are
 Arborescent—
 What goes
 Unseen
 Is at the very
 Root of ourselves. (7)

The poem's structure underscores the dialogue between ancestral roots and their growth into contemporary Black poets. Gorman formalizes this duality by arranging the text in two columns. The left column highlights communal identity with "We are" (ibid.), echoing the introductory poem that defines the aims of *Call Us*. The right column points to the invisibility of social origins. Yet the visual overlap of the two columns illustrates identity as inseparable from origin.

Within U.S. society, Gilroy highlights the tension between Black pluralism and Black particularity, a contrast that underscores the barrier preventing a unified, race-neutral ideology. He argues that a dominating supremacist ideology results in a "community . . . felt to be on the wrong road, and it is the intellectual's job to give them a new direction, firstly by recovering and then by donating the racial awareness

that the masses seem to lack” (Gilroy 32). In line with this assumption, Gorman seeks to counteract internal division. While Gilroy’s model centers on Black communities, it extends to American society as a whole, since Gorman juxtaposes the particular needs of Black Americans with the pluralistic needs of the nation.

In “ARBORESCENT II,” the lyrical speaker links origin to human and racial character traits, offering a way to make unseen roots visible:

We grasp
 At the very best
 Of each
 Other
 & begin. (Gorman 66)

Awareness of identity and origin creates a communal impulse to empower one’s community. Designed in the same columnar form as the previous poem, “ARBORESCENT II” highlights in its left column the individual’s natural desire for support from others. The right column, in turn, expresses the search for companions with shared intentions. As in “ARBORESCENT I,” the columns visually intersect to emphasize the relationship to the contrasting Other.

“ARBORESCENT III, or ELPIS” concludes the sequence of treelike poems. The lyrical speaker declares,

The same as trees,
 We, too, are shaped
 By how we twist
 Toward all that shoots
 Us through with sun. (198)

Formally, the two columns of the earlier poems merge into a single voice. The dialogue between distinct parties thus transforms into a communal perspective that unites Gilroy’s racial pluralism and particularity. Through this structure, arborescent imagery in *Call Us* envisions one society rooted in diverse racial origins that grow together into a single, resilient social organism.

From a sociological perspective, Gorman’s use of the tree as a metaphor for society aligns with Glissant’s theory of creolization. The term, first used in linguistics to describe the merging of languages, is redefined in *Call Us* as “the process of two or more cultures that were originally from different parts of the world mixing to produce a new culture” (“creolization”). Like the ever-branching roots and boughs of a tree, Glissant stresses that

[c]reolization is unpredictable, it is never fixed, or stopped, or inscribed in essences or absolutes of identity. To accept that the being changes

while remaining is not to veer towards an absolute. What remains in the changing or the change or the exchange is perhaps first of all the inclination or the daring to change. (Glissant, *Treatise* 14)

Change becomes the central theme of Gorman's poetic mission. "ARBORESCENT III" closes with the lines, "Our only word for this is / *Change*" (199; original italics), where "this" signifies both personal growth and the effort to cope with physical and mental struggles.

In these lines, Gorman indirectly invokes the voices of Black ancestral writers and connects her work to Frederick Douglass. He was the editor of the Black newspaper *The North Star* (1847–1851) and a formerly enslaved man, who escaped to freedom. As a formative influence on Gorman, Douglass also links change, growth, and suffering. Reflecting on the West India Emancipation⁷¹ of 1834, he asserts,

[i]f there is no struggle, there is no progress. . . . The struggle may be a moral one or it may be a physical one, or it may both [be] moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. (Douglass)

He continues that those who impose struggle on others "want the ocean without the roar of its mighty waters" (ibid.). In a racial context, White supremacists develop guilty consciences and deliberately ignore the harm they inflicted on minorities. Gorman opens her collection with "SHIP'S MANIFEST" to foreground the Black aquatic's significance as both statement and manifesto, presenting herself as a young poet of the New Black Aesthetics. The aquatic emerges immediately, beginning with the first word of the main text: "SHIP."

With the aquatic, Gorman defines her poetic style and explains that "by diving into the deepest, darkest waters within us do we rise above it. And I really try to do that with poetry" ("Amanda Gorman with Elizabeth Alexander" 00:06:30–38). Her poem "*ESSEX I*" exemplifies this approach to shape poetry by pairing content with a visual form that mirrors meaning. The poem combines three genres—narrative, epitaph, and lyric—enacting what Levine calls "collision—the strange encounter between two or more forms that sometimes reroutes intention and ideology" (18). Gorman's narrative preface introduces the whaling ship *Essex*, the inspiration for Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. The rest of the text appears in the shape of a whale. Its lines are rotated so that readers must either read from bottom to top or turn the book clockwise to achieve a conventional angle. Unlike traditional verse, this poem forces

⁷¹ With the West India Emancipation, the British government abolished slavery in the British West Indies on August 1, 1834. In 1857, Frederick Douglass commemorated the event in his West India Emancipation speech, noting that slavery still persisted and remained vital to the U.S. economy.

readers to choose their perspective before engaging with its content. The dense arrangement of lines makes it deliberately difficult to read, demanding active effort. At the same time, “*ESSEX I*” reverses the biblical story of Jonah and the Whale. In the original tale, Jonah narrates the experience. In *Call Us*, the whale itself tells the story through its physical shape.

The introductory lines of the poem are shaped like a whale’s head. With the whale as the lyrical speaker, the text declares that human history is grounded in storytelling. Readers must first decide how to approach the poem, but the imperative syntax of the opening lines pushes them further by demanding engagement in activism. The “whale” asks them to

Take tragedy, write a book.
 Look. Only when we’re drowning
 do we understand how fierce our feet c
 an kick.

 (Gorman 32)

Gorman’s development as a writer through opposition to racist ideologies reflects the influence of another key role model. As a reincarnation of Phyllis Wheatley (1753–1784), she links her poetry to the Atlantic slave trade and the generational trauma of the Middle Passage. Despite the brutality of captivity, enslaved Africans preserved their will to survive and claimed a recognized space for Black presence in American society. The tail of the whale-shaped poem concludes this story, declaring that (former) slaves nevertheless

..... refuse to believe
 that the only way we learn
 is by whip & woe, the dart of disaster

 (33)

Gilroy explains that “[t]his usage [of tradition] is important and inescapable because racisms work insidiously and consistently to deny both historicity and cultural integrity to the artistic and cultural fruits of black life” (188). His view of Black aesthetic tradition aligns with Gorman’s effort to build historical connections to her Black poetic ancestors.

As Gorman continues to develop her personal poetic style, her homage to ancestral Black poets remains central in marking her role within a new generation of writers. Her lyrical speaker asserts, “We / become what we flee / & what we fear” (Gorman 33), evoking the enslaved Africans’ desire for freedom during the Middle Passage. She further implies that captives such as Wheatley, forced into sea voyages of bondage, became foundational voices of Black Atlantic poetry. To connect Black history with Black poetry, Gorman observes “[p]oetry [as] the lens we use to interrogate the history we stand on and the future we stand for. . . . Whenever I’m writing, I’m looking at the history of words” (Gorman and Obama 63). Her poem “ANOTHER NAUTICAL” extends this link by explaining that the word “ship” historically refers to actions such as “to shape, create, form, destine” (Gorman 36). These verbs resonate with the poet’s task as a shaper and creator of textual art.

In this context, Gorman shifts attention from the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade to the etymological meaning of the ship. Viewing creation as a container, she explains, “This book [*Call Us*], like a ship, is meant to be lived in. / Are we not the animals, two by two” (37). She transforms *Call Us* into a poetic counterpart of Noah’s ark. In doing so, she frames the New Black Aesthetics as an ark moving across American literature and presenting Black poetry as the art form “marked to flood / This day throbbing into tomorrow” (ibid.). In “SHIP’S MANIFEST,” the lyrical speaker further defines Black poetry as “An ark articulated” (2). Like the dove in Noah’s tale, Gorman treats poetry as a symbol of hope, embodied in “the soft bird / We send across the sea / To see if this earth is still home” (39).

In *Call Us*, the ark functions as a metaphor for containing sorrow and human struggle on a global scale. The biblical ark symbolizes the survival of chosen ones tasked with preserving humanity by saving a specimen of every lifeform. Gorman extends this idea to argue that racial and human contrasts make social coexistence possible through charitable interdependence. In Noah’s tale, the preservation of animal pairs ensures survival through procreation rather than the continuation of a single race. Applied to Gorman’s present, the Covid pandemic resembles God’s flood, drowning countless lives. As a poetic ark, *Call Us* preserves the memory of human and global crises across history.

Drawing on the biblical image of racial pairs, Gorman connects human crises as historical pairs, contrasting eras rather than genders as in Noah’s tale. She pairs the 2020 Covid pandemic with the 1918 Great Influenza epidemic to critique medical

institutions that hired qualified Black personnel only when White colleagues were in short supply. In the NOTES section of *Call Us*, she explains that

[d]uring the First World War, the US Army was still racially segregated. Most African American service personnel were placed in noncombative roles, separate from whites. . . . Discriminatory administrative barriers prevented trained African American nurses from joining the war effort, but the public health crisis of the 1918 epidemic finally allowed eighteen Black nurses to be the first of their race ever to serve in the Army Nurse Corp during the epidemic and the war's aftermath. (217-18)

Only through a national and global health crisis did African Americans gain recognition as essential contributors to the U.S. war and epidemic efforts. Gorman symbolically portrays Black people and artists as travelers on an ark whose (poetic) impact fosters the transformation of interracial societies.

In addition, Gorman pairs the ark's positive metaphor with a negative association by placing the vessel in the context of slavery. Like "*ESSEX I*," the poem "____ RIP _____ A _____ SHIP" is a shape poem that experiments with text layout to depict sections of a slave ship based on James Phillips' "Description of a Slave-Ship" (1789). Paratextual elements complement the poem and revise the reader's understanding of the social and sanitary conditions on board, where overcrowding often produced lethal contamination. McCoy notes that

the paratext as a site of extraordinary ambivalence. . . . to borrow Theodore O. Mason's words on the politics of anthologies, it is to 'set the stage for work that needs to be done in understanding the conflicts comprising our history,' to balance how things have changed and how simultaneously they have remained much the same. (162)

Each stanza corresponds to one section of Phillips' sketch⁷². The first shows the ship's profile and the efficient storage of human cargo. Yet despite this logistical efficiency, slaves are described as "Numb fellow creatures used in [the slave traders'] country to anguish" (Gorman 126). The second stanza presents the cross section and emphasizes death as "The privilege / of being the little hope of / recovery" (127). Here, death becomes a state of mercy compared to the torturous conditions of life in slavery.

The third stanza depicts the ship's upper deck, with text reflecting the decay of the enslaved body. The body holds strength only while mental endurance remains, for "It is in the power of the / human imagination to picture itself carried, / restored" (ibid.). In parallel with Phillips' sketch, the final stanza mirrors the last figure in the

⁷² See dpul.princeton.edu/wa/catalog/qj72p788s.

“Description” with a bird’s-eye view of the ship, focusing on the death toll among both the human cargo and the crew (see Gorman 128). The key passage of “_____ RIP _____ A _____ SHIP” does not lie in the lyrical text but in its paratextual footnote. Gorman notes that in Phillips’ sketch, “the narrative description printed below [the image], which is just as harrowing, rarely receives the same attention” as the accompanying text or image (ibid.). To counter this neglect, she fuses shape poetry with erasure poetry by embedding excerpts from Phillips’ descriptions of slave ships directly into her stanzas.

Gorman uses the pandemic context to challenge the myth of racial hierarchies by showing that it places all humans on equal ground. She draws attention to the similarity between the shape of her stanzas and social communities, where status is often ranked by race. In the poem, she criticizes that the content of individuals’ characters is overlooked, echoing Martin Luther King Jr. (see King, “I Have a Dream”). She reinforces this claim in a footnote, a space often ignored by readers, making the act of neglect part of her point. Her critique also addresses the textual origin of the poem. Those responsible for “ordering” slaves and managing their transport disregarded both the sailors’ health and the condition of their human cargo.

She draws on Phillips’ “Description” to show the overstocking of slave ships and also to emphasize his account of the severe health issues caused by overcrowding. Phillips states that

[a]nother objection which may be stated, is, that [on the ship] no room is allowed for the sailors hammocks. In slave ships, while the slaves are on board, the sailors have no other lodging than the bare decks or (in large ships) the tops. From this exposure, they often are wet for a long time together, the rains in those climates being frequent and extremely heavy. There is in wet weather a tarpawling placed over the gratings: if the sailors to shelter themselves creep under this, they are exposed to the noisome and infectious effluvia which continually exhale from the slaves below.

It appeared from the evidence given by the slave merchants last year before the House of Commons, that the employment of the seamen, viz. boating up the rivers after the negroes, guarding them on board, cleansing the vessel, &c. is of a nature offensive and dangerous beyond that of seamen in other services, and that the small-pox, measles, flux, and other contagious disorders, are frequent on board these ships.

It is therefore falsely said by the well-wishers to this trade, that the suppression of it will destroy a great nursery for seamen, and annihilate a very considerable source of commercial profit. – The Rev. Mr. Clarkson, in his admirable treatise on the Impolicy of the Trade, has proved from the most incontestable authority, that so far from being a nursery, it has been constantly and regularly a grave for our seamen; *for*

*that in this traffick only, a greater proportion of men perish in ONE year,
than in all the other trades of Great Britain in TWO years. (sic Phillips;
original italics)*

For Phillips and Gorman, the slave ship represents a world of its own where disease spreads to the entire population because the infected cannot be isolated. The vessel becomes haunted by a pandemic comparable to the Covid pandemic or the Great Influenza. Both slaves and sailors serve as metaphors for bodies held captive by a superior force, namely disease. To highlight the parallels between slavery and pandemics, *Call Us* depicts Black and White bodies on a slave ship as viral carriers who “trade” contagion with one another. This “viral trade” mirrors the human trade of slavery and extends its impact globally, much like illness and racism that affect every person confined within the ship.

In “_____ RIP _____ A _____ SHIP,” the Covid pandemic illustrates the concept of race by showing that while human appearances differ, all share a mutual dependence on nature. The poem “*ESSEX II*” extends this idea by linking human relations to a racially independent common ground. This Whitmanesque vision shapes Gorman’s work, as she seeks to embody Whitman’s belief that “[m]en and women and the earth and all upon it are simply to be taken as they are, and the investigation of their past and present and future shall be unintermitted and shall be done with perfect candor. Upon this basis philosophy speculates ever looking toward the poet” (*Leaves* 2002, 626–27). Formally, “*ESSEX II*” recalls “*ARBORESCENT I*” and “*ARBORESCENT II*” with its two-column dialogue, the left justified and the right indented. Unlike the earlier poems, however, the columns here merge visibly. In the overlapping sections, Gorman concentrates grammatical forms that suggest community, such as the pronouns *we*, *our*, and *us* (Gorman 195). The lyrical speaker underscores this union: “As the world came apart, / We have come together” (*ibid.*), a reflection that echoes the poem’s form as two columns merge into common ground.

Gorman’s focus on social and human common ground connects to her view of cultural memory. Her lyrical speaker affirms this stance by declaring, “. . . It is the carrying / That makes memory mutual” (*ibid.*). For Gorman, the Black poet takes on the task of carrying, treating social entities as vessels that transport memory from one generation to the next. Memory becomes “Heritage . . . passed not in direct / recollection but through indi- / rect retelling” (82). Like griots who embody communal memory by reciting ancestral histories, Gorman charges the Black poet with preserving and transmitting ancestral knowledge. She highlights the rhythm of poetry as essential

to conveying the emotional weight of memory. In the poem “MEMORIAL,” her lyrical speaker asks, “Why the pulsing percussion, the string of syllables?” (74). The poem answers that “It is the poet who pounds the past back into you,” since “It isn’t knowing, / but remembering that makes us [poets] create” (ibid.). “MEMORIAL” thus defines the Black poet’s role and the origin of their art. As “*ESSEX I*” and “*ESSEX II*” also show, the memory of the sailors’ shipwreck that inspired *Moby Dick* becomes a touchstone for Black artists. Their work either engages the source memory directly or transforms it into an abstract method of balancing loss and offering guidance for its processing.

Gorman’s approach to Black memory resonates with Glissant’s account of the poet’s role in preserving remembrance in *Mémoires des Esclavages*. Glissant identifies two forms of memory. First, *tribal memory* passes orally from one generation to the next, as in the work of griots who safeguard communal history. Second, *cultural memory* links directly to Gorman’s practice of preserving and processing traumatic events. She connects contemporary crises such as the Covid pandemic to earlier ones like the Great Influenza. In this way, Glissant’s framework complements her vision of memory as both inherited and continually reinterpreted. He states

that results from a *current and communal* situation, which affects the entire world at the moment. This is the *cultural memory of the global collective*, which each collectivity or nation determines for itself but shares immediately with all others. Memory expands globally, sometimes it is acquired through an . . . individual eradication, abrupt . . . and sometimes disrupting. (*Mémoires* 22-23; original italics; my translation)⁷³

In its metaphorical link to the transatlantic slave trade, the sudden outbreak of the Covid pandemic exemplifies a global force that eradicates countless lives and disrupts the societies to which they belong.

In her poem “PRE-MEMORY,” Gorman distinguishes between *pre-memory* and *postmemory* to show how global memories merge with individual coping strategies. The lyrical speaker defines

. . . pre-memory [as] the phenomenon in which we remember that which we are still experiencing. It is how we understand a current reality as a collective memory, even

⁷³ The French original states: “Il y a deux sortes de mémoires en la matière, celle dont . . . nous appellerions la *mémoire de la tribu*, . . . et par ailleurs celle qui résulte de notre situation *actuelle et commune* dans le global et l’immédiat du monde, c’est la *mémoire culturelle de la collectivité Terre*, que chaque collectivité ou nation détermine pour sa part mais partage d’emblée avec toutes les autres, mémoire grossie au monde, quelquefois acquise . . . au prix . . . d’un déracinement individuels, soudaine . . . parfois perturbante” (Glissant, *Mémoires* 22-23; original italics).

as said reality continues to unfold. (Gorman 77)

Pre-memory thus creates new entries in a society's mental archive, giving individuals a sense of collective knowing and belonging. Since personality is shaped by memory (ibid.), the creators of communal memory must confront "the moral difference between collective amnesia & / collective remembrance" (78). Their intention determines how much they "forget, erase, censor, distort the experience" (77). Postmemory, by contrast,

. . . is not the solo but the choir,
a loyal we, to be not above others, but among them. (76)

These lines echo Whitman's notion of the common ground. While pre-memory asserts the unfolding of memory, postmemory produces the certainty of belonging within a shared collective.

Traumatic memories often emerge from past events and preserve unfractured recollections after pre-memory has shaped them. The lyrical speaker asserts that "collective memory need not be / experienced firsthand to be remembered" (ibid.), linking the trauma of remembrance to the ancestral roots evoked in "ARBORESCENT I." As another example of Gorman's poetics of recognition, the poem shows how Black people gain insight into their ancestral past and by doing so discover their identity. She stresses that awareness of ancestry is essential for transforming marginalized racial and social groups into liberated and self-determined individuals.

Her focus on intergenerational bonds as a mode of recognition aligns with Glissant's concept of poetics of relation. This form of remembrance does not arise from an ethical debt or an obligation to carry ancestors' memories. Instead, it emphasizes that shared memory itself generates intergenerational ties. As Glissant explains,

*[a] different kind of shared memory . . . results in a shared generosity. I call generosity a form of clarity people entirely apply to themselves as well as to their critique which they do not apply to others and their critique. This clarity does not erupt from a moral principle but from a Poetics of Relation*⁷⁴. (*Mémoires* 134; original italics; my translation)

Glissant introduces this model in *Treatise*, in the chapter "Cry of the World," where he outlines his concept of the trace (see 9). Gorman applies this idea of the trace

⁷⁴ The French original states: "La mise en commun d'une autre manière de mémoire et d'une autre donnée des imaginaires devra être l'effet d'une générosité partagée. J'appelle générosité la lucidité qui s'applique aussi entièrement à soi-même et à la critique de soi qu'elle ne s'applique aux autres et à leur critique. Elle ne relève pas d'un principe moral, mais d'une Poétique de la Relation" (Glissant, *Mémoires* 134; original italics).

throughout her “ARBORESCENT” poems to articulate her understanding of ancestral roots and relations.

Ghosts serve as a leitmotif in *Call Us*, symbolizing both individual and communal ancestry. They guide the lyrical speaker and clarify how ancestry shapes the present. In the poem “IN THE DEEP,” the speaker explores generational distance within a circle of “rememberers,” treating these cultural specters as benevolent ghosts that link the speaker to ancestors. Gorman urges her readers to “not fear our ghosts. / Learn from them” (Gorman 42). Bonnie Thomas notes that Glissant frames memory by “set[ting] up powerful value judgements about how one should react to an oppressive history . . . [and] come to terms with its past” (29). Gorman mirrors this stance when her lyrical speaker insists, “It’s not what was done that will haunt us, / But what was withheld, / What was kept out & kept away” (Gorman 42). Similarly, “PRE-MEMORY” contrasts “collective amnesia & / collective remembrance” (78), a tension echoed in the poem “WHO WE GONNA CALL,” where “ghost” becomes synonymous with “memory.”

The lyrical speaker reflects on why ghosts are often negatively connoted. Fear of the unknown and fear of “amnesia” suppress traumatic fractures of memory and risk their obliteration. The speaker explains that “There is nothing so agonizing, or so dangerous, / as memory unexpressed, unexplored, unexplained & / unexploded. Grief is the grenade that always goes off” (ibid.). In the poem “WHO WE GONNA CALL,” the lyrical speaker therefore summons ghosts of memory to confront generational trauma tied to oppressive histories, as Thomas observes. At the same time, the speaker recognizes the need to “Poke the scar until it speaks” (77). It triggers a controlled “detonation” of this psychological grenade, despite the pain that rediscovered memory may cause.

In fact, the poem defines the term “(ancestral) ghosts” and highlights their contradictory effect on those who remember. The lyrical speaker declares that

We rouse ghosts,
 Primarily, for answers.
 Meaning we seek
 Ghosts for their memory
 & fear them for it just the same.

 Like ghosts, we have too much
 To say. We will make do,
 Even if in a graveyard.
 We, like this place,
 Are haunted & hungry. (79)

The current generation of Black poets, represented by Gorman, voices concerns and addresses psychological turmoil rooted in present crises such as the Covid pandemic. Yet her dialogue with ancestors strengthens her arguments, as she speaks as a mouthpiece for ancestral ghosts. Gorman alludes to “the difficult journey from slave ship to citizenship” in Phillips’ portrayal of the slave ship (Gilroy 31). Gilroy warns that this journey “is in danger of being wrecked by the seemingly insoluble conflict between . . . the essentialist and the pluralist standpoints though they are in fact two different varieties of essentialism: one ontological, the other strategic. The antagonistic relationship between these two outlooks has been especially intense in discussions of black art and cultural criticism” (ibid.). The speaker thus invokes intergenerational communication, with ghosts of the past haunting descendants who uncover ancestral trauma. At the same time, these descendants long to serve as their ancestors’ storytellers among the living. Black poetry is therefore never solely individual but serves the entire community, echoing Ellis’ view that “finding a large body of the like-minded armors me with the nearly undampenable enthusiasm of the born again” (234). Within the New Black Aesthetics, recalling the artistic labor of ancestors enables contemporary Black artists to connect with the roots of their aesthetic legacy.

Gorman adopts Ellis’ concept of rebirth as a poet and underscores its importance through ancestral dialogue. In the poem “WE WRITE,” she raises the fundamental question of why Black poets write at all. Her lyrical speaker answers,

We write
Because you might listen.
We write because
We are lost
& lonely,
& you, like us,
Are looking
& learning. (Gorman 182)

The verbs in this stanza capture the process and purpose of Black poetry. Poets write to communicate with both ancestors and contemporaries. All three—poets, ancestors, and contemporaries—are called to listen, observe, and learn from one another, extending the dialogue to future generations. When the lyrical speaker declares, “*May those laid to rest never leave us, / But lead us to rise*” (ibid.; original italics), the lines echo the mode of ancestral communication in “WHO WE GONNA CALL.” Gorman thus presents artistic ancestry as a source of guidance for healing intergenerational trauma.

A closer look at the “disturbatory”⁷⁵ character of the New Black Aesthetics reveals its connection to ghosts, Black poets, and processes of mental healing. In *Call Us*, Gorman invokes this disturbatory quality through the emotional turmoil her lyrical speaker experiences both individually and collectively. She builds her work on disturbing events such as the Great Influenza, the Covid pandemic, racism, and war. Her poetry emphasizes the physical and psychological effects of these crises and explores how people confront grief and trauma. To connect human suffering to poetry, she defines the New Black Aesthetics by showing that “the scope of the poem results from the search, wandering and often anxious, of conjunctions of forms and structures that allow an idea of the world, expressed in the poem’s own place, to meet (or not) other ideas of the world. Writing draws the common places of the real together to found a rhetoric” (Glissant, *Treatise* 19). Writing thus becomes a search for new forms of poetic expression and interpersonal communication. At the same time, Gorman employs poetry to assert her identity as a writer, a task made more urgent by her own struggle with a speech impediment that once prevented her from pronouncing the letter R, for instance.

Gorman explains, “I began as a written word poet because I had a speech impediment. And so I typically depended on all of those kind of instruments that you can use on the page to communicate” (“Amanda Gorman with Elizabeth Alexander” 00:09:46–55). Her expressive style shows how she transformed this weakness into a powerful tool. By describing “the power of art as the language of the people” (Gorman and Obama 63), she underscores her awareness of poetry’s impact. In times of political upheaval and change, she uses poetry to place contemporary issues in dialogue with ancestral history. This dissertation chapter argues that her style mirrors the social and psychological disturbance of her subject matter. In *Call Us*, she appropriates diverse media—newspapers, billboards, diaries, and social media—to expand the reach of her poetic voice.

Call Us links the social impact of racism and pandemics by framing racism as a facsimile of a “pandemic” or “viral sickness.” By confronting readers with the traumatic effects of the Covid pandemic, Gorman challenges the historical practice of assigning value to individuals and races by dominant institutions such as abusive administrations or White supremacies. DuPlessis supports this view, noting that “[v]alue . . . is contingent, mobile, and situational, not perfectly absolute. Who

⁷⁵ See Ellis, p. 239.

supports, who disseminates, and how affiliations are made and unmade all contribute to value” (58). The Covid pandemic overrides “race values” by affecting all societies regardless of race. Yet DuPlessis also shows that outside crisis situations, value often reinforces racial hierarchies. In this context, *Call Us* deploys poetry to oppose contemporary *necropolitics*, Achille Mbembe’s term⁷⁶ for systems in which dominant powers decide who deserves to live and who must die.

In their study “Corona A(e)ffects: Radical Affectivities of Dissent and Hope” (2021), Mattia Fumanti and Elena Zambelli expand Mbembe’s concept by framing the present within an “‘enduring time’ of intersecting pandemics, such as those produced by racism, capitalism, and speciesism” (Fumanti and Zambelli) They reject the idea of the Covid pandemic as an “‘unprecedented’ predicament” and instead treat it as part of a recurring human history (ibid.). Gorman echoes this argument in her poem “AT FIRST,” where she describes “*times / Unprecedented & unpresidential*” (sic Gorman 9; original italics). The Covid pandemic is unprecedented for the current generation, who had not faced such a crisis before. It is also unpresidential, marked by the absence of support from U.S. institutions under the Trump administration and by the abuse of political power during the pandemic.

The poem’s opening also recalls the communicative challenges African slaves faced after being torn from their cultural and linguistic homelands. Captives from different tribes could not communicate because they spoke different languages. The lyrical speaker captures this loss of expression, remembering that

AT FIRST

There were no words for what we witnessed.
When we talked to each other,
Our sentences were stilted
& stalled as a telegram. (ibid.)

The poem describes a fractured dialogue that challenged the first generation of slaves. Unable to communicate across languages, Africans endured both silence and the trauma of captivity. From a necropolitical perspective, *Call Us* expresses Mbembe’s life-death binary through language, focusing on slaves’ (un-) ability to communicate

⁷⁶ Duke University Press introduces Mbembe’s work as a critical perspective on “the contemporary world, a world plagued by ever-increasing inequality, militarization, enmity, and terror as well as by a resurgence of racist, fascist, and nationalist forces determined to exclude and kill. [Mbembe] outlines how democracy has begun to embrace its dark side – what he calls its ‘nocturnal body’ – which is based on the desires, fears, affects, relations, and violence that drove colonialism. . . . [Mbembe’s] new conceptions . . . encounter the Other not as a thing to exclude but as a person with whom to build a more just world” (“Necropolitics”).

or their response-ability. Gorman secures her own ability to respond by pursuing “the Modernist legacy of materialist experimentalism and Language-oriented writing,” a hallmark of the New Black Aesthetics (Sewell and Ali 1). The poem’s title merges into the stanza, reconnecting to Gorman’s concept of the arborescent. Read without the title, the line suggests a singular first experience. Read with the title, it expands into observances unfolding across temporal spheres and multiple generations.

Gorman sets each stanza of “AT FIRST” in a separate speech bubble to highlight the poem’s polyvocal and intergenerational character. This visual design underscores the dialogue across generations (see 10–11). One speaker builds on the first voice, observing that

We began to lose words
As trees forget their leaves in fall.
.....
The phrases that remained
Were their own violence. (Gorman 10)

The metaphor connects pandemics that decimate populations with the enslavement of Africans, which destroyed native communities. Enslaved Africans were forced to neglect and forget their languages. Gorman uses the image of leaves to show that captured Africans are human leaves “falling” onto slave ships. Yet like leaves, they regrow in a natural cycle while the genealogical stem endures. Komunyakaa praises this aesthetic continuity, arguing that there is “this necessary juncture in African American creativity ... An internal dialogue is possible through metaphorical inquiry that is highly political and enduring, an inquiry that continuously reinvents itself” (qtd. in Leonard 21). Gorman extends this arborescent metaphor to represent ancestral connections and shared memory. While the lyrical speaker claims to be lost for words in the first half of the poem, it ends with an apology “. . . for the long text; / There are no small words in the mouth” (Gorman 11). These lines capture the physical suffering and generational trauma that continue to shape the descendants of enslaved Africans.

Poet Elizabeth Alexander asks how Gorman uses music to cope with communicative challenges. Gorman describes music both as a cure for her speech impediment and as a tool for shaping her poetic style. She explains that “[o]ne of the ways . . . that I would work on my kind of speech pathology to overcome my speech impediment was to read poetry, was to listen to rap and try to kind of read with the cadence of those poets in . . . spoken word orders” (“Amanda Gorman with Elizabeth Alexander” 00:16:14-31). *Call Us* reflects this influence by incorporating musical elements disguised as poetry, as seen in the poem “FUGUE.” The piece echoes “AT

FIRST” through its dialogical structure. In music, a fugue is polyvocal and marked by recurring, slightly altered passages. For Gorman, this structure translates into cadence. She defines cadence as “[t]he patterning of rhythm in natural speech, or in poetry without a distinct meter (i.e., free verse)” (“Cadence”). In “FUGUE,” cadence works as an audiovisual device. Audibly, it highlights the lyrical speaker’s declarative voice. Visually, punctuation enforces emphasis on the lyrical speaker’s statements.

“FUGUE” offers a further collective perspective on the Covid pandemic, echoing Fumanti and Zambelli, who describe affective behavior “emerging in the moment of reckoning with one’s dissent with the world-as-experienced” (Fumanti and Zambelli). The poem opens with a declarative appeal to the reader to “[not] get us wrong” (Gorman 12). Its communal voice demands “the reader to just listen” to the poet (Smith and Schwartz 184). Gorman draws on Tracy K. Smith’s call to educate audiences about overlooked archival materials written by Black contemporaries, adapting this intention to her own work.

Gorman uses the poem “FUGUE” to stress the parallel between viral infection and racism, noting that “There was another gap that choked us: / The simple gift of farewell” (Gorman 12). The act of farewell deepens the sense of loss. Gorman links this absence to the transatlantic slave trade, where Africans were forced into farewells at the moment of abduction. The lyrical speaker insists,

Don’t get us wrong.
We do pound for what has passed,
But more so all that we passed by –
Unthanking, unknowing,
When what we had was ours. (ibid.)

Colons and hyphens dominate the punctuation of the first three stanzas, reinforcing the poem’s declarative tone and tying the urgency of the statement to affect.

Gorman’s testimony as a witness of the Covid pandemic aligns with Joseph Harrington’s concept of documentary poetry. Harrington argues that docupoets “use . . . verse on occasion, often verse that is very linguistically inventive and affecting” (Harrington). Gorman reflects this approach in *Call Us* by grounding her poems in affect-driven behavior, as “FUGUE” shows. The term derives from the Latin *fuga*, meaning “flight” or “refuge.” The poem mirrors this meaning as its stanzas shift from single-line sentences to run-on sentences, enjambments, and sparse punctuation, particularly in the middle section. This formal shift conveys the escapist urge created when the pandemic confined people to their homes. Gorman extends this lesson to White supremacists, forcing them to recognize that pandemic confinement resembles

the racial confinement historically imposed on Black people. In both cases, escape is impossible because the threat outside—whether racism or disease—remains constant.

Although confined by their Blackness, Black Americans also seek refuge in their bodies and identities, hoping to survive the “race pandemic” without losing their sense of self. Global crises like the Covid pandemic intersect with the history of racism, making “History flicker . . . in / & out of our vision” (Gorman 13). The lyrical speaker explains that “In such eternal nature, / We spent days as the walking dead” (ibid.). Here, the walking dead embody ancestors as living memory, ensuring that memory endures. Yet the lyrical speaker asks, “. . . who has the courage to inquire *what if?*” (14; original italics). The question forces reflection: What if the race pandemic cannot be overcome? What if racial toxicity persists? By posing the question “what if,” Gorman echoes Claudia Rankine, who frames an entire poem around this question in *Just Us*. Rankine asks how social change can be pursued so that peaceful racial coexistence becomes possible. Her introductory poem “what if” begins with the lyrical speaker asking

What does it mean to want
an age-old call
for change
not to change

and yet, also,
to feel bullied
by the call to change? (5)

Like Rankine, Gorman juxtaposes the desire for an acknowledged personal and racial identity with the discomfort of exclusion in a racist social environment. She links this condition to the concept of racial liminality.

The poem “WAR: WHAT, IS IT GOOD?” portrays racism as a viral threat against which Black poets declare war. It frames racism as a liminal factor while extending the metaphor of racism as a virus. Poets of the New Black Aesthetics use poetry as missiles, believing that “[t]he moral imperative of being black in America enrapt us [poets] with a militant juju that wards off cynical minimalism” (Ellis 239). References to military resistance and warfare dominate the poem, since they are like “A virus . . . fought inside us” (Gorman 124). In *Call Us*, racism is an internal struggle. Gorman emphasizes that Black writers do not struggle against their race but with it, using poetry as a coping mechanism for racist experiences. The lyrical speaker insists that racially motivated “Hate is a virus. / . . . / Hate only survives when hosted in humans” (ibid.). Like a pandemic, this threat must be controlled through isolation and

disruption of communication channels. Gorman shows this parallel directly: “The first step in warfare & pandemics is the same: / Isolation, to rupture the channels of communication of / virus/violence” (119). Writing becomes both weapon and cure, as Black poets insist on truth-telling and spreading hope (123), aiming to raise national morale (121).

The lyrical speaker concludes that “Writing our stories / Is an essential service. / It is how we go to war” (122). Black poets use poetry as intellectual warfare, alternating between retreat from ideological attacks by White supremacists and militant poetic response. “WAR: WHAT, IS IT GOOD?” translates the physical threat Black Americans face into poetry. Glissant calls this the “art of flight” (*Treatise* 16). Gorman links this to “FUGUE,” since poetic retreat mirrors seeking refuge, the literal meaning of “fugue.” In this way, New Black Aesthetic art juxtaposes opposites: writing as refuge and writing as attack. Glissant explains that “translation teaches us the thinking of evasion, the practice of the trace, which . . . points the way to the uncertain, the threatened, which come together and strengthen us” as Black poets (*ibid.*). When the lyrical speaker asserts, “If we are to give [writing] anything, / Let it be our sorrow / & never our skin” (Gorman 124), poetry emerges as a mental cure for the race virus.

The Covid pandemic obliterates race by reducing infection to a biological process that affects all humans equally. Gorman even appears to “praise” the pandemic for ignoring race and focusing on human bodies as viral carriers. *Call Us* presents “affectivities of disorientation and liminality emerging amid the COVID-19 pandemic, encompassing fears of a return to ‘normality,’ reminiscences of the silenced past, and hope in what can come afterward” (Fumanti and Zambelli). Roy Underwood Plummer, an African American writer and soldier in France during World War I, embodies these same concerns about what defines normality.

In the poem “*The Soldiers (or Plummer)*,” Gorman creates a documentary piece that tells Corporal Roy Underwood Plummer’s story through archival materials rearranged as poetry. She prefaces the poem with an introduction that highlights his self-awareness, noting that “he often crosses out or corrects / himself, as if aware that someone else will be reading his work” (Gorman 103). This framing adds authenticity to her archival use. Fumanti and Zambelli’s concern with the “return to ‘normality’” (Fumanti and Zambelli) echoes in Plummer’s account, where he observes that interracial interaction between genders “. . . within / the limits of this camp is strictly

/ prohibited” (Gorman 104). His testimony shows that even in war, racism persists in the U.S. Army, despite Black and White soldiers fighting to defend the same homeland.

Arranged in a form that alternates between prose poetry and haiku, Gorman copies Plummer’s war diary, creating a documentary poem in Harrington’s sense. Harrington defines documentary poetry as work that “(1) contains quotations from or reproductions of documents or statements not produced by the poet and (2) relates historical narratives” (Harrington). In *Call Us*, Gorman creates doubles of Plummer’s diary, since both recall a pandemic within a warlike context. In “*The Soldiers*,” she modifies his writing by transforming it into her own haikus, yet the haikus still echo Plummer’s voice. By building this bridge between her present and his past, she composes a dialogue that links their individual histories.

With her haikus, Gorman responds to Plummer’s diary prose. He records that the

Epidemic of Spanish Influenza has been
raging. We now have 4 men in hospital
with it and 7 men are said to have died
in one night of it. (Gorman 105)

Gorman responds in the next stanza with a haiku. The words are her own but spoken in his voice:

We hear men coughing
Then the stiff, loaded silence
Of coughing no more. (ibid.)

The haikus scattered through the poem follow the traditional three-line form and syllable pattern, as she clarifies in a footnote⁷⁷ (116–17). Gorman also alters the poem’s visual appearance to foreground Plummer’s presence while keeping her own voice in the background. “*The Soldiers*” is one of the few titles set in bold italics rather than capitals. She uses a different font and also creates a palimpsest, printing her text over scans of Plummer’s diary pages so that his handwriting remains visible. In doing so, she enacts what DuPlessis describes as the desire for “a real poet/a person really sincerely and authentically speaking to us directly. . . . We want to feel feeling and even personality” (62). Gorman thus joins Plummer’s voice as both poet and editor.

⁷⁷ In her footnote to the poem, Gorman explains that “[t]he prose portions are [Plummer’s] original diary entries, while the verses are my own creation, where I imagine new writings. In writing in Corporal Plummer’s voice, I wanted to do so in a form that embodied his concise language. The lined papers used as a background in this piece are scans of blank pages in Plummer’s original diaries. The haiku was particularly fitting – many of Plummer’s entries are one to three sentences, & the haiku is three lines, their five-seven-five syllable pattern demanding an economic use of language” (Gorman 116-17).

By adding haikus while preserving his text, she keeps his personality intact and leaves him in possession of his words.

By imitating Plummer's voice, Gorman demonstrates how memory is preserved through language and transmitted across generations. In this context, the poem "WHAT WE CARRY" reactivates the ark metaphor first introduced in the poem "ANOTHER NAUTICAL." The lyrical speaker defines the ark as "a boat like that which preserved Noah's family & / animals from the flood. The word comes from the Latin / word *arca*, meaning 'chest,' much like the Latin word / *arcere*, 'to close up, defend, or contain'" (Gorman 202; original italics). This dual meaning ties to the claim in the poem "WAR: WHAT, IS IT GOOD?" that Black poetry is both refuge and warfare. It offers security for Black poets while also serving as a verbal defense against hate. To paraphrase the title of *Call Us*, what the Black poet carries is the intellectual and verbal strength of a collective, one still trapped in the metaphorical cage of White supremacist ideology.

Beyond its confining connotation, the cage also shields captives from external harm, making them like a "caged bird sing . . . / with a fearful trill / of things unknown / but longed for still" (Angelou). By referencing Angelou, Gorman incorporates her idol into her poetry and reexamines the cage from a supremacist perspective. Her lyrical speaker responds that "The oppressor will always say / the oppressed want their over- / crowded cage, cozy & comfort- / ing as it is" (Gorman 84). The image in "WHAT WE CARRY," which metaphorically unclips Angelou's bird's wings, recalls Gorman's own portrayal in *TIME* magazine⁷⁸. Glissant reinforces this expressive approach, arguing that "[t]he proportion of the means of expression and their adequacy are stronger than mere proclamation" (*Treatise* 19). His claim mirrors Gorman's stylistic range, which blends poetry with audiovisual elements.

In *Call Us*, language functions as both preservation and protection. "Words matter, for / Language is an ark" (Gorman 203) and "a life raft" (204) that carries memory across generations. Through this vessel, Gorman juxtaposes "The past & present, paired & paralleled" (203), since "we have decided to / Remember" (204). The ark becomes a protective cage moving with the tide of Black poetry, flooding racist language and ideology like a virus to be destroyed. She addresses what Sewell and Ali define as "the problems of mimetic language, the need to resist the false singularity of lyric subjectivity and the cultural construction of the raced and gendered

⁷⁸ See p. 171 of this dissertation.

self” (11). Accordingly, Gorman employs a polyvocal lyrical speaker to represent Black individuality and reveal the many dimensions of a communal Black voice.

Language in *Call Us* functions as a metaphorical treatment for the race virus and the grief it produces. In the poem “GOOD GRIEF,” Gorman frames grief as its own language, since “Grief commands its own grammar, / Structured by intimacy & imagination” (Gorman 28). She links grief to renunciation, distinguishing between external loss and voluntary surrender, which implies agency. By doing so, she translates grief into a psychological language that enables survival. The poem shows how Black poets transform grief into an emotional response central to their art. Glissant describes “[r]enunciation when the poem, transcribed into another language, has given up the greater part of its rhythm, its secret structures, its assonances, these accidents that are the chance and the permanence of writing” (*Treatise* 16). Gorman echoes this paradox, portraying grief as both a reminder of loss and a tool for healing. Thus, the lyrical speaker insists, “The hurt is how we know / We are alive & awake; / It clears us for all the exquisite, / Excruciating enormities to come” (Gorman 28). Emotional hurt threatens to shatter the self, yet sharpens awareness of future possibilities altered by loss.

Gorman appeals to the survival instinct of grievers by showing how hurt clears the mind for rational evaluation. Inspired by the Covid pandemic, she asked people about their experience of grief. Many instinctively avoided grief to shield themselves from further harm, a response she links to exhaustion and fatigue. As she explains, “they really just wanted to focus on this moment of feeling liberated, feeling kind of rejuvenated at last” (“Amanda Gorman with Elizabeth Alexander” 00:05:25-33). In the poem “GOOD GRIEF,” the lyrical speaker reframes grief as a source of strength, declaring, “All that is grave need / Not be a burden, an anguish. / Call it, instead, an anchor, / Grief grounding us in its sea” (Gorman 29). For Gorman, the deepest fear is erasure from communal memory, and *Call Us* emphasizes the Black poet’s ability to resist this loss through erasure poetry. The lyrical speaker insists that

. . . . The key to constructive—& not
Destructive—erasure is to create an extension instead of
an extract. It’s not erasure, but expansion, whereby we
seek the underwriting, the undercurrent beneath the
watered surface of the words. . . .

. . . Hereby the pen looks to enhance, evoke,
explore, expose the bodies, the truth, the voices that have
always existed but have been exiled from history & the
imagination. In this case, we erase to find. (90)

This passage challenges the assumption that erasure destroys. Instead, erasure becomes expansion, selecting and amplifying passages of significance while disregarding those that obscure meaning⁷⁹.

Call Us argues that the Covid pandemic erases race by infecting people regardless of affiliation, offering the “potentialities of learning to practice – in and through the pandemic – more equal, inclusive relationalities within and across species” (Fumanti and Zambelli). The poem “_ _ _ _ _ [GATED]” translates social distancing during Covid into the tradition of “generations quarantined, / Exiled from the places of each other” (Gorman 141). In doing so, Gorman links the pandemic’s isolation to generational trauma produced by White supremacy. The lyrical speaker illustrates coping mechanisms both in the poem “GOOD GRIEF” and also in “_ _ _ _ _ [GATED],” where racism appears as a haunting that turns into a hunt: “To be haunted is to be hunted / By a history that is still hurting” (ibid.). Social distancing as viral containment becomes a metaphor for racial exclusion. The lyrical speaker clarifies that “distance from society – social distance – / is the very heritage of the oppressed. Which means to / the oppressor, social distance is a humiliation” (145). This passage exposes the internalized racism of White supremacists and shows how racialized social norms replicate across generations.

Despite its lethal nature, the lyrical speaker welcomes the Covid pandemic because it forces White supremacists “for once [to wear] the chains their power / has shackled on the rest of us” (144). Like all others, they must follow rules to contain viral spread. Gorman connects “social distancing” to the segregation ideology of the 1960s. The visible word “gated” in the poem’s title points to enclosed social groups or “gated communities” that shield themselves against imagined outside threats. If the missing letters are read as S E G R E, the title transforms into “segregated,” extending social distancing into racial segregation. The lyrical speaker asserts, “& just like that, through poetry, / We have recalled what was not ours” (141). Here, poets of the New Black Aesthetics claim the white page with Black art to show that “Art, if fact, / Is both a method & a finding” (146).

The issue of racial distancing and the Black poet’s mission to claim White space directly ties to identity and identification. Gorman addresses cultural identity by presenting New Black Aesthetic poetry as both a preservation of cultural memory and a tool for healing generational trauma. To portray American authenticity, she employs

⁷⁹ For a definition of erasure poetry, see dissertation chapter 2, “Erasure,” p. 87.

analogy, using pandemic contexts as synonymous with the viral nature of American racism. Her work encourages readers to view racism from multiple perspectives, linking her approach to the other poets discussed in this dissertation. Chapter 1 shows Terrance Hayes exposing America's attachment to violence against racial minorities. Chapter 2 demonstrates how Tracy K. Smith reveals America's deliberate destruction of its environment and its effect on society. Chapter 3 uncovers America's constructions of Whiteness and their roots in racist sentiments. Together, these poets portray a realistic image of contemporary America. In this respect, the "New Black Aesthetic says you just have to *be* natural, you don't necessarily have to *wear* [an identity]," as Ellis argues (236; original italics). This is the attitude Gorman pursues in *Call Us*.

Gorman's work questions the validity of the term "identity" and instead emphasizes "identification" shaped by both Blackness and Americanness. Identity describes individuals or groups through personal, cultural, and social characteristics, while identification is a continual process of recognition and formation. This process depends on validation by both the self and by the social entities one interacts with. Throughout *Call Us*, Gorman demonstrates her effort to understand diverse perspectives on the issues her poetry addresses. Recognizing other viewpoints helps her recognize herself and her role as a poet of the New Black Aesthetics, thereby promoting interracial social bonds. Considering that "NBA artists are . . . defining blacks in black contexts – so we are no longer preoccupied with the subjects of interracial . . . integration" (238), Gorman seeks to liberate Black Americans from the White gaze, from internalized racial stereotypes, and from what W. E. B. Du Bois defines as *double consciousness*.

In *Call Us*, the pandemic context frames masks as veils or shields against contamination and harmful external forces. Gorman uses the motif of the mask not to conceal or invent another identity but to block the contaminating effect of the White gaze on the Black psyche. The poem "ANONYMOUS" views masking as restriction. Set in the shape of an operation mask (see 180), it critiques the persistence of racism alongside the necessity of wearing masks during the Covid pandemic. When Paul Laurence Dunbar writes, "We wear the mask that grins and lies" (Dunbar), Gorman alludes to him as one of her artistic Black ancestors. Her lyrical speaker claims the mask functions like the ark and Angelou's cage: protective containers that shield and preserve within the broader framework of *Call Us*.

Gorman reevaluates Du Bois' concept of double consciousness to create a contemporary awareness that embraces both Blackness and Americanness without White ideological contamination. Du Bois inspires her approach to Black self-perception in "a world which yields [them] no true self-consciousness, . . . this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (Du Bois 2). Yet Gorman seeks to reconfigure double consciousness to achieve social conformity across all races that constitute American society. Central to understanding cultural interdependence, Glissant stresses

[t]he thought of hybridity, . . . of cultures of hybridity, which perhaps save us from the limitations or the intolerances that lie in wait for us, and will open up for us new spaces of relation. (Treatise 7; original italics)

Gorman's use of the mask motif connects to Paul Jay's debate on the authenticity of postcolonial cultures and traditions. Jay argues that "[a]ll 'authentic' cultures . . . are the products of contamination" and shaped by "contemporary disruption of traditional cultures by the forces of globalization," including the transatlantic slave trade and its racial legacy (62). In *Call Us*, pandemic references serve as metaphors of this cultural contamination. They stress how Gorman redefines social and national identification without race as the central marker. Jay further proposes colonization itself as a cultural contaminant, whose acknowledgment is essential for a nation-state to embrace a multifaceted identification that includes but is not limited to race.

The myth of cultural purity⁸⁰ persists as the imagined reality of White supremacists, who cling to supposed racial superiority and express it through violence. To exemplify the timelessness of such violence, Gorman recalls the 1919 race riot in her poem "DC PUTSCH." The riot took place "within the / shadow of the dome of the Capitol, at the very front door of the White House" (Gorman 100-01). Both a shape poem and an erasure poem, it is set in the form of the Capitol building and borrows its text from James Weldon Johnson's report "The Riots: An N.A.A.C.P. Investigation"⁸¹. As part of the Red Summer of 1919, the riot highlights the manipulative tactics of White people. "DC PUTSCH" thus becomes an example of a New Formalist approach, showing how "political forms impose their order on our lives, putting us in our places" (Levine 16). These forms "add up to a complex environment composed of multiple and conflicting modes of organization" (ibid.). For instance, White newspapers such

⁸⁰ Jay quotes Kwame Anthony Appiah, who argues that "'[c]ultural purity' . . . 'is an oxymoron'" (62).

⁸¹ Johnson first published his article in the magazine *The Crisis* in 1919, as Gorman notes in a footnote (see Gorman 101).

as the *Washington Post* intentionally manipulated readers with inflammatory headlines.

In his article, Johnson recalls that “[a]s I passed through the cars on my way to the diner and back, men and women glanced up at me with what seemed to be a look of mild surprise” at seeing a Black man present where the riot occurred (241). He also expresses surprise “to find the colored people . . . calm and determined, unterrified and unafraid” (242). Gorman alters this testimony by erasing the negating prefix, so the lyrical speaker declares, “we found us terrified & afraid” (Gorman 101). At the time, President Wilson sent troops to suppress the 1919 riot, since the local police refused to intervene. In stark contrast, President Trump incited his supporters to assault the Capitol in 2021. Thus, Gorman concludes “DC PUTSCH” by reflecting that “worse” than the 1919 race riot “might have been a riot / protected by the law” (ibid.). As president, Trump was supposed to embody righteousness and democracy, yet he instead confirmed Gorman’s fear by sanctioning the attack on the Capitol.

In response to “DC PUTSCH,” Gorman juxtaposes it with the poem “AMERICA™” to counter Trump’s threat to democracy with a vision of national unity. Opening with “*A house divided cannot stand. To be divided, then, is to be devastated*” (154; original italics), the poem recalls Abraham Lincoln’s warning that slavery fractured the House of Representatives⁸². Gorman extends this critique to modern politicians who remain ideologically divided on race, warning that such division risks anarchy. “AMERICA™” is a shape poem in the form of the U.S. flag, its text embedded in the flag’s stripes (see 154). Within this structure, the lyrical speaker critiques racial labeling: “From the beginning, the colonized are kennings: / African American, Asian American, Native American (apparently / There is no White American). American & adjective, American & / Qualifier” (ibid.). A kenning, drawn from Nordic literary traditions, combines an affiliation with a qualifier, often as alliteration. Gorman applies this device to colonized peoples, turning racial minorities into stylistic figures that embody beauty and cultural depth. By doing so, she argues that these groups shape the racial diversity of American society. Du Bois similarly praises their cultural value, asserting that “there are today no truer exponents of the pure human spirit . . . than the American Negroes; there is no true American music but

⁸² In his “House Divided” speech on June 16, 1858, Lincoln addressed the Republican State Convention of Illinois. He declared, “[a] house divided against itself can not stand.’ I believe this government can not endure permanently, half slave, and half free. . . . I do not expect the Union to be dissolved. I do not expect the house to fall; but I do expect it will cease to be divided” (Lincoln).

the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave; the American fairy tales and folk-lore are Indian and African” (7).

Gorman uses “AMERICA™” to interrogate the definition of Whiteness. The poem identifies all other races, yet never names a “White American.” This omission raises the question: Is *American* itself synonymous with *Whiteness*? If so, Whiteness must also function as part of the racial kennings the lyrical speaker lists, suggesting inevitable mixtures such as African Whiteness or Asian Whiteness. This logic exposes “cultural purity” as a false construct. What is often called purity is instead “cultural authenticity,” a utopian vision of Whiteness that cannot exist. Jay clarifies this point, noting that “the traditional distinction between authenticity and contamination does not hold, because cultural forms and practices often deemed to be authentic are in fact the product of contamination” (61). His claim aligns with *Call Us*, which affirms racial hybridity as the foundation of American authenticity.

Glissant’s concept of the trace reappears in this context, as it “enables us to move away from the strangulations of the system. . . . It opens onto these diffracted times that human communities today are multiplying among themselves, through conflicts and miracles” (*Treatise* 10; original italics). Gorman echoes this idea in her “ARBORESCENT” poems, where the trace signifies generational and interpersonal ties in American society. In “AMERICA™,” the trace also points back to the transatlantic slave trade, when humans were reduced to goods. The trademark symbol in the title underscores how race in contemporary America remains commercialized. The lyrical speaker presses the point with a direct appeal: “Do you really understand what it is to be this dispensable body” (Gorman 154). Here, Gorman insists that racial minorities continue to be treated as objects of trade and disposal.

Jay proposes countering the commercialization of marginalized groups through an ideological shift from racial barriers to intercultural exchange rooted in shared histories. He argues that if we

think of globalization more broadly as characterized by a complex set of intercultural encounters facilitated by successive historical shifts in forms of travel, communication, exploration, conquest, and trade that periodically accelerate in ways keyed to technological, economic, and political change, then globalization in our own time will appear to be *the extension of relationships with a long and complex history both within and outside the West*. (34; my emphasis)

Gorman echoes this view in the poem “THE HILL WE CLIMB,” urging America “To compose a country committed / To all cultures, colors, characters, / And conditions of

man” (Gorman 207). Written for Joseph Biden’s presidential inauguration in January 2021, the poem positions her as a representative of American poetry and cultural heritage. Her performance underscored this role, as she honored African and African American women’s traditions by wearing her signature yellow coat, a red hair band symbolizing racial pride, and a ring with an embedded caged bird in tribute to Angelou.

Additionally, the complex history Jay describes takes the form of a jeremiad in Gorman’s poem. Her verses call for social cohesion in moments of turmoil, written against the backdrop of Trump’s role in the Capitol assault only days before Biden’s inauguration. At the same time, the poem highlights the symbolic weight of the inauguration as a national act of reunification—between Democrats and Republicans, and between racial minorities and White Americans.

American identity is inseparable from the nation’s history, which turns the poem into a distinctly American message appealing to exceptionalism in the tradition of Winthrop’s sermon “A Modell of Christian Charity”⁸³. Gorman’s lyrical speaker insists that “. . . being American is more than a pride we inherit –” (208) and clarifies that “It’s the past we step into and how we repair it” (ibid.), warning that “A nation’s cold pride will kill” (161). By framing the U.S. as a binary of perfection and imperfection, Gorman argues that the privilege of being American requires effort and a duty to climb the hill toward a society capable of improvement, especially in its racial and social relations. In the manner of Tracy K. Smith, she appears as a bridge builder who believes “poetry could make us behave as our better selves when we are together with others” (“Art Works” 00:31:06-12). She mediates between contemporary struggles and ancestral memory, reminding her audience that “For while we have our eyes on the future, / History has its eyes on us” (Gorman 209). Her optimism points toward the future of American poetry as a vehicle for reconciliation and peaceful racial coexistence.

Although Gorman speaks of “A nation that isn’t broken, but simply unfinished” (206), she resists defining America as fractured. Instead, the first and final stanzas of “THE HILL WE CLIMB” form another binary. At the outset, the lyrical speaker remarks that

When day comes, we ask ourselves:
Where can we find light

⁸³ Chapter 3, “Documentation,” highlights the significance of Winthrop’s “A Modell of Christian Charity” in connection to Claudia Rankine’s *Just Us: An American Conversation*. Both Rankine and Gorman engage with Winthrop’s ideal of harmonious racial coexistence. He argues that members of a society depend on one another to sustain a healthy social organism.

In this never-ending shade? (ibid.)

Her final stanza responds with a reference to the poem “DC PUTSCH,” where racial violence unfolds within the shadow of the Capitol. Thus, “THE HILL WE CLIMB” closes with determination and appeal, because

When day comes, we step out of the shade,
Aflame and unafraid.

.....
For there is always light,
If only we’re brave enough to see it,
If only we’re brave enough to be it. (211)

Although meant as a hopeful conclusion to *Call Us*, the poem carries a combative tone that recalls Johnson, who describes Black people during the 1919 race riot as “determined, unterrified and unafraid” (242). This language highlights the gap between the utopian ideal of a peaceful America and its violent reality. The lines “What we might’ve been if only we’d tried. / What we might become, if only we’d listen” (164–65) underscore this contrast and foreshadow the final words of *Call Us* in the poem “THE TRUTH IN ONE NATION.” That poem confronts America’s violent nature, a truth reinforced by “DC PUTSCH” and “AMERICA™.”

Showing courage in what “we” might become as a nation, Gorman adopts another New Black Aesthetic strategy by “creating [her] own definitions of blackness” (Ellis 241). In *Call Us*, Blackness seeks a homelike space that provides agency and a refuge from the challenges of the outside world. The poem “THERE’S NO POWER LIKE HOME” echoes Du Bois’ emancipatory doctrines to promote personal identification. When the lyrical speaker in “THE HILL WE CLIMB” urges the reader to see and be, the poem responds to Du Bois’ claim that the Black poet must “attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another” (5). While affirming the necessity of self-consciousness, “THERE’S NO POWER LIKE HOME” reconsiders Du Bois’ concepts of the veil and double consciousness.

The poem links the veil to the mask, claiming that “Our mask is no veil, but a view. / What are we, if not what we see in another” (Gorman 19). Speaking as a Black woman and poet, Gorman envisions art as a tool to unite races and shape the future of Black poetry. Yet the challenge of persuading White supremacists to identify by nationality and affiliation rather than race lies in what Saidiya Hartman calls temporal entanglement. Quoted by Rankine in *Just Us*, Hartman defines this as “the sense of temporal entanglement, where the past, the present and the future, are not discrete and cut off from one another, but rather that we live the simultaneity of that entanglement”

(145). Gorman, Rankine, and Hartman all argue that races are bound together through generations of biological and ideological exchange. They insist that this shared history of entanglement negates any claim to racial superiority.

Gorman's idea of temporal entanglement aligns with what Glissant calls *rhizome-identity*⁸⁴. Like Gorman, Glissant rejects the notion of a single dominant root, such as race. Instead, he argues that no race is rootless but always connected to others. He addresses

a world where so many communities find themselves mortally denied the right to any identity, [where] it is paradoxical to propose the imagination of an identity-relation, an identity-rhizome. I believe however that this is indeed one of the passions of these oppressed communities, to believe in this moving beyond identity and to carry it along with their sufferings. (*Treatise* 12)

Glissant's view on the difficulty of forming an identity intersects with Jay, as both advocate for communities built on shared history and culture rather than race. They argue that identity remains incomplete until the process of identification itself is fulfilled. By questioning whether this process can ever be completed, they doubt the possibility of establishing a universal common ground. The poem "THERE'S NO POWER LIKE HOME" addresses this issue through Du Boisian self-consciousness and self-realization, which carry the relational struggles of past generations. The mask sharpens perception by forcing individuals to see their environment differently, but the lyrical speaker reflects, "Once we stepped into our home, / We found ourselves gasping, tear- / ing [the mask] off like a bandage" (Gorman 19). Gorman suggests reprogramming society to view others through national affiliation instead of race. At the same time, she emphasizes the necessity of a private sphere akin to the comfort of home, a place free from constant precaution against racism and the "viral" atmosphere it spreads.

Gorman implies that the external sphere outside the home is one of discomfort if the home signifies safety and comfort. Outside, racism causes her unease as a Black woman. In this context, the mask motif functions as precaution, protecting her against both racism and Covid. In *Call Us*, Covid becomes a metaphor of hate speech, where the lyrical speaker describes it "Like something that gauzed / The great gape of the mouth" (ibid.). Because everyone must wear masks to contain viral spread, the mask

⁸⁴ Glissant refers to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who develop the concept of the rhizome based on the botanical root system (see Glissant, *Treatise* 11). First a botanical term and later adapted by cultural studies, the rhizome connects multiple roots. Through this connection, plants grow into a single healthy ecosystem.

first protects the person with whom its bearer interacts. Medically, the mask confines the virus to the nose and mouth, since harmful particles originate in the respiratory tract. Yet even if the recipient also wears a mask, particles may still be absorbed through the eyes, bypassing the protective barrier⁸⁵.

As a result, people can only interact through visual perception. The lyrical speaker highlights a shared human fragility that disregards race. Gorman implies that racism, like a virus, harms both those who spread it and those who endure it. In the context of Covid and racism, she proposes that both challenges be approached through compassionate gestures. The lyrical speaker claims that

Even faceless, a smile can still
Scale up our cheeks,
Bone by bone,
Our eyes crinkling
Delicately as rice paper
At some equally fragile beauty – (ibid.)

Gorman emphasizes interconnectedness as the foundation of equality across races. She insists that this bond affirms shared humanity. To stress the need for a metaphorical mask, she echoes Glissant, who warns that “advertising one’s identity is nothing but uttering a threat if it is not also the measure of a way of speaking” (sic *Treatise* 19). He portrays identity as a process rather than a fixed state, which parallels the symbolic role of the mask in *Call Us*.

In the poem “DISPLACEMENT,” the lyrical speaker connects the mask motif to the history of racial struggle. The speaker notes, “It is only then that we can understand / How our distance from our worst selves / Is centuries & yet / We have not been displaced” (Gorman 149). To explain racist tensions in the U.S., Gorman distinguishes *displacement* from *distance*. She defines displacement as fact rather than problem, since “Displacement is merely the space between / Where an object starts & where it ends” (148). These lines allude to the abduction of Africans to America without reducing them to objects. Instead, displacement explains the forced relocation of Black people across the Atlantic. The “Distance” between African and American coasts “can / Distort our deepest / Sense / Of who / We are” (7). As part of the “ARBORESCENT”-series, this metaphor links human and cultural entanglement to

⁸⁵ The National Center for Biotechnology Information confirms Covid transmission through the eyes, noting that “coronaviruses (SARS-CoV-1 and 2) are mainly transmitted through direct or indirect contact with mucous membranes (eyes, mouth, or nose). Thus exposed mucous membranes including unprotected eyes increase the risk of viral transmission . . . Another . . . way for transmission can occur through direct coughs or sneezes reaching unprotected eyes” (Dawood).

ancestral memory. Ultimately, the poem frames displacement as historical, while distance becomes ideological—between Black and White in America, and between Black Americans and their cultural roots.

Ultimately, Gorman’s poetry traces both ethnic and cultural roots to expose the origins of racism in contemporary America and to seek more effective ways of confronting racial disparities. As a poet of the New Black Aesthetics, she demonstrates that

from the point of view of identity, the scope of the poem results from the search, wandering and often anxious, of conjunctions of forms and structures that allow an idea of the world, expressed in the poem’s own place, to meet (or not) other ideas of the world. Writing draws the common places of the real together to found a rhetoric. (Glissant, *Treatise* 19)

In the poem “THE HILL WE CLIMB” (206), Gorman seeks a poetic language that unites peoples and races, specifically addressing America and the world. She emphasizes the “poem & how it runs / Through the body before leaving / Us something slightly more than we were” (149). These lines echo Du Bois, who speaks of “this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self” (2). In “DISPLACEMENT,” the lyrical speaker affirms that the human race is inherently equal. For Gorman, categorization depends not on skin color but on the struggle with inner values.

Seeing barbarity and greed entangled with goodness in the same individual, the lyrical speaker reflects that

According to legend,
There are two wolves inside us:
One half that must be fought
& one that must be fed.
One that must fall
& one that must never fail. (Gorman 149-50)

To transcend the past self and balance one’s internal instincts, Gorman frames distance as awareness of past interracial struggles. This model survives through trauma-induced memories, whether drawn from personal experience or inherited across generations. Ultimately, “Our disgust is a measurement / Of distance, a distaste for what was,” defining distance as a temporal measure (150).

With *Call Us*, Gorman envisions a symbolic exchange shaping the future of the New Black Aesthetics and Black poetry. Malcolm Waters links social relationships to culture, which “facilitates ‘symbolic exchanges’ through ‘oral communication, publication, performance, ritual, entertainment,’ and narrative” (qtd. in Jay 56).

Gorman fulfills these aspects in her work as a poet. Du Bois frames the Black poet's role around "the contradiction of double aims": resisting White contempt for liberal Blackness while uplifting the Black community (3). He notes the paradox of the Black intellectual, whose "knowledge . . . [is] a twice-told tale to his white neighbors" yet "Greek to his own flesh and blood" (ibid.). Gorman translates this paradox in the poem "AUGURY or THE BIRDS," where the lyrical speaker explains that "In ancient Rome, augurs were official diviners / . . . / Their job was not to prophesy the future, / But to determine if their new-named gods / Approved of an action before it began" (Gorman 176). Gorman embodies the augur as an in-*augur*-al poet, a figure of hope for Black Americans, and a voice for a peaceful future. Speaking on behalf of Jill Biden—who recommended her—Gorman appeared as Joseph Biden's inaugural poet. In this role, she reclaims the authority of the ancient augurs.

"AUGURY or THE BIRDS" comments on the struggle of earlier Black artists to "articulate the message of another people, [i.e., White people], . . . seeking to satisfy two unreconciled ideals" within one society (Du Bois 3). When Gorman shares the inaugural stage with the new president, she mirrors her lyrical speaker, who declares, "We inaugurate our dreams at the injury. / We consecrate at the cut" (Gorman 176). These lines connect to the concept of entanglement, first introduced with "DC PUTSCH," and underscore textual parallels across *Call Us*. Unlike the poems "DC PUTSCH" and "AMERICA™," which expose riots and threats to democracy, the poem "AUGURY or THE BIRDS" casts the Biden administration as a remedy for the ideological, cultural, and political wounds left behind. For Gorman, the future of Black poetry depends on building an ideological framework that unites all races. She stresses that this vision requires sacrifice, since "Courage must cost / us something, or else it is worth / nothing at all" (85).

I conclude with Gorman's hopeful vision for the future of Black poetry and interracial relations in the United States. A brief comparison with the poets in the previous chapters clarifies how she positions herself as an aspiring voice of the New Black Aesthetics alongside her more experienced poet colleagues. Gorman occupies a distinct position within the framework of this dissertation because her experimentation with visual and shape poetry simultaneously converges with and diverges from the formal strategies employed by Hayes, Smith, and Rankine. Like Smith, Gorman integrates archival material to recuperate overlooked or deliberately erased historical voices; however, while Smith emphasizes absence and silencing through the technique

of erasure, Gorman foregrounds presence by assigning semantic weight to the visual dimension of the poem. In her work, the page itself becomes a space of cultural memory where the formal arrangement of words produces meaning beyond language. This orientation resonates with Hayes's appropriation of the sonnet and Rankine's blending of lyric and documentary prose, yet Gorman distinguishes herself by turning poetic form into performance. Her shape poems enact recognition not only at the level of discourse but also at the level of visual design, underscoring her conviction that poetic form itself can embody and transmit cultural memory.

At the same time, Gorman's poetry differs from that of Hayes, Smith, and Rankine in its pronounced future orientation. Hayes reworks the inherited weight of the sonnet tradition in order to interrogate racial violence; Smith reanimates Civil War archives to expose processes of historical erasure; and Rankine stages contemporary interracial encounters as a means of exposing constructions of Whiteness. By contrast, Gorman fuses these modes of historical recovery and social engagement with a sustained emphasis on possibility and futurity. Her visual experimentation functions not only as a critical intervention in established traditions but also as an imaginative act of projecting alternative futures. In this respect, Gorman both synthesizes and extends the aesthetic impulses of the other poets: she adopts Hayes's formal subversion, Smith's archival curation, and Rankine's dialogic engagement, while simultaneously redirecting these strategies toward a performative poetics of hope and democratic renewal. Thus, Gorman's work suggests a generational shift within the New Black Aesthetics, one that underscores the continuity of historical memory while insisting on its capacity to shape collective futures.

Conclusion

This dissertation has examined how poetry of the New Black Aesthetics redefines poetic form, interrogating traditional understandings of poetic form in connection to contemporary racial relationships and power structures in the U.S. Through close readings of Terrance Hayes, Tracy K. Smith, Claudia Rankine, and Amanda Gorman, this study has shown a fourfold approach to poetics of recognition. It has demonstrated how poetics of recognition disrupt dominant White perspectives on U.S. history by counteracting the erasure of Black people's contributions to this history through poetry, reflecting a new racial (self-) consciousness. By situating these exemplary poets within the framework of twenty-first century Black poetry studies and New Formalist literary theory, this dissertation contributes to discussions on the intersection of Black poetry, its social function, and its redefinition through the lens of New Formalism.

One of the key results of this dissertation is that poets of the New Black Aesthetics challenge poetic conventions that are traditionally considered as White. They use a refined Black perspective on past and present racial struggles in the U.S. combined with experimental poetic form. This dissertation analyzes Hayes' approach to a contemporary form of the Black sonnet in *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* and illuminates Smith's erasure poetry recovering African American memory in *Wade in the Water*. Moreover, Rankine's documentary poetry approach is to transform constructions of Whiteness and racial imbalance in *Just Us: An American Conversation*, whereas Gorman's visualization of poetry is to form racial identities devoid of supremacist indoctrination in *Call Us What We Carry*.

This dissertation shows how these poets weaponize Black poetry to claim power over racial self-determination, the curation of their cultural heritage, and their acknowledgement as Black writers. These poets' experimental lyrical approach to structurally disrupt conventional poetry forms is inextricably intertwined with New Formalist critique and historical revisionism, emphasizing the idea that poetic form itself is a political tool in the literary body of the New Black Aesthetics. These results propose that New Black Aesthetic poetry should be examined for its critical content regarding racial, social, and political issues and further consider how their poetic structures resist White supremacy. By redefining poetic parameters, these poets design a platform for oppressed, overlooked, and erased histories, challenging traditional paradigms of American poetry.

This dissertation has examined the role of the Black archivist in New Black Aesthetic poetry, showing how archival practice mediates racial history through rectification and the recovery of suppressed voices. Poets such as Smith and Gorman draw on cultural memory, silence, and historical records to challenge White constructions of U.S. history, reframing the “true” racial past from marginalized perspectives. Hayes and Rankine, in turn, employ poetry as a “practice” of interracial encounters, foregrounding experimentation as a defining feature of the New Black Aesthetics. The study has demonstrated that the archival and intertextual strategies pursued by these poets function simultaneously as aesthetic choices and acts of resistance. By incorporating overlooked documents and neglected testimonies, they memorialize the victims of racial oppression while actively resisting the dominance of White ideology. This double function—tribute and resistance—underscores how New Black Aesthetic poetry works within and against the archive to reframe historical narratives.

My research contributes to a deeper understanding of the New Black Aesthetics as a dialogue that reshapes historical and cultural memory through the inclusion of voices once silenced. Hayes, Smith, Rankine, and Gorman act as interracial mediators: they reclaim African American cultural memory through archival intervention, while also creating poetic forms that reflect hybrid racial identities. The emergence of hybrid structures, such as the New Black Aesthetic sonnet, illustrates how these poets both inherit and transform tradition. Ultimately, this dissertation has emphasized that the incorporation of archival material is never merely an artistic gesture. It is also a political act that redefines U.S. race relations by exposing erasures and asserting new historical truths. Through their work, the poets of the New Black Aesthetics enact both preservation and reinvention, ensuring that American poetry becomes a space where suppressed histories are not only remembered but reimaged.

These findings show that the structural innovations of New Black Aesthetic poetry—revision of historical narratives, poetry as visualized recognition, and the use of New Formalism as racial empowerment—cannot be separated. They work in concert. By merging form and politics, poets of the New Black Aesthetics create narratives that capture the complexity of history, communal memory, and identity in contemporary U.S. society. This dissertation has demonstrated that the interaction between formal experimentation and textual meaning is central to the art of contemporary Black poetry. Stylistic innovation and ideological resistance remain

inseparable, defining the “newness” of the New Black Aesthetics through the intersection of racial identity and cultural production. The variety of narrative voices across the four poetry volumes analyzed here reflects the contested nature of both racial and American identity. U.S. history emerges not from harmony but from friction, from the collision of opposing voices. Poets of the New Black Aesthetics make this friction visible and ask their readers to reconsider dominant White narratives. In doing so, they open the possibility of a more inclusive historical vision—one that refuses erasure and works toward eliminating racial disparity.

Beyond analyzing the mechanics of experimental forms—the contemporary Black sonnet, erasure poetry, documentary poetry, and shape poetry—this dissertation has also questioned their broader significance for studies of the New Black Aesthetics. The integration of multiple experimental strategies demonstrates that contemporary Black poetry resists dependence on inherited Western conventions. Instead, poets of the New Black Aesthetics invent new structural modes that reflect decolonized Black worldviews long marginalized in the Western canon.

This invention subverts established White frameworks for interpreting Black poetry. It asserts the authority of Black poets and reclaims historical truth. By emphasizing both individual and communal experience, these poets foreground racial identities and cultural memories that complicate and expand the field of contemporary race discourse. In highlighting the formal subversions at the core of New Black experimentalism, this dissertation contributes to a broader understanding of how Black poetry negotiates power. At the intersection of form, race, and memory, New Black Aesthetic poetry generates resistance through historical revision and cultural reimagination.

While this dissertation has offered detailed insights into historical revisionism and cultural production in the New Black Aesthetics, several questions remain. The field itself is complex and still underexplored, and this study has focused specifically on poetry. The choice of theoretical frameworks that could be applied consistently across all four poets further narrowed its scope. As a result, some dimensions of how these poets’ critiques of race and social inequality affect the American consciousness beyond the poetic text remain unresolved. Identifying such gaps is crucial. They open pathways for future research and sharpen our understanding of the innovations and developments shaping contemporary Black poetry.

Given that all of the poets discussed in this dissertation address the significance of loss, future research can further illuminate the evolution of the elegy in Black poetry. The elegy has a long and evolving tradition in American literature, functioning as a vehicle for mourning, memory, and cultural reflection. From early colonial eras to the Romantic and Modernist periods, poets have used the elegy to navigate personal loss while also engaging with larger social and historical questions. In American literature, the elegy often carries dual purposes: it memorializes the dead while interrogating the conditions of life, identity, and society. This dual function resonates strongly with contemporary African American literature and the New Black Aesthetics, where the elegy becomes both personal and political. New Black Aesthetic poets, such as Natasha Trethewey and Tyehimba Jess, employ elegiac forms to recover erased histories, giving voice to ancestors, silenced communities, and overlooked cultural contributions.

The elegy's traditional focus on grief and remembrance is expanded in these works through what can be called "literary hybrids"—blends of poetry, historical documentation, and experimental form that resist conventional boundaries. By merging personal mourning with historical reclamation, lyrical hybrids transform the elegy into a tool for cultural critique, historical intervention, and formal innovation. In this context, the elegy serves the New Black Aesthetics' goal of redefining Black identity as multifaceted and historically rooted. It demonstrates that mourning can be both intimate and a method of asserting cultural memory. This hybrid approach highlights the continuing relevance of the elegy as a dynamic, adaptive form in contemporary African American poetry.

Examining the works of Hayes, Smith, Rankine, and Gorman shows that each poet extends the elegiac tradition through innovative formal strategies and contemporary concerns. Hayes blends lyricism with experimental structures to explore personal and collective loss. Smith merges elegy with speculative and historical dimensions, mourning both intimate and national traumas beyond *Wade in the Water*, particularly in collections like *Life on Mars* (2011). Rankine incorporates prose poetry, visual fragments, and documentary materials to create hybrid elegiac forms that confront racial violence and social injustice. Gorman's work, though often public and performative, invokes elegiac notions to memorialize both historical and contemporary struggles while inspiring communal reflection. Further studying these poets in the context of the elegy allows scholars to trace how the elegy in Black poetry

has expanded beyond mourning the individual to encompass layered histories, social critique, and hybrid forms, offering rich intersections between tradition and innovation in the New Black Aesthetic framework.

One unresolved key issue is the definition of the term “New Black Aesthetics.” This dissertation has analyzed contemporary Black poetry primarily through the lens of Postcolonialism and the lingering influence of colonial structures in modern societies. Yet it could not conclusively establish whether the New Black Aesthetics constitute a distinct poetic movement or whether they merge with other frameworks such as Postmodernism or Afrofuturism. The focus here remained on the intersection of Black poetry with Postcolonialism and New Formalism. Still, Postmodernism’s emphasis on ideology and power, as well as Afrofuturism’s vision of future-oriented Black art, point to promising opportunities for further study.

A second open question concerns how the New Black Aesthetics engage with intersecting and inclusive identities. This dissertation has shown moments where race overlaps or collides with gender and social power in everyday contexts, but the broader impact of New Black Aesthetic poetry on such intersections remains uncertain. Future research is needed to evaluate how racial identity interacts with poets’ gender, class, and lifestyle, and how poetry itself becomes a medium for cultural and economic inclusion. Addressing this question, however, would have gone beyond the thematic scope of the present study.

Another unresolved issue concerns the relationship between the New Black Aesthetics and the Black Lives Matter movement. The poets analyzed in this dissertation frequently gesture toward the aims and practices of Black Lives Matter, raising the question of whether the New Black Aesthetics should be read solely as an artistic phenomenon or also as a vehicle for racial activism. This question emerges from the poets’ recurring references to contemporary racial violence, the erasure or falsification of Black memory, and the realities of social exclusion. The findings of this study suggest a strong resonance between the mission of Black Lives Matter—pursuing Black liberation through self-determined art—and the revisionist and culturally invested work of New Black Aesthetic poets⁸⁶. Further research could clarify the depth of this connection and explore how poetry contributes to the political and activist aims of the movement.

⁸⁶ See “About Black Lives Matter.” *Black Lives Matter*, blacklivesmatter.com/about/.

Further research on the New Black Aesthetics in connection to Black Lives Matter shows that contemporary Black art specifically functions as a form of artistic activism, directly engaging with the political and social realities of Black life. New Black Aesthetic artists use poetry to recover silenced histories, critique systemic oppression, and redefine Black identity through hybrid, experimental forms. This approach aligns closely with the aims of the Black Lives Matter movement, which seeks to combat police brutality, racial profiling, and structural racism while affirming the value of Black life. Black Lives Matter emphasizes public witnessing, storytelling, and cultural mobilization to demand accountability and social change—strategies mirrored by New Black Aesthetic poetry.

Poets like Rankine and Hayes adopt hybrid forms that mix lyric, documentary, and fragmented narratives to bear witness to racial violence and the lived experiences of Black Americans. By doing so, New Black Aesthetic poetry transforms private grief and historical memory into public testimony, echoing the insistence of Black Lives Matter on visibility and justice. In this sense, poets' artistic activism is not merely aesthetic: it intervenes and creates spaces for reflection, dialogue, and cultural awareness while contributing to the broader struggle against racial inequality in contemporary society.

Addressing these unresolved questions is essential for advancing scholarship on the New Black Aesthetics and for shaping the future of Black art and its inclusion in American literature. Clarifying the terminological scope of the New Black Aesthetics could not only refine close reading practices but also encourage distant reading methods that account for poets' increasing use of intertexts and archival databases. Further exploration of the intersections of race, gender, and economic capital could also inform humanitarian institutions in their efforts to promote racial justice and Black liberation in the United States. Finally, resolving the activist potential of the New Black Aesthetics would help bridge the divide between cultural expression and the lived realities of racial injustice—realities at the center of Black Lives Matter critiques. Such work would advance the broader discourse on how New Black Aesthetic poetry reframes creativity itself as a form of political agency.

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Deutschsprachige Zusammenfassung

In dieser Dissertation wird untersucht, wie die New Black Aesthetics lyrische Formen neu definieren. Dabei werden traditionelle Sichtweisen auf lyrische Formen hinsichtlich zwischenmenschlicher Beziehungen unterschiedlicher Ethnien und Machtstrukturen Amerikas kritisch hinterfragt. Close Readings der Lyrik von Terrance Hayes, Tracy K. Smith, Claudia Rankine und Amanda Gorman betrachten die Dichter vor dem Hintergrund der „poetics of recognition,“ um zu zeigen, wie sie dominierende Weiße Perspektiven zur amerikanischen Geschichte unterminieren und künstlerische Beiträge von Afroamerikanern bezüglich ihres ethnischen Selbstbewusstseins hervorheben. Anhand des theoretischen Modells des New Formalism wird der Einfluss afroamerikanischer Lyrik des einundzwanzigsten Jahrhunderts untersucht, wodurch Beziehungen dieser Lyrik zu ihrer sozialen Funktion und Neudefinition beleuchtet werden.

Dichter der New Black Aesthetics stellen traditionelle westliche lyrische Formen infrage, indem sie neue lyrische Formen entwickeln, die präzise die historische Vergangenheit und Gegenwart rassistisch motivierter Auseinandersetzungen in der amerikanischen Gesellschaft zeigen. Hayes' Werk *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* „schwärzt“ das ursprünglich westlich geprägte Sonett. In *Wade in the Water* untersucht Smith anhand von Erasure Poetry vergessene historische Erinnerungen von Afroamerikanern. Rankine stützt sich auf Documentary Poetry, um in *Just Us: An American Conversation* Weißen Machtstrukturen und ethnischem Ungleichgewicht auf den Grund zu gehen. In *Call Us What We Carry* visualisiert Gorman durch experimentelle lyrische Formen ethnische Identitätsbildung. Indem diese Dichter Lyrik zu ihrer rhetorischen Waffe machen, beanspruchen sie ethnische Selbstbestimmtheit, die Restaurierung ihres kulturellen Erbes sowie ihre Wertschätzung als afroamerikanische Schriftsteller. Durch ihre experimentelle Lyrik brechen Dichter mit strukturellen lyrischen Konventionen und zeigen die enge Bindung von New Formalism und Geschichtsrevisionismus. Dadurch wird argumentiert, dass lyrische Form im Rahmen der New Black Aesthetics ein politisches Werkzeug ist.

In thematischer Hinsicht fokussiert diese Dissertation die Rolle afroamerikanischer Dichter in deren Funktion als Archivare der Lyrik der New Black Aesthetics. Sie „korrigieren“ die amerikanische Geschichtsschreibung, indem sie

gezielt über archivierte historische Dokumente in der Form von Intertexten in ihren Werken reflektieren, um unterdrückte Sichtweisen zu zeigen und Lesern zugänglich zu machen. Dieser Ansatz zeigt, dass das Einbauen archivierter Materialien in Lyrik einerseits als ästhetisches Mittel zu verstehen ist, aber andererseits ein Akt des Widerstandes aus einer marginalisierten Perspektive gegen herkömmliche, westliche Geschichtsschreibung ist. Folglich sind Dichter der New Black Aesthetics als ethnische Mittelpersonen zu verstehen, die durch ihre Lyrik der Verfälschung ihrer Darstellung in der Geschichte und Gesellschaft Amerikas entgegenwirken. Um ihre Rolle als ethnische Mittler zu festigen, erschaffen sie in ihrer Lyrik hybride ethnische Identitäten durch ebenso hybride lyrische Formen, wie zum Beispiel anhand des afroamerikanischen Sonetts.

Diese Dissertation zeigt, dass die strukturellen Neuheiten der New Black Aesthetics eng ineinander verwoben sind, wie das lyrische Revisionieren historischer Narrative, Lyrik als visualisierte Form des (Wieder-) Erkennens und der New Formalism als Ansatz für den gesellschaftlichen Aufstieg afroamerikanischer Dichter und der ethnischen Minderheiten, die sie repräsentieren. Daher fokussiert die Lyrik der New Black Aesthetics die komplexen ethnischen und ideologischen Verzweigungen (afro-) amerikanischer Geschichte und Identität im Kontext der sozialen Strukturen der gegenwärtigen U.S.-Gesellschaft. Grundlegend für gegenwärtige afroamerikanische Lyrik ist das Zusammenspiel von Form und Inhalt der Texte, die eine enge Verbundenheit von experimentellem Stil und ideologischem Widerstand seitens der Dichter demonstrieren. Diese Dissertation argumentiert, dass sich gegenwärtige afroamerikanische Lyrik folglich als Ort der Korrelation von ethnischer Identität und kultureller Produktion versteht, was letztendlich die „Neuheit“ der New Black Aesthetics ausmacht.

Die experimentellen Eigenschaften der New Black Aesthetics zeigen sich anhand von verschiedenen formalen Herangehensweisen—wie das afroamerikanische Sonett, Erasure Poetry, Documentary Poetry und Shape Poetry—um die Standardisierung traditioneller westlicher Lyrik anzufechten. Anstatt konventionelle Dichtungsformen zu reproduzieren, erschaffen Dichter der New Black Aesthetics neue strukturelle Ansätze, durch die sie dekolonisierte, afroamerikanische Weltanschauungen fördern und durchsetzen, die von traditionellen Konstruktionen westlicher Lyrik tendenziell übersehen, wenn nicht ignoriert werden. Diese Dissertation zeigt daher zum einen, dass die Lyrik der New Black Aesthetics formale

Umbrüche konventioneller, westlicher Dichtungen durch experimentelle Strukturen fördert. Darüber hinaus trägt sie diskursiv zu Erörterungen bei, wie essenzielle Verknüpfungen von afroamerikanischer Lyrik, ethnischer Macht- und Handlungsfreiheit und historischem Revisionismus als politischer Widerstand zu verstehen sind.