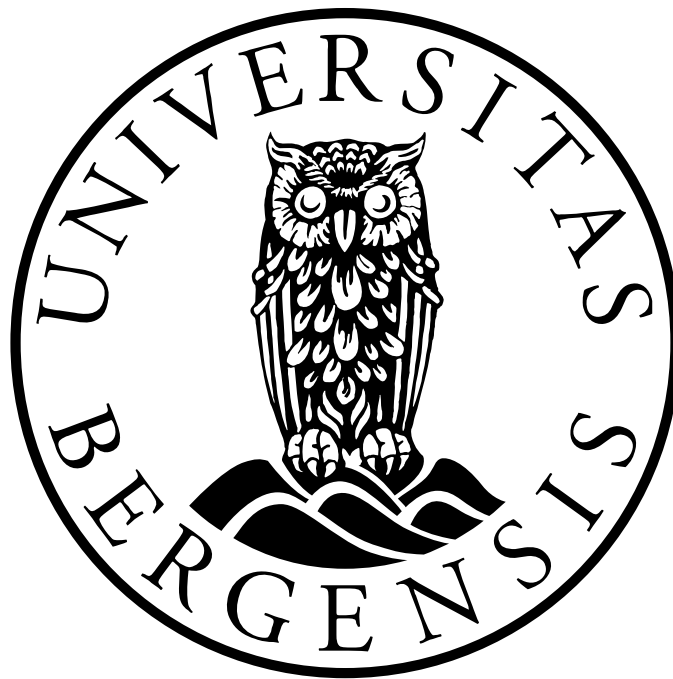


Rhythm and Rhyme

The Political Aesthetics of the Jazz Poetry of Langston Hughes and Yona Harvey

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Sammendrag

Denne oppgaven utforsker jazzens estetiske uttrykk i poesi og hva den politiske meningen bak denne jazzen betyr. Med dette som basis ser jeg på jazzpoetene Langston Hughes (1902-1967) og Yona Harvey (1974-), og sammenligner hvordan de to former poesien sin ved bruk av jazz. I tillegg til dette drøfter denne oppgaven hvordan den estetiske betydningen av jazz i poesi har endret seg i tidsløpet fra jazzpoesi først fremkom til i dag, samt den politiske meningen som blir kommunisert av disse estetikkene. Videre tar oppgaven for seg i mindre grad likhetstrekkene mellom blues og jazz når de formes i poesi, samt ulikhetene.

Det første kapittelet tar for seg den teoretiske innfallsvinkelen, som er basert på Jacques Rancière sin ide om hvordan sanseinntrykkene til hvert enkelt individ spiller inn i deres verdensbilde, samt hvordan de utformer og bruker estetikker. Rancière argumenterer for at all estetikk, på det mest fundamentale, er politisk som følge av de sosiale omstendighetene til hvert enkelt individ. Utover dette diskuterer kapittel én også diverse trekk som forekommer i jazz, hvordan disse kan forekomme i poesi, og hva hvert enkelt trekk kan bidra med å kommunisere.

Kapittel to diskuterer poesien til Langston Hughes med å se konkret på diktene «The Weary Blues,» «Saturday Night,» «Early Evening Quarrel,» og «Dream Boogie.» Av disse er to av diktene mer bluesrelaterte enn jazz og tar for seg en fremstilling av legitimitet, mens de to andre viser til jazztrekk og hvordan disse i de utvalgte diktene brukes til å påpeke et sosialt skille.

Det tredje kapittelet diskuterer den første publiserte samlingen til Yona Harvey, *Hemming the Water* (2013), og ser på hvordan denne samlingen behandler jazz mindre som en estetikk som må kjempes for, og mer som en allerede akseptert del av poetens arv. Kapittel tre ser også på hvordan *Hemming the Water* nytter ett rammeverk som fremstilles i form av prosa. Disse rammeverkene etablerer flere av samlingens metaforer og troper.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iii
Sammendrag	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Jazz and the Politics of Aesthetics	13
Swing and the rhythms of jazz	15
Syncopation.....	16
Polyrhythm and Call and Response	17
Blues.....	19
Chapter 2: The Poetry of Langston Hughes.....	25
The Weary Blues.....	25
Saturday Night.....	37
Early Evening Quarrel.....	49
Dream Boogie	57
Chapter 3: <i>Hemming the Water</i>	69
(Girl With Red Scarf).....	72
Notes on Polyphony	74
The Riot Inside Me.....	80
Communion with Mary Lou Williams	87
Conclusion	99
Works Cited	104

Introduction

Once you free your mind about a concept of “Harmony” and of music being correct, you can do whatever you want. So, nobody told me what to do, and there was no preconception of what to do. – Giovanni Giorgio Moroder

Within American culture, there is a particular form of music, a particular aesthetic, which has been referred to as “America’s classical music” (Taylor 1986). This aesthetic, or form, is, of course, jazz. In spite of this, this particular musical form was seen as “underdeveloped” and “uncivilized” for quite some time, and as a result, the form came to be looked down upon and even to some degrees repressed. Two primary factors were behind the repression of jazz. Firstly, its performers were primarily of African American descent during a time where racial segregation in the US was nearing its peak. Secondly, the form of jazz itself draws upon aesthetic traits from Africa and African culture; traits such as polyrhythm, call and response. With an essence of statement – repetition – revision manifested through improvisation and artistic freedom, jazz sprang up from humble roots in New Orleans, gaining traction in the period from 1913 to 1917 before spreading north (DeVeaux 74). A likely primary influencer in the movement of jazz was the “Great Migration.” From 1916 to 1970, some 6 million African Americans moved from the rural South to the industrialized North, settling in the Mid-Atlantic region, the Midwest, and the West coast (“Great Migration”). New York and Chicago were amongst the cities where the migration was the highest, and would see their African American population increase exponentially during this period. Initially met with a reception ranging from contempt to light disdain from the white population of America, the popularity of jazz exploded with the Harlem Renaissance, and with this popularity the art at last managed to grab the fleeting attention of white Americans. While the “Jazz Age” waned, the lasting influence of the aesthetic did not. The roots of jazz run deep, and its arms reach further still. Experimentation and evolution are core tenets of jazz, and one of its branches would develop into bebop, which in turn has laid the foundation for hip-hop (DeVeaux 55).

However, the reach of jazz and its experimentation is not limited to just music. Its aesthetic found footing in other works of art, namely literature and poetry, where an equal amount of experimentation occurred.

The aim of this project is to argue for the existence of a political jazz heritage in poetry. In order to support this claim, this thesis will examine a number of poems by Harlem Renaissance author Langston Hughes (1902-1967) and contemporary Black Lives Matter poet Yona Harvey (1974-). The two poets hail from different generations, seventy years apart, yet they both still display a similarity in their employment of specific jazz traits; a kind of fascination with the rhythm and style of jazz. This fascination has carried jazz poetry into the present, and there is no indication that jazz poetry will be fading. It is, however, changing. Harvey is far from the only contemporary poet who still deploys jazz; nevertheless, she has been specifically selected due to three central factors. Firstly, Harvey is an outspoken activist of the Black Lives Matter movement, making both herself and Hughes activists of social reform movements. Secondly, Similarly to Hughes, Harvey has participated in the creation of art outside of poetry. Whereas Hughes also wrote novels, Harvey has together with Ta-Nehisi Coates (1974-) co-written several volumes of Marvel's reboot of the *Black Panther* comic series ("Yona Harvey: Comics"), thus increasing her literary repertoire and range. The final reason for Harvey's selection is that there is a difference in her use of jazz aesthetics from Hughes', making her poetry not only unique and distinct, but also displaying how jazz poetry is far from stagnant – experimentation remains key. Hughes' selection for this project seems natural. Hughes has been credited as the inventor of jazz poetry (Sanders 99) and his collected poems, ranging from 1921 to 1967, provide ample material for the purposes of analysing a personal as well as stylistic development.

Born to poverty in Missouri in 1902, Hughes would go on to publish several poems, short stories, and essays praising jazz – its roots and aesthetics – actively introducing them

into his own works. Hughes published his first poem, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” in 1921 and found himself at the precipice of what would soon come to be known as the Harlem Renaissance. While “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” does carry a repetitive structure with reliance on a statement and subsequent repeat, it is uninflected and comparatively standard by western norms in terms of presentation – it is not a jazz poem. According to Professor Sascha Feinstein, “jazz poems must be jazz-related. They must be poems which have undoubtedly been informed by the music and which, either in content or presentation, emphasize the influence of jazz” (Feinstein 34). Professor of Music Hao Huang, in paraphrasing Feinstein, poses the questions:

Should any poetry regarding or alluding to jazz performers or music be considered jazz poetry? Is authenticity achieved in jazz poetry only by directly referring to the rhythm, structures, and improvisational techniques of jazz music? To paraphrase the jazz critic Sascha Feinstein, the answer to all these questions is a qualified yes.

(Huang 9)

This project will lean more on the paraphrased definition provided by Huang than the original one posited by Sascha, and as such, jazz poetry in this project is to be understood as poetry which refers to the thematic or structural aspects of jazz.

Jazz, along with poetry inspired by it, was popularized during the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance has no clearly defined beginning or end, but it is generally considered to have lasted from 1924 to 1935, ending with the Harlem race riot, though some sources claim its beginning as early as 1917. Similarly, the movement had lost much of its traction prior to the 1935 race riot (Jackson 241-47). As the movement flourished, the manner in which the arts were employed, their political purpose one might say, began to diverge into separate camps as two opposing opinions came to prevalence. It is no particular surprise that the movement would come to diverge, as the Renaissance was “never a cohesive

movement. It was, rather, a product of overlapping social and intellectual circles, parallel developments, intersecting groups, and competing visions” (Hutchinson 1). And so opinions were formed regarding the depiction of African Americans and their usage of the arts. Some contributors of the movement, perhaps most notably W.E.B. Du Bois, desired a cleaner, more sterile interpretation of African American life; an image that would “lift the race” (Bernard 35-36). Opposite this, Claude McKay and Langston Hughes believed that was that to “whitewash” African American life would bring neither justice nor change, and that the core experience of the African American, the man to whom these aesthetics ‘belonged,’ was the “low-down folks” (Hughes 1994, 56). These competing visions of (re)presentation are most visible in the interaction between McKay and Du Bois regarding McKay’s publication of his 1928 novel *Home to Harlem*.

In his review of McKay’s novel, Du Bois found *Home to Harlem* to be ““nasty, brutish, too long, and largely unhygienic”” (Du Bois, qtd. in Maxwell 170). In stating that the novel ““nauseates me, and after the dirtiest parts of its filth I feel distinctly like taking a bath”” (Du Bois, qtd. in Maxwell 170), Du Bois displayed his conservative stance to McKay and the public. McKay is reported to have replied with a letter to Du Bois questioning the philosopher’s credentials as both author and critic, stating ““I should not be surprised when you mistake the art of life for nonsense and try to pass propaganda as life in art”” (McKay, qtd. in Maxwell 170). *Home to Harlem* strived to represent the life of the ‘low-down’ folks, and the conflict its publication enabled displayed a subject matter discussed by Langston Hughes in his 1926 essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” Aligning himself more with the opinion of McKay than Du Bois, Hughes displays a desire for representation of the working-class and the poor, and communicates this through his love of jazz;

They live on Seventh Street in Washington or State Street in Chicago and they do not particularly care whether they are like white folks or anybody else. Their joy runs,

bang! Into ecstasy. Their religion soars to a shout. Work maybe a little today, rest a little tomorrow. Play awhile. Sing awhile. O, let's dance! These common people are not afraid of spirituals, as for a long time their more intellectual brethren were, and jazz is their child. They furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations. (Hughes 1994, 56)

With his essay, Hughes takes upon himself the task of discovering why one may find the separate opinions presented by McKay and Du Bois' conflict. Hughes presents a hypothetical situation in which a middle-class African American, as a result of their upbringing, ends up devaluing African American traditions and aesthetics. Hughes takes issue with these attitudes, desiring of both artist and consumer to find in their ethnicity not a wish for whiteness, but pride and beauty (Hughes 1994, 59). Hughes in particular saw beauty in jazz, finding it to be

one of the inherent expressions of negro life in America: the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile. (Hughes 1994, 58)

Hughes' description of jazz, with its eternal tom-toms, displays his understanding of the structure and politicization of the art form. The phrasing of "pain swallowed in a smile" is no coincidence either. In all likelihood this phrasing is inspired by Frederick Douglass statement that "slaves sing most when they are most unhappy" (Douglass 19) and demonstrates Hughes' awareness of his literary heritage. In time, Hughes would come to lead by example in the philosophy described in "Negro Artist;" a philosophy of taking pride in black aesthetics, and changing that ever so silent whisper of "I want to be white" (Hughes 1994, 59) to "I am a Negro—and beautiful!" (Hughes 1994, 59).

It is reasonable to assume that the middle-class artist taught not to find beauty in his own people – who would rather heed to these Caucasian patterns – is Du Bois. Hughes and Du Bois must have had an established relationship by 1926 (prior to the publishing of “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”), as Du Bois was the editor of *The Crisis*. *The Crisis* was a monthly magazine founded by Du Bois, where Hughes published several of his poems; including his first, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” Du Bois personally oversaw each edition of the magazine, and “nothing was published in *The Crisis* that did not meet Du Bois’ exacting standards” (Bernard 35), which indicates that Du Bois actively participated in censorship. It is reasonable to assume that the two may have had disagreements regarding Hughes’ aesthetics (and Du Bois’ potential censorship) when taking into consideration Hughes’ more artistically liberal stance and Du Bois’ position as editor of *The Crisis*. This assumption, combined with Du Bois’ previously discussed stance on *Home to Harlem* makes it reasonable to argue how Hughes might have had explicitly Du Bois in mind when writing “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” Hughes in particular was someone who was devoted to working-class African Americans, the ‘low-down folks,’ and endeavored to represent them and their experiences in his poetry. Jazz and its aesthetic were of particular interest to him, not only due to its origins in folk traditions, but also due to how it carried itself through working-class African Americans, both literally with the race migrations of 1917 and metaphorically with the messages and themes of the songs.

Integrating the vernacular language of said migrators and coupling it with jazz in his works, Hughes “reclaimed dialect, invented jazz poetry, and celebrated the blues, all in service to a broader, deeper, and more complex rendering of African American life” (Sanders 99). A definition of the term “vernacular” is necessary to understand how vital it is to the politics of Hughes’ jazz poetry. In the African American context, “vernacular” is a term carrying an implicit, heavy weight. As explained by distinguished scholar Houston A. Baker

in his work *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, vernacular refers to “a slave born on his master’s estate” (Baker 2). In the context of African American culture and society, vernacular is a term that carries with it the history of the nation; it is a sign of difference (Gates XIX). It is also worth remarking what the use of vernacular signifies in Hughes poetry: In the ‘sign of difference’ visible through vernacular in Hughes’ poetry is found pride in his heritage as an African American.

Hughes’ art and the manner in which he celebrated his culture and heritage are recognized well past the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes spoke loudly and clearly for social justice, and one of his best known poems, “Harlem,” has been said, perhaps excessively so, to have foreshadowed the Civil Rights movement. Hughes would go on to publish poetry, novels and children’s rhymes well through the Civil Rights movement until his death in 1967, yet his heritage as the “inventor of jazz poetry” remains. Hughes himself would go on to develop and refurbish the aesthetic and his personal usage of jazz in poetry throughout his life, keeping pace with contemporary musical developments. An example of this development is visible in his 1951 collection *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, in which poems such as “Dream Boogie” and “Jam Session” draw upon bebop. In the time between the end of the Harlem Renaissance, and 1965 however, it could be argued that Hughes was writing in something of an echo chamber. After the decline of the Renaissance, African American aesthetics and jazz would once again “go out of vogue” until it was resuscitated by the ‘Black Arts Movement’ (1965-1975). The Black Arts Movement is considered to have been established in 1965 by artist Amiri Baraka’s opening of the Black Arts Repertory Theater in Harlem. Baraka’s establishment of the movement was prompted by Malcolm X’s assassination in 1965 and the subsequent division of the Black Power Movement into the “Black Panther Party” and the “Cultural Nationalists,” with the latter calling for “the creation of poetry, novels, visual arts and theater to reflect pride in black history and culture” (Foster).

The movement reinvigorated the artistic nature that had previously been seen in the Harlem Renaissance, and jazz became the focus of the movement's euphonic side; "cultural nationalists saw jazz as a distinctly black art form that was more politically appealing than soul, gospel, rhythm and blues, and other genres of black music" (Foster). The movement was, however, not free of criticism, and much of the art put forth emphasized violence and hyper-masculinity. In time, the movement began to fade, but it had laid the foundation of hip-hop as well as lift several prominent artists of the movement to lasting fame.

Jazz was once again a central artistic contributor during the Black Arts Movement, and it would come to influence a further generation of jazz poets such as Michael S. Harper (1938-2016), Morgan Parker (D.O.B. Unknown), and Yona Harvey. The focus on jazz in the Black Arts movement, some fifty years after its inception and its superior position over other forms of African American music shows us that jazz is important. Jazz has remained a constant in African American culture. It is a manner of speaking developed by African American traditions. In 1987, Congress passed a resolution declaring jazz a "valuable national American treasure," finally acknowledging the artform (DeVeaux 53). However, the phrasing of this resolution is important; "American treasure." Not African American, but American. The distinction is important. In terms of jazz, its practitioners, roots, and message are very vividly African American in nature, and declaring the art form as American implies assimilation – an annexation of the art. When jazz was in vogue, it came to be assumed as American. Prior to this, it was not American – it was undesirable. This "annexation" could be interpreted as an (unwitting) attempt to "take away" its heritage. Confrontations against such annexation is visible in poems "Saturday Night" and "Dream Boogie." These poems enable a discussion around a "political jazz heritage." In order to understand the implications behind a political jazz heritage, it is important to clarify what is meant by this. The political jazz heritage may be understood as a set of traits of African origin acting as a form of coping

mechanism, formulated in the vernacular, providing praise and critique to both internal and external societies, that is to say, African American society, and white society. Stating that jazz may be seen as a coping mechanism is a strong statement; however, Hughes put it best when saying that it is “pain swallowed in the smile” (Hughes 1994, 58). This phrasing is extremely important in understanding jazz. Moreover, jazz heritage is also to be understood as the capability of the art and the aesthetic to be employed for the purpose of social commentary. For the purpose of comparing the politics of jazz heritage in two separate timeframes, the works of contemporary poet Yona Harvey will be the focal point of chapter three.

One gap remains yet to be filled: is jazz inherently to be associated with African American culture? The New Orleans style of Jazz stems from a combination of ragtime – its short-lived predecessor, brass bands, and blues (DeVeaux 58-72). In addition to these forms of musical presentation, specific jazz traits include “call and response,” “spirituals” (an evolution of the call and response), “field hollers,” and “work songs.” DeVeaux argues that these traits enable what he calls a “simple but provocative assertion” (DeVeaux 54); jazz in its New Orleanian form is a distinctly urban form of music, yet its distinctive marks qualifying it as “different from other musical genres stem directly from its folk origins. More often than not, those folk resources are African American” (DeVeaux 54). Jazz is thus an African American music. This statement is important in acknowledging not only jazz and jazz heritage, but also why it is such a peculiarly important aesthetic within African American cultural movements. A repressed aesthetic carrying these traits of African culture inadvertently became the spearhead for the first major African American cultural movement – The Harlem Renaissance. Twice since then, the aesthetic has been selected to speak for social movements, first with the Black Arts Movements, and second, as this project will

argue by proxy of Harvey's collection *Hemming the Water* – in the Black Lives Matter movement.

Founded in 2013, Black Lives Matters campaigns against police violence and the systematic racism against African Americans in the United States are victims of (“Black Lives Matter, About”). Harvey herself was an activist of the movement, and its colors are visible in her collection. The poem “The Riot Inside Me,” which opens with the lines “King’s body swallowed then released a black / boy’s spirit” (Riot 1-2) draws parallels between the Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter. Jazz aesthetics are an intrinsic part of how Harvey presents this connection, however jazz itself is not the ultimate goal or theme of *Hemming the Water*; the collection has a thematic focus centered around the trials and tribulations of ordinary people – the ‘low-down folks.’ The collection fuses jazz into its very structure, with which it “speaks to the futility of trying to mend or straighten a life that constantly changes. In [*Hemming the Water*], I attempt to redirect the disruptions of motherhood and domestic life by employing them through sound and rhythm” (“Artist Statement”).

Hemming the Water is a collection of poetry reliant upon a subset of images which are initially set up by the first and final pieces of the collection, acting as frames. These frames – “Girl With Red Scarf” and “Notes on Polyphony” – establish images relating to vocality, divinity, and water. Unlike the rest of the collection, these first and final passages mimic poetic prose rather than standard poetry, albeit the structure of individual poems varies. For example, several poems of the collection rely upon empty spaces to create meaning, while others insert musicality into themselves to lay a fundamental rhythm. The two merge into one in the poem “Hearing My Daughter’s Heartbeat the First Time,” wherein the rhythm of the poem is further tied into the image of water, as established by the framing devices. The theme of water is also addressed by the collection’s title: *Hemming the Water*. Through the motif of

water is communicated metaphors for music as well as the flow of time. In this usage of water, *Hemming the Water* draws parallels with Hughes' "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." In Harvey's "Communion with Mary Lou Williams," the "muddy water" (Communion 54) of the Nile as well as the Mississippi is used to signify an image of heritage and jazz, a development of how Hughes used these same rivers to state that his "soul has grown deep like the rivers" (Negro 4 & 13). First and foremost the image of the river, and with it, the motif of water, represents an image of time. The two poets rely on similar images to establish a sense of jazz and heritage, and ultimately is drawn upon by both Harvey and Hughes in how they shape and politicize their poetry. Both poets choose to use the jazz aesthetic to lend a voice to the ordinary 'low-down folks.'

Jazz' prevalence in cultural and political movements enables a discussion on the aspect of the political nature of an aesthetic. The idea of the politicization of aesthetics will be examined in greater detail through the lens of French philosopher Jacques Rancière (1940-) in the first chapter. Rancière has been chosen as his theory formulates a basis for political conversation by means of aesthetics, making it an apt fit in discussing jazz poems that speak of society, which Rancière establishes by means of presents his idea of what he calls the "distribution of the sensible." This distribution of the sensible is quite simply everything our senses are capable of picking up, and how we use this to extrapolate on our environments (Rancière 2004, 85). This is our basis of understanding, and it reflects how we construct aesthetic principles and our social distribution of power. Jazz, as an aesthetic, is very much based on the African American perception of the world around them. Rancière's concepts and the manner in which these ideas are relevant in this thesis will be further discussed in the following first chapter, alongside the technical musical aspects of jazz. The breakdown and analysis of each individual component of jazz will be based on Scott DeVeaux's *Jazz* (2009).

Whereas chapter one thus will focus on the technical aspects of jazz and the theoretical lens through which to decode them, the ensuing second chapter will cover Langston Hughes' poetry, focusing on the four poems "The Weary Blues," "Saturday Night," "Early Evening Quarrel," and "Dream Boogie." The selected poems differ in their explication of jazz, and in fact two of them rely more heavily on blues than jazz. The blues influenced poems – "The Weary Blues" and "Early Evening Quarrel" – have been chosen to exemplify how there may be a need for separation of blues and jazz in poetry, solidifying the argument that jazz carries a *unique* voice – a voice not present in the poems which rely on the blues. Aesthetically, the third chapter focuses almost wholly on jazz, with Yona Harvey's collection *Hemming the Water* being influenced almost exclusively by jazz. The third chapter will discuss how Harvey uses jazz to speak, and what her jazz says. More than this, Harvey uses jazz to speak of what jazz signifies to her, which will also be a central discussion in chapter three. The poems chosen for the third chapter are "The Riot Inside Me" and "Communion With Mary Lou Williams," with an added examination of prose-poems "Girl With Red Scarf" and "Notes on Polyphony," which act as framing devices for the rest of *Hemming the Water*.

Chapter 1: Jazz and the Politics of Aesthetics

The coming chapters examine the poetry of Langston Hughes and Yona Harvey, and the two will be understood as poets who consciously incorporate jazz-associated traits into their works with the purpose of shaping a “jazz aesthetic.” In order to explore this jazz however, one must first lay the foundation for understanding jazz elements, so as to be able to grasp and recognize when, where, how, and why the two poets jazzify their art. The discussion of jazz and its ground components will be based on the book *Jazz* (2009) by Scott DeVeaux and Gary Giddins. Furthermore, this chapter will explore jazz’s political purpose and messages, and the approach to decoding the politics and aesthetic of jazz will be executed by drawing upon the insights of French philosopher Jacques Rancière. DeVeaux discusses some of the history and developments within jazz, and identifies its core devices as “polyrhythm,” “call and response,” “swing,” “syncopation,” “breaks,” “blue notes,” “polyphony,” and “improvisation” (DeVeaux 18-29). The scholar claims that “the technical vocabulary [...] applies equally to standard European classical music. But jazz must also be understood as a music that derives, in a fundamental sense, from Africa” (DeVeaux 20). DeVeaux bases this assertion on historical context and the particular traits found in jazz, tracing its roots to the folk origins of field hollers and spirituals (DeVeaux 55).

The form of jazz we today recognize as such first cropped up in New Orleans, and was characterized by polyphony and improvisation, with heavy inspiration taken from marching bands and dance music (DeVeaux 79-81). New Orleans jazz itself was preceded and influenced by the blues (DeVeaux 58-62) and “ragtime” (DeVeaux 72). Ragtime as an art surfaced in the South in the years between the Civil War and 1917, and was a musical form characterized by “ragging” of tunes, that is to say, playing tunes in a polyrhythmic manner (DeVeaux 72). The form became increasingly popular with the working class African American population in the South, as pianos were steadily made more accessible in public

saloons. With the accessibility of the piano, African American musicians discovered that the ragtime – already established on the banjo – could be transferred to the piano. This evolution of ragtime effectively laid the foundation for the modernized jazz by shifting the polyrhythm from a niche instrument to a more mainstream one, thus laying the groundwork for what would swiftly develop into jazz (DeVeaux 74). Jazz’ origins in folk forms, as well as its popularity among the working class in public saloons, paint jazz not only as an art of the African American, but also one of the working class.

An important question arises from this statement however. What purpose does it serve to say that jazz is African American, or working class? Does its origin influence the art or its utterance in any manner? As briefly discussed in the introduction, jazz speaks, and jazz’s speech is heavily influenced by its origins. Thus, when jazz speaks politically or emphatically, the colors of the African American working class marks jazz’ speech, regardless of who the speaker today is. This assertion is based on Jacques Rancière’s philosophy that an aesthetic – in this case jazz – carries an inherent political message. “There is no art without a specific distribution of the sensible tying it to a certain form of politics. Aesthetics is such a distribution” (Rancière 2009, 44). In discussing the aesthetic of jazz, its aesthetic, and the traits with which it manifests, it is vital understand not only how and where these traits manifest, but also *why* they manifest.

Confronting the notion of an aesthetic colored by a specific group or class of people is based on the notion of our “distribution of the sensible,” and “polices.” These terms are key in Rancière’s philosophy and, by extension, in the decoding of the politicization of jazz as an aesthetic in this discussion. Firstly, the distribution of the sensible is to be understood as everything an individual’s senses are capable of observing, and how this individual’s observation shapes and changes their perception of the world around them (Rancière 2004, 12). The formation or employment of aesthetics thus becomes “configurations of experience

that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity” (Rancière 2004, 9). Following this argument, any aesthetic is to be understood as *inherently* political due to how aesthetics are shaped. As aesthetics are formed through a perception of the world around the individual, any form of filtering or change in the individual’s perception of this world would therefore influence the creation or usage of an aesthetic. In line with Rancière’s argument, such filters exist. These filters are the philosopher’s “police.” According to Rancière’s definition, “police” is to be understood neither as an institution of power nor as a branch of the law enforcement, but rather as a subconscious social divider: a “symbolic constitution of the social” which “divides up the sensible” (Rancière 2010, 36). Based on this understanding of the police, any given individual’s social group directly influences their perception of the world around them, and by extension, the way in which they shape their art. The argument thus arises that jazz is not only to be understood as something that is African American or working class; it is exclusively both. Jazz could only be created by the sense perception available to these particular groups, at particular times. Every beat of jazz, every tune, every trait incorporated, thus becomes a reflection of those who created it. Jazz, on the basis of the African American working class from whence it originated, acts as a revision of statements made by its originating police.

Swing and the rhythms of jazz

There are three basic styles of rhythm in jazz: “pulse rhythm,” “breath rhythm,” and “speech rhythm.” These three archetypes of jazz rhythm allow the musical form to accelerate, decelerate, or stop altogether for limited amounts of time, causing “breaks.” A break within jazz is primarily used as a device to enunciate contrast where the band briefly and suddenly stops playing while a single musician continues the performance, highlighting a lone “monophonic passage” (DeVeaux 28). It is these three key tempos of jazz which lay the foundation for its ability to “swing.” Swing is difficult to pin down to any particular trait, to

the point where it has been pronounced almost impossible to define. Louis Armstrong when asked to define its rhythms and aspects, explained: ““If you have to ask, you’ll never know”” (Armstrong, qtd. in DeVaux 20). Simply put, it is the inherent ability of jazz to keep the listener on their toes through its purposeful inability of keeping any persistent, easily recognizable beat. When presented with the previously discussed core rhythms – pulse, breath, and speech rhythm – one may reasonably make the argument that it is through the culmination of these rhythms, the art of mixing and varying between them, and the artist’s ability to freely draw upon these separate styles when they so desire, that jazz creates its swing. These rhythms do not only create swing however; they also assert the human nature of the art. Based in the human biology, the rhythms and their naming, whether consciously or not, work to reflect a message from the police of the lower class, African American artist: “I am alive.” The names of these rhythms fundamentally assert that the jazz musician has the power to live and breathe – pulse and breath rhythm – but most importantly, to *speak* – speech rhythm. Jazz as such will be argued to be an aesthetic that focuses exactly on speech. The ability to allow multiple musicians to let their voices be heard, all the while supporting the independent soloist is a key concept in jazz.

Syncopation

Syncopation can generally be understood as an unexpected shift of key, or note, which diverges from the established pattern. This divergence generally occurs when performers move the emphasis in the previously established pattern from one note to another, primarily for the simple purpose of providing a sense of variety. Moreover, syncopation may be extended to create an “unexpected combination of interruption and continuity” (Barnhart 171) keeping the audience on their toes. Syncopation is not exclusive to jazz, and occurs outside of it, though in these cases it is considered to be more of a special effect, an occasional disruption of the established rhythm. Jazz syncopation “is not an effect—it is the

very air jazz breathes” (DeVeaux 20). Syncopation is not a tool exclusive to music. In literature, Professor Bruce Barnhart of the University of Oslo describes the phenomena as occurring when a theme or tonal shift is unexpectedly injected into a narrative, “making [the scene’s] completion fall on an unexpectedly stressed beat” (Barnhart 171). In poetry, the presence of the trait may be discovered through an unexpected, or subversive, usage of meter. In such cases, the emphasis of a given word moves to a different location from what the previously established meter would imply. Concrete examples of such an effect will be discussed in chapters two and three, with emphasis on the Hughes poem “Saturday Night” and “Communion with Mary Lou Williams” by Harvey. Apart from the cases in which this occur, however, prosodic features will not be a central part of this project, as the focus will be on the aesthetic and political.

Polyrhythm and Call and Response

Describing polyrhythm can be a complicated manner, and without delving into the theoretical musical aspects of beats and meters, jazz employs something called “cyclical time.” Cyclical time is based upon the recurrence of beats, or “measures,” in which there is a small, fixed repeatable cycle within the tune. This form of cyclical time, which may be repeated endlessly, is the “ideal structure for jazz” (DeVeaux 18), and it is what allows jazz to be open and flexible. This repetitive yet open-ended structural cycle of rhythm is what lays at the foundation of jazz’s concept of “rhythmic layers.” Rhythmic layers are separate rhythms working at the same time at separate tempos to create contrast with one another, with one superimposing the other and vice versa. These separate yet complementary rhythms are what create “polyrhythm,” one of the absolute key concepts of jazz, and one of the most recognizable aspects of the aesthetic. The focus on polyrhythm in jazz may work to reinforce some of the art’s politics, as polyrhythm has been speculated to be a reflection of a community intent on an openness of ideas and discussion, rather than a hierarchical system

serving to control (Tracy 2015, 18-19). This understanding of polyrhythm works well in perceiving jazz as an art that speaks for and promotes equality, while at the same time commenting upon the racial hierarchy of the United States. In terms of the more practical (as opposed to the political), polyrhythm synergizes with another central trait of jazz, that of the “call and response.”

Call and response is a concept which should be familiar to those who study literature, as its presence is already well-documented in its many forms. Its usage in jazz, however, while fundamentally similar, can be claimed to be more immediate than the form found in literary works. As its name implies, the call and response creates a form of conversation. A counterstatement, or “response,” immediately answers the original “call.” In a jazz performance this dialogue may be internal, between musicians, or between a musician (or the band as a whole) and the audience. Call and response in particular will be central in discussing the prose poems of *Hemming the Water*, which act as calls and responses to one another and act as framing devices to the collection. Working together with the polyrhythmic nature of jazz, the musicians may also set the act up in such a manner that one beat signals the call, and another the response. This immediacy of the call and response in the performance differs in format from what may be found in literature, where a call may be made only for the response to come several pages later, or be intrinsically woven into the structure of an entire chapter or book. Such an example of call and response and polyrhythm within literature presents itself in Hughes’ 1930 novel *Not Without Laughter*. Using jazz in his novel, Hughes creates a narrative in which pleasure and pain become not juxtaposed, but interwoven (Barnhart 167), and the past becomes “present by repetition” (Barnhart 163). The interweaving of call and response with polyrhythm is what enables the moment-to-moment jazz structure of statement – repeat – revision.

The individual components of jazz are not, by themselves, uniquely African. Polyrhythm in particular is found in Indonesia and India, and call and response, while more prevalent in African cultures, can be found essentially everywhere (DeVeaux 54). It is, however, the combination of the different sounds and traits we find in jazz that is uniquely African (American). These traits come together and create, through their harmonic interaction, jazz's "deep musical grammar" (DeVeaux 54-55). How then, does one translate deep musical grammar, or any auditory sensation, into something one would consider an equivalent on paper? There are generally two ways of attempting this: an actual polyrhythmic poem in which the poem contests rhythm within itself, or a polyphonic poem in which a multitude of speakers appear. To clarify, polyphony is not interchangeable with polyrhythm; while polyrhythm refers to multiple contrasting rhythms, polyphony occurs when "two or more melodies of equal interest are played at the same time" (DeVeaux A17). While the two may appear together, they may also occur wholly independently of one another. Fundamentally, one would assume that polyphony most significantly makes its appearance by "poetic expression beyond a single voice" (Mazur 1169). While this is indeed to be understood as the case, in the poetry selected for this discussion the presence of polyphony is most visible in the thematic. Several of the poems in the following chapters include a theme of polyphony, without explicitly making use of multiple voices. Polyrhythm, on the other hand, is to be understood as appearing through a system of calls and responses, in one instance, within "The Riot Inside Me," enacted by means of a temporal distancing. Polyrhythm as an enactment of jazz will be most visible in the third chapter.

Blues

The blues as a form of music is arguably more codified and easily pinpointed than jazz, characterized more so by the blues stanza and blue notes than rhythmic improvisation and freedom. The blues form is made up of a statement, repeat statement, and finally a response,

usually with an ironic twist, creating an “asymmetric three-line stanza” (DeVeaux 32) – an AAB structure. In this AAB structure, the manner in which the blues enacts the call and response also becomes visible, with the first two “A” lines acting as a call, and the final “B” line performing the role of the response. Henceforth this “blues form” will be referenced to as the “blues stanza.” Furthermore, the blues can be considered to be more personal, “as though exploring the singer’s solitary mind” (DeVeaux 58), and will often more than jazz, and to a greater degree, make explicit the utterance or politics of a tune. While incorporated in jazz through blue notes, it should be stated that blues is by its own right an African American artform molded by the sense perception of its artists and their police. Blues, as a reflection of the police of African American society, can be seen by the ballad-like structure of the narrative of the tune, reflecting how the previously enslaved societies “had recently shifted from the communal confines of slave culture to the cold, terrifying realities of individualism” (DeVeaux 58). This statement reinforces Rancière’s argument of a socially enforced sense perception influencing the creation of aesthetics. However, the inception of blues can be considered far more gloomy than that of jazz. As DeVeaux stated, the blues was born out of the recently emancipated African American population, with its many roots in field hollers and work songs. The form however draws heavily on the English and Scottish ballad structure. This drawing upon European form shows the police of the African American working class as not yet culturally free from oppression thus becoming a reflection of enslavement. Jazz on the other hand includes aspects of African culture to a much greater degree, drawing less on western musicology. Thus, it becomes an art of freedom. This freedom is closely reflected in jazz’s distinct traits and their ability to enable individualism to shine by means of the solo.

While the blues may be depicted as a reflection of slavery, it is certainly far from a form incapable of aesthetic diversity or uniqueness. A particular trait of the blues is the “blue

note.” Blue notes are difficult to describe, yet easy to hear, and are primarily how the blues becomes incorporated in jazz. Generally considered unconventional in western music, a blue note describes variable intonation of notes, such as through lowering an E pitch half a step (DeVeaux 24). While the ear easily recognizes blue notes, its written depiction and imitation is less easily discovered. Thus, when incorporating blues into poetry, the main emphasis becomes primarily to imitate not so much the direct pitch of the blue note itself, but rather to tonally synthesize it through a recreation of the blues stanza, combined with visual cues signaling the blues moan. An example of this tonal synthesis is visible in Hughes’ poem “Jazzonia,” wherein the lines “*Oh, silver tree! / Oh, shining rivers of the soul!*” (Jazzonia 1-2) the usage of “oh” works to detract attention from meaning and shift it to tone (Anderson 40-41). The focus on tone and how the blues moan is used to shape this is central in the early works of Hughes. The incorporation of blues into jazz, and blues poetry as its own form of art, works to further expand the political reach of both jazz and Hughes’ own poetry through the blues stanza, acting as a window into the artist’s (or their police’s) pained soul.

Hughes’ early poetry was influenced by both jazz and blues, and examples of both forms of music appear in his first published collection *The Weary Blues* (1926). While the title of the collection (rightly) implies that the emphasis is on blues, jazz is very much present in the collection, albeit more so thematically than aesthetically. As Hughes developed as a poet, his focus point shifted from blues aesthetics, visible in poems “The Weary Blues” and “Jazzonia,” to jazz aesthetics, and he grew fluent in the employment of jazz in his poetry. Hughes starts experimenting with jazz poetry as early as this, which is also visible in “Jazzonia.” The poem opens up with the lines “*Oh, silver tree*” (Jazzonia 1), and the tonal implications of these lines has already been touched upon. However, Hughes displays an early interest in jazz improvisation in the repeat of the introductory lines, in which upon the first repeat “silver” is replaced by “shining,” and the line is altogether subverted on the

second repeat; “*Oh shining tree / Oh, silver rivers of the soul!*” (Jazzonia 7-8). These lines provide an early look at Hughes’ development of jazz poetry, while tonally the poem imitates the blues to a greater extent than jazz. Hughes would in time come to distinguish jazz and blues poems more clearly, with syncopated structures or blues stanzas characterizing the respective formats.

Each individual trait employed by jazz may be examined through a political lens as a reflection of the police from which it stems. Breaking down the politics of each particular trait in the art may work to enlighten a reader to the purpose of a poem in which these traits might occur. The question thus becomes how do these traits speak for themselves, and how does the combination of several different traits work to shape a message. Firstly, as a standalone trait, the blues stanza presents tragicomedy; a dogged persistence, yet lacking triumph – a dream deferred. When incorporated into jazz, the blues still represents this persistence, the tragicomic nature, yet it is a step removed from the feeling of despair. In jazz, the blues stanza becomes “the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile” (Hughes 1994, 58). The pain is still very much present, yet its presence should not encumber joy. This duality is the essence of jazz, jazz becomes an art with that “something underneath” (Dream 12). This sensation of pain swallowed in a smile may also be brought about through breaks or syncopation. Syncopation is something that allows for a feeling of suspense, of brief reflection before the tune moves on. This effect has the potential to be greatly reinforced when introduced into poetry to such a manner that it allows reflection of the entire work – of its politics – before moving on. When reading poetry the readers themselves choose the rhythm, the pace at which to move on, and so the syncopated poem may allow for a break as brief as the one in music, briefly suspending the reader, or it may invoke deep reflection on matters entirely outside the poem itself. This syncopation – the time to reflect – can also be used to invoke a realization of the presence of polyrhythm in poetry. This effect will be

particularly examined in the discussion around “The Riot Inside Me” in the third chapter. As previously stated, polyrhythm may indicate a view of society itself; a promotion of multiple lines of thought. Rather than a single hierarchical structure of thinking, a line of thought merely flowing “downriver,” polyrhythm promotes a level of openness of thoughts flowing both “downriver” and “upriver.” This river through which ideas flow is to be understood not only as an image of society, but of time itself, as polyrhythm may be adopted in literature to revisit upon previous concepts (Barnhart 164).

Looking for jazz aesthetics in poetry thus boils down to looking for particular ways in which each individual poem communicates its jazz nature, and how this jazz in turn inflects and shapes the poem. Some particular elements to look out for in poetry include, but are not limited to, an acceleration or deceleration of the tempo of the poem, a call and response signature, syncopation and breaks which may be signaled by line breaks or spacings, or the poem adhering to multiple layers of rhythm, that is to say polyrhythm. Polyrhythm in particular is interesting in poetry, as it is difficult to emulate multiple rhythms occurring simultaneously on paper. It can be executed skillfully as will be shown in the discussion around Harvey’s poetry in chapter three. An alternative route to an incorporation of polyrhythm may indeed be to opt for a polyphonic narrative, which would also work to signify jazz, however the two are by no means mutually exclusive. Likewise it is interesting to discuss the way in which poems signpost their jazzification through language. While the blues presents itself through tonal terms such as “oh”— quite literally a moan, jazzification occurs through an incorporation of jazz-associated language in order to awaken the reader to the traits of jazz. Examples of this form of signposting will be seen in the second chapter, in particular in the discussion around Hughes’ 1951 poem “Dream Boogie.” In both of these scenarios, a particular usage of certain words is what leads the reader to a realization of what the aesthetic influence is. Thus, the power of a word as simple as “daddy” or as seemingly

insignificant as “oh” should not be underestimated in the slightest, and may be employed as a voice of the politics of the poem.

Chapter 2: The Poetry of Langston Hughes

Prior to his development as a jazz poet, Langston Hughes would first establish himself as a blues poet. This is not to say that Hughes initially felt more attached to the blues than to jazz, but rather that two factors are influential in his aesthetic attachment to the blues as opposed to jazz. Firstly, there is the fact that jazz was only just developing and becoming mainstream while Hughes was finding his footing, and the blues was a far more culturally established artform while Hughes was publishing in the twenties. In fact, jazz and blues were not recognized as wholly separate genres in music until after the Second World War. Secondly, as will be argued in the forthcoming chapter, blues simulated in poetry is less ambivalent and more immediately transparent to both reader and poet, thus making the skillset required in writing blues poetry more easily attained than that which is required in writing jazz poetry. With these factors taken into consideration, an examination of Langston Hughes' poetry, both jazz and blues, is in order. What are the politics of the aesthetics of Langston Hughes' jazz poetry? Do they differ from those presented in blues poetry, and *how* are these aesthetics and the politics within communicated by the poet? For the purpose of this discussion, four of Hughes' poems will be sampled on the basis of aesthetics and transparency of theme. Two poems of each musical genre have been selected from Hughes' collection. Of the blues genre "The Weary Blues" and "Early Evening Quarrel" have been chosen; of the jazz – "Saturday Night" and "Dream Boogie." Of these poems, a representative poem of each genre that clearly states its musical alignment has been chosen, as well as one of each genre that presents itself as more ambiguous.

The Weary Blues

"The Weary Blues," published in *Opportunity* in 1925 (Hughes 1995, 626), is one such poem which, already with the title, explicitly displays the blues – both in terms of structure and theme. The poem tells the story of an old piano player, performing on Lenox Avenue in

Harlem. The performance, to which the speaker is exposed, is both lyrical and literal/physical, as the piano player is both singing – and living – the blues. Incorporating the blues stanza, the poem is told within the context of a second-hand story; the poetic voice is passing on the events of the evening to the reader. The poetic voice initially impresses upon the reader the reality of experience: these events occurred and the poetic persona was witness to them. For most of the poem, this physical reality is pertinent. Lines indicating tangible first-hand observation such as “I heard a Negro play” (Weary 3), “with his ebony hands on each ivory key” (Weary 9), and “swaying to and fro on his rickety stool” (Weary 12) reinforce this sensation of a real experience – of a physicality. The physicality of the poem is eventually challenged by a more metaphysical or hypothetical sense, as the poetic voice proclaims that the artist, having gone to bed, “slept like a rock or a man that’s dead” (Weary 35). This finality to the story, to which the speaker could not physically have been a witness, strengthens the feeling of the poem as a second-hand story relayed to the reader via the poetic voice. The poem’s transition from observation to omniscient may be explained by Hughes himself in his autobiography *The Big Sea*. Regarding the process of writing “The Weary Blues,” Hughes states, “I didn’t send it anywhere because I wasn’t satisfied with it. [...] I could not achieve an ending I liked, although I worked and worked on it—something that rarely happens to any of my poems” (Hughes 1993, 92). The transition of narrative structure in “The Weary Blues” is not well indicated in the early stages of the poem, and the poet’s struggles in capturing both his own experience and the aesthetics of the blues bleeds through to the reader.

The story being relayed to the reader is one that is emotionally laden, primarily emphasizing sorrow and despondency. The narrative follows a musician throughout the night as he experiences the blues, and the poetic voice too becomes subject to this blues. The lines “He did a lazy sway. . . . / He did a lazy sway. . . .” (Weary 6-7) imply the blues musician is

intoxicated, and in his inebriated performance, the artist enacts sorrowful art. “Sweet Blues! / Coming from a black man’s soul. / O Blues!” (Weary 14-16). It is worth noting that the blues is clearly something which prompts an emotional response from the poetic voice – the exclamations of blues as sweet and its origin in a “black man’s soul” (Weary 15) is not the artist’s exclamation, but rather the poetic voice’s reflection. The focus on the blues as sweet and mournful whilst coming from a black man’s soul is worth remarking. With these lines, and the impact the blues has had on the poetic persona, the poem is representing the blues as art – Art coming from a black man’s soul. The close relationship between blackness and blues reinforces their intimacy, also supported through the proximity in pronunciation. “Blues” and “black” both begin with a /bl/ sound before leading into back vowels. The poet uses this simple phonetic similarity along with proximity in the poem to tie the subjects together, reinforcing their intimacy and fronting his own, as well as his art’s, “blackness.” With this is clearly working to represent the blues as art. The final line of the poem similarly works to solidify the blues’ capability of emotional impact, or affliction: having himself been influenced by the blues, the performer becomes despondent and sleeps “like a rock or a man that’s dead” (Weary 35). Thus, the politics of the poem’s aesthetics become an assertion of blues as art.

The poem employs precise language and word choices, reinforcing a sense of intoxication and mellow moods. The phrases and words coloring the tempo and mood of the poem set the stage both rhythmically and aesthetically. Through such phrasings as “drowsy” (Weary 1), “mellow croon” (Weary 2), “pale dull pallor” (Weary 5), and “melancholy tone” (Weary 17), amongst others, the poem not only gives an indication of the mood of the surroundings of the narrative, but the poetic voice establishes itself within the narrative setting of the poem. The poetic persona inserts itself into the canon of the poem, but also works to establish the rhythm. It stands to reason that a storyteller would dominate the

rhythm of a tale with their own impressions. Yet, the impressions of the storyteller remain those of the blues. What the poetic voice presents is a blues artist signified through the blues.

The importance of these impressions cannot be overstated: the storyteller is recounting the blues through his blues. In doing this, the poem itself becomes an act of signifyin(g).

“Repetition and revision are fundamental to black artistic forms” (Gates, XXIV), and the poet through this poem creates a multi-layered signification. Hughes originally heard the blues of the poem on Lenox Avenue (Hughes 1993, 92), and through the poem repeats and revises the original work. This signifyin(g) is woven into the narrative, as the poem itself carries its own performer, and its own storyteller. With this revision comes a transition from sound to written form, and with this transition comes the difficulty of rhythm. As has been stated before, rhythm in poetry may prove to be exceptionally difficult as each reader is free to read and decrypt at their own pace. A skilled poet leaves hints to the reader of how to decode the intended rhythm, assuming there is one, and “The Weary Blues” is one of the earlier poems in which Hughes opens up for a placement of such hints, indicating to an “intended rhythm,” which in this case would in all likelihood be a revision of the original tune he himself heard in Harlem. This ability exhibits Hughes’ growing capabilities as a poet, and it is a vital ability for him to master. Working with musical poetry by choice, it is critical for the poet to be able to lay down and maintain a desired rhythmic pattern. The ability to signify rhythmic structure is of particular import in the emulation of jazz, with its multiple rhythmic patterns.

Hughes, then, is at this point dabbling in using words and sentence structure to signify both meaning and structure. Inspecting the first line of the poem alone one discovers several words which signal the theme, mood, and rhythm of the poem. The poem opens up with the word “Droning” (Weary 1), which thematically indicates a low, continuous hum or moan. Already through this a concept of time is referred to – a sense of continuity is ascertained. The vowel is of particular note; a dragged out dark /ou/ diphthong, working to give a

sensation of sadness and melancholy, not only alluding to the blues moan but in its own sense acting as a blues moan. Similarly, the second stressed word, “drowsy” (Weary 1) contains several thematic and structural hints. Firstly, the topic of the word itself is one that points to sleep, or a desire to do so. When combined with the continuity that was set up in “droning,” a slow pace becomes hinted at. If sleep was the only desire, something as simple as “sleepy” or “dull” would have sufficed; however, the utterance itself is also key. Harmonizing with the opening word of the poem, “droning” is soft on the ears; starting with the soft, plosive /d/ the word moves through the liquid /r/ into a deep, dark diphthong. This effect is also performed by “drowsy.” The sound of the word conveys an essence of being deep and mellow, synergizing with the set up scene – an after-hours tavern or speakeasy somewhere on Lenox Avenue, dimly lit and lightly populated. The final phrase of line one, “syncopated tune” (Weary 1), establishes something which may be perceived as contrarian to the first key words. While droning and drowsy flow naturally off the tongue, “syncopated” sounds jagged, almost staccato in its conveyal. “Syncopated” thus signifies a shift in rhythm, a shift that is both present in the word itself as well as alluded to in the future of the poem. “Syncopated” contains four syllables, of which the second, third and fourth syllables all begin with plosives. These plosives work to very clearly separate and give pause to each individual syllable, through which the word acts out its own subject meaning: “syncopated” syncopates the structure of the first line of “The Weary Blues,” becoming a meta-narrative commentary and enactment which signifies itself and enables the reader to more easily pick up on shifts in rhythm as the poem goes on. “Mellow croon” (Weary 2) similarly acts in the manner discussed with “droning” and “drowsy,” providing a deep and slow pace through both pronunciation and theme. This softness is built upon with “mellow’s” second syllable, which opens with a liquid /l/ lending softness to the phrase. And so, within the space of two lines

and thirteen words, Hughes has established mood, rhythm, and theme, all of which relates to the weary blues.

The musician in the poem is one that engages in some degree of physical movement. Initially, the poem describes this movement as “rocking” (Weary 2). As the poem, and with it the night, goes on, this rocking devolves into a “sway” (Weary 12). The two words are synonyms, yet the “sway” holds different implications within the narrative of the poem. The word itself rolls off the tongue with ease, and yet swings somewhat through the softness of the diphthong. The word choice in this context is so precise that it provides an image of the sway, both in the third eye’s re-enactment of the poetic narrative, and the mental tact inherent to it. The musicality becomes bound to the meaning of the word. The singer in the poem, the blues artist, is somberly swaying, providing an image of lonesome intoxication – but the image of the *sway* itself is key to this period of Hughes. The artist, like the poem, do not *swing*, they *sway*. Following the paces of the poem, the reader is met with lines that do not abruptly swing with multiple keys, but rather lines and stanzas that sway, leaning from one pace to the other. This impression of leaning and swaying is difficult to pinpoint but is, in all likelihood, communicated primarily through the way in which line breaks are employed, which

generally reflect such nuances of oral performance as breaths and vocal pauses, but [Hughes] often turns them to still greater poetic advantage. Typically, Hughes will choose to end a line on a minor word. This strategy heightens expectations of the syntactical conclusion, paralleling a harmonic resolution in the music. (Chinitz qtd. In Huang 14)

The poem explicitly reinforces this image of the somber, somewhat intoxicated sway with the lines, “He did a lazy sway . . . / He did a lazy sway . . .” (Weary 6-7). These two lines are filled with soft language and sounds, characterized by their liquids seen in /h/, /z/, /s/ and /w/,

as well as their use of the /ei/ diphthong in both “lazy” and “sway.” Furthermore, part of the key to these lines is in their repeating. The lines are swaying to and fro, each word contributing to the rhythm, mood, and image of the poem: the lines themselves almost *appear* as though they are softly, repeatedly, leaning, or swaying, left and right.

The opening line of the final section reinforces the soft swaying with its “Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor” (Weary 23). The thumps break the previously established rhythm, establishing a new one that works similarly to the rhythm that was presented in the preceding blues stanza. The potential for rhythm breaks, established in the first line of the poem through the word “syncopated,” is thus followed through. However, the thumps do not deliver an impression of a staccato rhythm like that which was implied by “syncopated.” The short, soft sound of the word “thump,” combined with the commas that follow every repeat, leaves an impression of deep breath with short, ragged speech containing a continuous flow. In addition to providing some solid sense of intended rhythm through the structure of the sentence via the employment of short words and commas, there is a sense of deliberate softness to this line. Ordinarily one may associate a foot repeatedly pounding the floor with something more akin to a “thud” or a “smack;” however, the poem labels these sounds “thumps.” When comparing the sounds of the mentioned examples, the sound of the thump comes across as the one that carries the softest implication. Rather than the sudden sound of a thud or rash smack, with particular emphasis on the final consonant, a thump opens and ends on a soft note, allowing one to naturally flow into the other and alluding to the previously established sense of manipulated time. A “thud, thud, thud” going on for an extensive amount of time extends a sensation of finality with every “thud,” whereas a “thump, thump, thump” gives no such impression. The words weave and flow into one another with flexibility, suspending any definitive impression of beginning or end.

The sense of time set up by the words are followed up on in the narrative. When the blues artist is done performing the blues, the mood, which the art impresses upon him, remains. With the lines “The singer stopped playing and went to bed / While the Weary Blues echoed through his head. / He slept like a rock or a man that’s dead” (Weary 33-35) the poem conveys a sense of eternity. This echo indicates that the blues to which we are exposed is no facade or temporary illusion; it is very much a real aspect of the artist’s character. The lyrics that the singer has sung reverberate and echo through his existence, hanging over him throughout the night, influencing him with the mellow blues. The mood of which he sings is one that is permanent, wearing him down and bringing exhaustion. Presented in a blues stanza, the lines “Ain’t got nobody in all this world, / Ain’t got nobody but ma self” (Weary 19-20) explicitly show the singer’s sense of loneliness; however, this “loneliness” is immediately subverted through comedy. The two lines are followed by “I’s gwine to quit ma frownin’ / And put ma troubles on the shelf” (Weary 21-22), adding a flavor of irony to the poem. The idea that the blues and the supposed immense loneliness the singer experiences may be dealt with through the metaphor of “putting them on the shelf,” or rather ignoring the issue or sheer willpower, is intended to be perceived as ludicrous to the point of humor. Thus, the first two lines introduce and reinforce a complaint, while the third and fourth humorously answer it, culminating in a faithful recreation of an eight-bar blues stanza. It is also worth noting that vernacular language is included in the poetic voice’s citation of the blues artist, through words and phrases such as “gwine” (Weary 21), and “ma self” (Weary 22). At this point it is apt to state that the most common format of blues is twelve-bar, rather than eight-bar presented here. Twelve-bar blues consists of the AAB structure discussed in chapter one, which is “divided into three four-bar phrases, altogether forming a full chorus” (Huang 39). Eight-bar blues on the other hand consists of an AB structure, with two contrasting lines (Huang 12).

A complaint may be raised regarding this particular blues stanza however. While it is key to the subject matter of the poem, in terms of the poem's internal rhythm that has been set up thus far, the eight-bar blues stanza may strike the reader as somewhat off-key or lacking in pace. Up until this point the poem has been *swaying* to and from partially due to the structure of the poem. Thus far the structure of the poem has been such that there are two lines with more syllables, followed by one or two lines with less syllables. There is one exception to this, which appears in the lines "Sweet Blues / Coming from a black man's soul. / O blues!" (Weary 14-16). In this instance, "Coming From a black man's soul" (Weary 15) is the only longer line, preceded and immediately followed by two equally short lines – Both of the lines "Sweet Blues" (Weary 14) and "O Blues" (Weary 16) contain only two syllables. However, in the eight-bar blues stanza,

‘Ain’t got nobody in all this world,
Ain’t got nobody but ma self.
I’s gwine to quit ma frownin’
And put ma troubles on the shelf.’ (Weary 19-22)

all of the lines have a high amount of syllables, ranging from seven to nine syllables on each line. Adding to this is the fact that the previous two lines, "In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone / I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—" (Weary 17-18) follow the lines of the pre-established rhythm, with a respective eleven and twelve syllables, thus giving these six lines an uncharacteristic length and weight. The break in rhythm appears out of place, and the change is signaled only by the visage of the poem itself: the lines are marked through placement, with the entire blues stanza being indented. The signaling in change of rhythm minimal in the lyrics of the poem itself, and while the idea of syncopation and change in rhythm has been thematically presented, the overall execution comes across as somewhat clumsy and lacking in flair.

The blues singer's second stanza thematically repeats the first line of the poem, this time a twelve-bar blues. Hughes takes the classic formula of three lines; a double statement followed by a response (AAB) and incorporates it into his poem through six lines, thus splitting each statement in two.

'I got the Weary Blues
And I can't be satisfied
Got the Weary Blues
And can't be satisfied—
I ain't happy no mo'
And I wish that I had died.' (Weary 25-30)

The singer at this point actually performs the previously mentioned drowsy droning, repeating his troubles to the tavern. Through these lines, Hughes incorporates his second blues stanza. The split structure signifies breaths and breaks mid-sentence, reinforcing the singer's "syncopated tune." The final word of the blues stanza thematically the final word of the poem, both signaling death.

These themes are all tied together by the final line; "He slept like a rock or a man that's dead" (Weary 35). In this not only is the exhaustion and despondency to which the character is exposed culminated into deep sleep, but the allusion to death further works to display some of the aspects of the blues. The sense of lacking power, the sense of stagnation, of a murky future – the blues with which the poetic voice expresses itself – is one synonymous with despondency, or perhaps the more clinical term, depression. Even though the singer promises that he's "gwine to quit ma frownin' / And put ma troubles on the shelf" (Weary 21-22) he finds himself unable to do so, and the blues reverberates through his existence, echoing through the night in his head. This blues is not pain swallowed in a smile. The singer attempts to do so but as the poem shows, he fails. Despondency, or as the poem

calls it, the Blues, is not simply cured through an attempted change in attitude. It is presented and perceived as pervasive. The blues as a mood has consumed both the singer and the poetic voice, yet the only manner of expressing the mood of the blues is through the art of the blues. Blues, in the end, becomes the only way to dull the pain of the blues.

In the poet's recreation of the blues, the readers themselves come across the "Sweet Blues! / Coming from a black man's soul" (Weary 14-15) – Hughes is no musician, he is a poet, and the blues he creates is colored by this fact. In "The Weary Blues" is seen as much as an attempt to emulate the Blues through poetry, a desire to not simply mimic, but create. Hughes succeeds in recreating the literal blues stanza through lines such as

‘Ain’t got nobody in all this world,

Ain’t got nobody but ma self.

I’s gwine to quit ma frownin’

And put ma troubles on the shelf.’ (Weary 19-22)

however, he also manages to *create* the *feeling* of the blues through his marriage of theme and style. This theme and style are combined with precisely crafted lines and use of language that echo the emotions and feelings of the blues and the sway. Hughes through the creation of "The Weary Blues," is, as much as the poem's audience, attempting to decrypt the blues – to unpack its messages and its aesthetics. The poet wishes to present to the reader a blues poem which offers a sense of understanding of not only the structure but also the emotional capability of the blues. All the while the poet is striving to deepen his own understanding of the art. Thus, the politics of the aesthetics of "The Weary Blues" becomes Hughes' desire to represent the blues, which he is attempting to manifest into poetry, and its capacity for emotional response.

In reading the poem aloud, a person discovers that in general the poem's verbal rhythms are similar to those of a classic blues: four steady metrical beats in each line,

spiced with syncopated rhythmic patterns created by the syllable in between the feet/pulses. Hughes confesses the importance of orality in his poems: “The blues poems I would often make up in my head and sing on the way to work” (*The Big Sea* 217) The opening recalls the classic three-line twelve-bar blues lyric stanza (AAB). (Huang 15)

As the blues developed through the twenties and thirties, musical jazz would firmly separate itself from blues. Hughes, however, would continue to dabble in both forms to strengthen his understanding and connection with the musical art produced by the ‘low-down folks,’ of which he held such fondness. Just like the musical form, his jazz poems retain some aspect of the blues format, and while the themes and aesthetics of these two styles of poetry differ, the politics of Hughes’ aesthetics remain the same throughout his career: his poetry speaks fully and truly of a man who desires to speak for the people, representing them and their art through his own.

Hughes’ carefully executed strategies and the choices he makes in terms of words and phrases work to enlighten the reader to the politics of his aesthetics. Through his selective phrasings, Hughes crafts a poem in which language, theme, and structure go hand in hand. While the narrative deals with the blues, melancholy, alcohol, and despondency, the overarching poem conveys, somewhat paradoxically, a simple sense of soft joy. Embedded within itself is a feel-good sense conveyed via its soft and lulled language, as though it were attempting to emulate that appropriate level of intoxication in which the poison that is alcohol creates apparent bliss. It seems then that this, to Hughes, is what the blues is. It is this sensation that the poem is trying to recreate and emulate through the language and aesthetics of the poem: the representation of the blues as a joyful, if somber, artform.

Saturday Night

Another of Hughes' early publications is "Saturday Night." Published in 1926 the poem carries a marked difference in both theme and aesthetics from what was seen in "The Weary Blues." For one, "Saturday Night" is more clearly influenced by jazz than blues, and the poem employs the aesthetics to comment on altogether different matters than what was seen in "The Weary Blues." While the aesthetic sources of the two poems differ markedly, it is worth considering that blues and jazz originate from the same pool of mental consciousness – the same police. Therefore, the politics of the aesthetics of "Saturday Night" should, theoretically, not be too different in nature from that which was seen in "The Weary Blues." This is, largely, not the case. While "The Weary Blues" politicized its aesthetics in a manner which commented on the art and its validity, "Saturday Night" confronts the very nature of polices. In "Saturday Night," jazz and jazz structure present an interaction between two persons of different polices. This interaction is the running theme of the poem, as every scene displayed is in some way or another a cross-police interaction. The two poems converge in their politics in the manner that they both address the hegemonic police in some manner, however their methodology in doing this is remarkably different.

"Saturday Night" tells the story of an evening out in Harlem filled with dance, song, music, and perhaps most importantly for the theme of the poem – indulgence. The narrative follows an entourage of an unspecified number, consisting of a minimum of two people in every scene portrayed by the poem. The poetic persona is very much part of the narrative, unlike the narrator seen in "The Weary Blues," who was acting as an observer, and by extension, storyteller. Furthermore, the poem all the while comments on contemporary culture and society. Being one of Hughes' earlier publications, it displays some expected traits of his early career: an inclusion of vernacular language and fairly straightforward form in terms of meter – an accentual verse with two beats to the line. Interestingly, this poem also

incorporates some more unexpected aspects more prevalent in Hughes' later years. One such trait is found in an inclusion of scatting in the poem. While Hughes would in his later years incorporate bebop in his works, most notably in his collection *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, in which it appears in poems such as "Jam Session," "Likewise," and "Dream Boogie," similar aesthetics are not commonly seen throughout his collected works. The application of scatting in Hughes' earlier publications is minimal, and its inclusion in this poem displays an indication that this poem is experimenting with language as salient and acoustic, and the balance between the two. Moreover, Hughes fluently incorporates vernacular into the language, though this is a less prevalent vernacular than may be found in some of his other works such as "Song for a Banjo Dance" and "Gal's Cry for a Dying Lover." In "Saturday Night" the vernacular emphasis is on slurring certain words: "an" (Saturday 4), "de" (Saturday 28), "dat" (Saturday 22), "o" (Saturday 11), "yo" (Saturday 9), "git" (Saturday 11) and the expression "o" in the line "O, play it some more" (Saturday 2). The closest the poem comes to an assertive inclusion of vernacular is through the phrase "you's" (Saturday 17) – grammatically incorrect yet prevalent in the African American idiom. There is no inclusion of peculiar phrasings or words that may cause discord in an external reader; this is, in all likelihood, on purpose as there is an argument to be made that the poem sets out to make a mockery of just those who are outsiders to Harlem society. In doing this, the poem empowers the African American reader with a subtext that the white reader is *intended* to miss.

Opening with the lines "Play it once. / O, play some more" (Saturday 1-2), Hughes once again uses "o", perceived similarly to the moan employed in "The Weary Blues," although the vocal moan the reader meets in these opening lines is far from a sorrowful, mourning sigh. Instead it comes across as a festive one, acting as an incantation of encouragement to a performing musician, which may be surmised from the context provided

by the first two lines. The lines themselves could be applicable in a setting akin to the one in “The Weary Blues.” The poem, however, by merit of the manner in which it presents itself through shorter lines than that which was seen in the previous poem, introduces the reader to a sound of enthusiasm, which one would associate much more with an exhilarated person than an exhausted one – this is a sigh intended to set the stage – to induce cheer – a superficially joyous moan. Acting upon the stage that thus far has been set, the poem introduces the acting characters in a scene not too far removed from the scenario presented in “The Weary Blues.” This is unmistakably a festive occasion somewhere in Harlem, probably, as was the case in “The Weary Blues,” set somewhere in a Lenox Avenue speakeasy. And yet, the mood conveyed by “Saturday Night” is markedly different from the one conveyed in the previous poem. The poem recounts consumption of whiskey and gin, creating a different context for alcohol from “The Weary Blues.” While “The Weary Blues” used alcohol to promote drowsiness, relaxation and the blues, “Saturday Night” lives up to its name by leaning on alcohol to create festivity. The upbeat mood is not maintained exclusively by alcohol, however, as the poem carries strong allusions to a live jazz performance. With the lines “Git a quart o’ licker, / Let’s shake dat thing!” (Saturday 11-12) the poem marries jazz performance to alcohol through both proximity and narrative consequence. The consumption of alcohol reinforces the will to dance, or perhaps even enables it altogether. The lines not only establish a firm relationship between alcohol and dance but also act as commands from the poetic voice. With this one may see a different approach to alcohol and the culture of consumption around it from that which was presented in “The Weary Blues.” In “The Weary Blues” alcohol was tied into the singing musician, his sway, and his despondency. In “Saturday Night” the relationship of the depressant is with the audience, and its effect causes not despondency and swaying, but merry-making and shaking.

These lines only work to reinforce something that has by this point been firmly established by the poem; a language of indulgence. The first four lines of the poem immediately communicate this to the reader:

Play it once.

O, play it some more.

Charlie is a gambler

An' Sadie is a whore. (Saturday 1-4)

These lines convey not only the intended sense of festivity, they also introduce us to a poetic persona who by the time the poem begins is indulging past initial barriers. The poetic voice goes from a bid to play a tune once, to immediately asking for another repeat in the span of a single line shift. Following up on these lines with the introductions of the characters – a gambler and a whore – two character roles one may easily associate with indulgence. It should be noted however, that this is, it would seem, a male sense of indulgence. Prostitution is by no means particularly glamorous or fun and the act of purchasing sexual services can only be seen as an act of indulgence on behalf of the male character. Thus, the poem's theme of indulgence becomes intrinsically tied with gender. With these opening lines the poet firmly establishes theme, and ties this theme together with the Harlem nightlife. Further choices of phrasing and words that refer to these aspects appear in the continued theme of alcohol consumption throughout the evening as well as the phrase "All night long" (Saturday 24), mandating continued joviality, and with this, indulgence.

While the poem opens up with a command aimed at a musician, the poetic voice generally appears to speak not to a resident of Harlem, but to an outsider – A *white* outsider. The first four lines not only establish the theme of indulgence but also introduce the poem's two central characters: "Charlie is a gambler, / An' Sadie is a whore" (Saturday 3-4). While the Charlie character is addressed with the formal title "Mr" (Saturday 7), Sadie holds neither

title nor the attention of the speaker – she is not addressed. As such, there is no direct parallel to be made, although the lacking attention to her character is likely an indication of her status, and by extension, the attention to Charlie gives a glimpse of his. It is unlikely that the speaker of the poem would address the gambler Charlie as *Mr. Charlie* were he an insider of the Harlem society. Charlie is a gambler – a *white* gambler – who has come to Harlem on a Saturday night to experience the famed nightlife and the poetic voice is his company, touring with him around the city. The argument that the Charlie character is the person to whom the poetic persona speaks is supported by the bid to “Pawn yo’ gold watch / An’ diamond ring” (Saturday 9-10). With these lines comes the implication that Mr. Charlie is, if not significantly rich, at the very least someone who is well off to the point where he can afford the luxuries of a gold watch and a diamond ring. Whether or not these lines allude to Mr. Charlie having gained his money during the investor boom of the Roaring Twenties is not clear, but it is not difficult to make the argument that the poet would have one such person in mind when creating a well-off character who has come to tour the Harlem nightlife. With this taken into consideration, the lines may indeed comment upon the tendencies of the so-called “New Money” to overextend their investments and eventually go bankrupt. This argument is made on the basis that an individual who *should* have money, that is to say, Mr. Charlie, is eventually reduced to a position where he is forced to pawn his jewelry in order to keep the party going. The poem beats in key with the story it tells; its presentation is far more upbeat and lively than much of Hughes’ other poetry from this era, indicating that structurally the poem itself is part of the narrative. The poem is a reflection of the mood within any given scene, the more excited the scene is, the more upbeat the poem becomes by extension. The opposite is also true – when the characters encounter emotional despondency, the poem too slows down.

Through Charlie the white onlooker of Harlemites culture is mocked, his character representing any outsider desiring to experience and “*appropriate*” the Harlem nightlife. The speaker promotes his increased intoxication and gambling efforts, all the while making the character dance “Till de dawn comes in” (Saturday 8). There is no indication that the Charlie character is used as a laughing stock; rather his presence is used to fuel the speaker’s own entertainment and enjoyment of the night. The gratification the poetic voice portrays in the company of Mr. Charlie is merely a facade maintained for the purpose of keeping the festivities going. This argument is supported by the pawn scene, in which Mr. Charlie in all likelihood is by no means *forced* to pawn his inventory, but *coerced* into doing so in order to cover the expenses of the night on the town for his entire entourage. This facade is temporarily dropped through the poem when, for a brief moment, the speaker is met with reality once again. Up until this point the poem has remained comparatively cheerful, in spite of the pawn scene. The festivities peak through scatting as seen on the lines “Skee-de-dad! De-dad! / Doo-doo-doo” (Saturday 13-14), and as the crash sets in so too does reality and nihilism:

Won't be nothin' left
When de worms git through
An' you's a long time
Dead
When you is
Dead, too. (Saturday 15-20)

One line in particular stands out from this section: “When de worms git through” (Saturday 16). This line reads in several ways. Firstly, there is the more literal meaning, which reads in accord with the lines coming before and after; it may be a quite literal comment that, when you are dead, worms will eventually get through your coffin and eat your remains until there

is nothing left. A literal and uninteresting way of interpreting the line, albeit a consuming thought to the intoxicated mind. Looking at the overall theme of the poem it may be more apt to consider the worms, not as literal parasites feasting upon an actual corpse, but rather White American hegemony feasting upon *Harlem*. The speaker is participating in a ritual in which he is allowing a worm, a parasite, to appropriate the Harlemites culture, accelerating its demise. This indicates that the Hughes of 1926 very much realizes that the renaissance is partially supported by its being in vogue with the majority white population. The poem thus appears to caution that one must not allow the excessive consumption of Harlem culture, as should white people feast too greedily, there will be naught left – the worms will have had their fill and “blackness” will go out of vogue, thus potentially bringing about the demise of the Renaissance altogether.

Reality is yet again suspended and festivities resume with the final section. Dance and noise is reintroduced as the poem once again accelerates, humming musically with the lines “Hey! Hey! / Ho . . . Hum!” (Saturday 25-26). Mr. Charlie is once again pulled into the poem, his character absent from the morbid scenes, and henceforth included in the festivities, which will proceed “Till de red dawn come” (Saturday 28). This line is on its own straightforward; the party has gone on from dusk till dawn. It should be noted that the presentation of this line in the poem seems supremely neutral. It is not overly optimistic as the first time the dawn is mentioned in the line “Till de dawn comes in” (Saturday 8.) Likewise, it is not nearly as pessimistic as the preceding part of the poem, in which the ultimate end is discussed. This mood is conveyed somewhat by the respective lines’ preceding context. In the first mention of dawn, Mr. Charlie is told to “strut” (Saturday 7), which carries positive connotations. In the second mention, however, Mr. Charlie is merely told to “do it” (Saturday 27). While this line does indeed reference one of the previous lines, “shake ‘em up an’ shake ‘em up” (Saturday 23), the direction given to Mr. Charlie is more

removed the second time around, both in terms of distance to the commanding line, and intimacy between the poetic persona and Mr. Charlie. The final line seems to altogether hold a sensation of “come what may, for now we feast,” leaving tomorrow’s troubles to tomorrow with the poetic persona having resigned, taking a back seat to the occasion.

When taking into consideration not only the manner in which the poem appears to comment on consumerism through Mr. Charlie, and to some extent capitalism via the pawn scene, it is possible to extend the interpretation of the final line. The red dawn may indeed prophesize a communist revolution. This interpretation is based solely on two factors: the reference to a “red dawn,” red being intimately tied with communism, and the aforementioned manner in which the poem appears to comment, rather vaguely, on consumerism by means of the pawn scene. It is worth remarking that this poem was published in Hughes’ earlier years in which he was still very much a socialist activist. The potential socialist prophecy of this poem is far more hidden than the blatant communist nature of some of the poetry Hughes would come to publish in the 1930’s, and there may be several reasons for this. One may argue that Hughes was not yet too comfortable with ousting his political opinions in poetry at this time; or that he was not fully committed to the cause which would come to enamor him in the 1930’s (although he did distance himself from communism in his later years). Another possible interpretation of the line signals to an equal amount of potential bloodshed and prophesizing. The memory of the Red Summer of 1919 would still be fresh in the mind of Harlem and American society as a whole, and a red dawn may indeed hint at a tomorrow in which more blood will be shed, hence the reference to color. This interpretation may suggest that should Harlem culture fail to revolutionize American society, by going out of vogue or being altogether appropriated and wholly consumed by White America, a violent revolution may ultimately be the result.

Structurally, the poem displays far more jazz than blues traits in spite of its early publication, thus making this one of Hughes' earlier experiments with the genre. An interesting aspect that may display the poet's desire to experiment with jazz is his willingness to stray away from sexuality. While some of Hughes' blues poems are explicitly sexual, such as "To Midnight Nan at Leroy's," it is not an overtly common theme in his poetry. Although as a musical genre sexuality is a very common theme in the blues, Hughes does not oft entertain it. In "Saturday Night" the aspect of sex and its intimacy to music is introduced only to be immediately discarded through the character of Sadie, who is introduced as a prostitute only to vanish for the remainder of the narrative. The inclusion and prompt discard of sexuality may be seen as a conscious move of the poet to remove the reader's associations of a blues theme, and reinforce this particular poem's jazz nature. The poem seeks to make the reader aware that this is not a wholly conventional piece of blues or poetry, but jazz. This heightened awareness allows the reader to pick up on the structure of the poem, and how the poem swings. Visually the poem also communicates to the reader the concept of swinging with indentation on three separate occasions. This works to mark to the reader a visual indication of a swinging back and forth, albeit the poem does not mimic the structure in terms of where it swings, adding a sense of unpredictability or improvisation. When compared with some of the other poems to be discussed in this project, "Saturday Night" does not communicate a particularly high level of jazzification, particularly in terms of structure. Even so, bearing in mind its theme as well as the manner in which it provides criticism to both Harlemitic culture as well as external, hegemonic culture, "Saturday Night" ought to be considered something of a prototype jazz poem. As a prototype jazz poem, one may expect to discover some level of blues aesthetics in "Saturday Night." Yet it is difficult to argue for the presence of such aesthetics; there is no blues stanza or blue note present, nor are there any

explicit blues moans. The moan that is present in “Saturday Night,” rather than communicate despondency, signals animation.

The swing of the poem is additionally communicated via usage of syllables and stresses. The base foot of “Saturday Night” consists of two stresses, which sets up for shorter lines to which the poem adheres throughout. This double-stress structure however, is often broken or subverted, which allows for the poem to stray from its general, established rhythm: the offbeat lines create swing. The aspect of swing is further enabled by the syllabic structure of the poem; starting with the line “Pawn yo’ gold watch” (Saturday 9) there is a gradual increase in the presence of monosyllabic words. This increase in monosyllables promotes a sense of higher speed, causing faster reading and thus, an increase in perceived rhythm. The lines

Pawn yo’ gold watch

An’ diamond ring.

Git a quart o’ licker,

Let’s shake dat thing! (Saturday 9-12)

remain on foot, containing only two stressed syllables in spite of their length, all the while thematically setting up the swing to come through the line “Let’s shake dat thing” (Saturday 12). With this line, the language begins to move from the salient to the acoustic by means of scating. Through the scating, the poem gives every signal it can to indicate a heightened swing of tempo. The scats, signaled thematically by the previous lines, are indented, monosyllabic, and purely acoustic in meaning. Combined with this is the usage of hyphens to link the words visually together and the musical context of scats typically being rapid when performed. The poem goes to great lengths at this point to communicate that this poem is intended to *swing*.

From a rapid swing to a reduced tempo, an increased amount of syllables and stresses are seen with the lines “Won’t be nothin’ left / When de worms git through / An’ you’s a long time” (Saturday 15-17), giving the reader an almost conceptual whiplash by going from purely acoustic sounds to a thematically heavy subject. These lines provide a sense of deliberate deceleration until the poem meets a near standstill, both rhythmically and thematically with the following line: “Dead (Saturday 18). With this line the poet brings the line almost to a grinding halt, through using similar techniques as was seen in “The Weary Blues.” The previous line ended on a minor word, working to “heighten expectations of syntactical conclusion, paralleling harmonic resolution in music” (Chinitz, qtd. In Huang 14). Hughes sets up an expectation of both syntactical and harmonic equilibrium. This expectation that has been set up is subverted almost entirely with the single word line and its full stop, adding to a line of held breath and vocal pause, a sense of improvisation. The poem returns to its original foot but retains its monosyllabic key with the following lines “When you is / Dead, too” (Saturday 19-20). This works to leave the reader with an almost syncopated sensation through the vacuum caused by these two lines, which is immediately picked up by the following line; “So beat dat drum, boy!” (Saturday 21). Off foot by one syllable, yet retaining single-syllable words, this line swings the rhythm of the poem back around to one that is fast. The language on the following lines moves from the salient to the acoustic once again, with the phrasing “Hey! Hey! / Ho . . . Hum!” (Saturday 25-26). Interestingly enough, in spite of being in itself a word carrying coherence, the meaning of the word “hey” is removed and the word is employed due to acousticity rather than signification.

Supporting the rhythmic contrasts and swinging of the poem are particular word choices which help communicate the current “mood” of the poem. Negatively laden words are used with the intention of slowing down pace, whereas more positive, lighter pitched words are used to increase speed and tact. Typically when attempting to decrease the rhythm

of a poem, heavy syllables, which are a “heavy either by having a long vowel or being closed by a coda consonant” (Mazur 1138) slow down the pacing by lending weight to the sound, and work to elongate the pronunciation of the individual syllable. When increasing the rhythm, the opposite is done, and words with shorter vowel sounds promote a rush of words or induce a sense of panic. While Hughes does this, his word choices appear to lean more on the meaning or theme of the word than its length. The particular words which are used by the poem to slow down the rhythm of the poem are “dead” (Saturday 18 & 20), “long” (Saturday 17), and “time” (Saturday 17), all of which produce a sense of suspension and are tied together with concepts of length in time if not infinity. With the sounds /ai/ /o/ and /e/, the poem lowers its own pitch by employing vowels from the back of the throat, in addition to the surrounding consonants being comparatively soft. Starting with a liquid /l/, “long” merely fades out rather than ending on a particular note, as does time. “Dead,” on the other hand, ends abruptly, with a soft, plosive /d/. Opposite of this are the aforementioned tempo increasing words, used in the lines “So beat dat drum, boy! / Shout dat song: / Shake ‘em up an’ shake em up” (Saturday 21-23) which work to both increase tempo as well as provide a change of mood. Through the words “beat,” “boy,” and “shout,” the poem produces a sense of spontaneity through rapid, consecutive monosyllabic words that are short and “pop” – providing a brief sense of explosive burst. Furthermore, acting contrary to the words used to slow the poem down, the three words all provide a sense of the temporary: boyhood is brief – young, fresh – and both a beat and a shout are loud and explosive bursts of sound.

Something that becomes visible by reading “Saturday Night” is the manner in which the poet uses jazz, its aesthetic, to commune between polices, and tell different stories to different audiences. What is seen by the white, uninitiated reader is a straightforward poem of song and dance in a time of prohibition. The initiated, however, see cultural commentary colored by Harlem, tempered by jazz. In this sense, the poem becomes almost polyphonic by

nature, speaking in two separate tongues, with one overt and one subvert text. There is an altogether different interpretation of the lines “Dead / When you is / Dead, too” (Saturday 17-20), presented by professor Shane Vogel of the University of Indiana, in which the imagery for death is to be understood, not as overarching cultural commentary, but simply the end of the festivities for the evening.

When there are no afterhours to which to retreat, closing time can mark a radical finality, the death of subjective possibility and possible subjectivity. Even when the space is repeated and reoccupied the next night, every closing has something of the eternal in it. For Hughes, this end of the night stands as nothing less than an allegory for death, a transition in which he glimpses a haunting timelessness. (Vogel 2006)

While this analysis is radically different from the one presented in this discussion, it provides insight into the poet’s love of Harlem and its nightlife, and the manner in which Hughes went to great lengths to voice his appreciation of the place in which he “felt happy again” (Hughes 1993, 81). Without intending to criticize, this overt polyphonic voice of the uninitiated may indeed be what Vogel saw in his analysis of the subject of death, not as cultural, but as temporal. Hughes employs the aesthetics of jazz, with its swing, scatting, and idiom, to politicize his poem beyond initial impression, providing the reader with a multilayered jazz poem.

Early Evening Quarrel

A central device of both blues and jazz is that of the call and response, and one would be remiss to discuss Hughes’ poetry without discussing a poem structured wholly around this aspect. “Early Evening Blues,” originally published in 1941, is one such poem, in which the entire structure is that of blues stanzas acting as calls and responses to one another. Married with this is the narrative structure of the poem – a conversation going back and forth. In this way, the poem fashions a very natural musicality in which the poetic characters actively

participate in the form of the poem. The aspect of the call and response do not end with form, characters and narrative: it is shaped into the very themes of the poem. Superficially, the poem contains themes of poverty and gambling, seen in the line “*I gambled your dime away*” (Early 8). Another theme of the poem is “done me wrong Blues,” presented through the final stanza of the poem

Lawd, these things we women

Have to stand!

I wonder is there nowhere a

Do-right man? (Early 21-24)

and a very literal lacking sweetness, which is perceived throughout the poem in a multitude of forms. Lines such as “Coffee without sugar / Makes a good woman cry” (Early 5-6) and “*I ain’t got no sugar, Hattie*” (Early 7) work to introduce the concept of sugar as both a physical and metaphorical idea. All of these themes corroborate bitterness – the poem’s ultimate and overarching theme. The “call” in this context becomes the themes of poverty, gambling, and marital strife, while the “response” is enacted by the encircling bitterness. In this is also seen the politics of the poem’s themes and aesthetics; a humanization of the bitter livelihood of the impoverished. It should further be noted that, as was mentioned, a theme of the poem is “done me wrong Blues,” which works to extend the aspect of bitterness from exclusively poverty to feminism. The poem gathers a bitter sense of reality from several sources, fashioning them into a blues in which form, theme and aesthetic all work together in an effort to humanize the ‘low-down folks.’

Published in *Living Age* in June of 1941, “Early Evening Quarrel” is one of Hughes later blues poems. 15 years have passed since the publication of “The Weary Blues,” and in that time the way in which Hughes performs the blues in his poetry has changed markedly. Gone is the obvious blues moan and explicit mention of the blues. Instead, the poem is in

itself a blues, each stanza being of a blues nature. Admittedly, there certainly are poems published by Hughes in this period and later which *do* include both the blues moan and explicit proclamation of the blues; however, this particular poem works to indicate how the poet's usage of the blues aesthetic has developed. Unlike "The Weary Blues," "Early Evening Quarrel" lacks a poetic persona with which exposition or a recount of events is provided. Rather than adhere to the narrating voice present in "The Weary Blues," "Early Evening Quarrel" takes on the structure of an ongoing narrative with a poetic persona removed, following an argument between two lovers. The argument around which the narrative of the poem revolves is spurred by a male figure, Hammond, gambling away the last of their money. The argument escalates to implied threats, and the final two lines of the poem, "I wonder is there nowhere a / Do-right man?" (Early 23-24) cements the overall theme of the poem: "done me wrong" blues. This constitutes an interesting shift in Hughes' focus from the two previously sampled poems. "The Weary Blues" and "Saturday Night" entail evening situations somewhere in Harlem. Both focus to greater or lesser degree on the nightlife and surrounding culture of Harlem. This is a marked shift of focus from what "Early Evening Quarrel" does, which appears to have moved from the recollection or representation of Harlem life to the more simple, or quaint, daily life. "Early Evening Quarrel" shows us Hughes as a people's poet, speaking for the 'low-down folks.' Using the blues Hughes recreates, for better or for worse, a domestic dispute between Hattie and Hammond – presumably a husband and wife – who are plagued by poverty, gambling, domestic disputes, and threats of violence. This aspect of the poet as one who wishes to speak for, or to, the 'low-down folks' is key to understanding his poetry. Through "Early Evening Quarrel" Hughes confronts some of the issues he perceives to be central in African American domestic life.

The structure of the poem is clear-cut in accordance with the traditional blues stanza, coupled with vernacular language, which acts as the poem's sign of difference. The poem opens with two twelve-bar blues stanzas in which a statement is made, then repeated, then answered.

Where is that sugar, Hammond

I sent you this morning to buy?

I say, where is that sugar

I sent you this morning to buy?

Coffee without sugar

Makes a good woman cry. (Early 1-6)

The poem opens up with a woman's voice, that of Hattie, posing a question which acts as a call within the first two lines. This question is repeated in the ensuing two lines before a reply is made in the final two lines which justify the previous calls. Thus the stanza acts out the twelve-bar AAB structure, with the A lines ending on the word "buy" (Early 2) and the B line rhyming the call with "cry" (Early 6). This layout is repeated in the following stanza, in which the male's voice is heard, and the rhyme pattern repeated by the double repeat of words "away" (Early 8 & 10), and the response "say" (Early 12). This twelve-bar structure, which is the most common of the blues (Huang 39), signals to the reader the nature of this poem and its aesthetic origin. As such, those who are familiar with the structural layout of the blues will easily notice the nature of the poem, and it is here that part of the key of the poem lays. Rather than assuming that the reader is familiar with the blues *sound* by means of acoustics such as the blues moan or scating, the poem asks the reader to be familiar with the blues *stanza*. The emphasis on signaling the blues trough structure rather than acousticity demonstrates Hughes' development as an aesthician in the time between "Early Evening Quarrel" and the previously discussed poems, as well as perhaps displaying the poet's

increased confidence in his own name and an increase in cognitive recognition of his aesthetics. Initially, in the 1920's, Hughes was still making a name and reputation for himself as a blues poet. Thus in poems such as "The Weary Blues" the aesthetic is signaled to the reader immediately through the title, as well as being baked into the narrative through explicit mentions of the blues within the narrative of the poem. Adding to this is the usage of the blues moan to remind the unfamiliar of the sound of the blues. What is seen here, however, is a poet confident both in himself and in his reader to the point where the only places in which the blues is signified is through the nature of the narrative and its structure.

The employment of the blues stanza is not the only manifestation of the blues form in the poem, albeit none of the aesthetics are overtly explicit in their signaling of the blues. The whole poem follows the structure of the call and response, with an initial call made in the first stanza, and a response following the call in the second. This pattern is repeated throughout the poem, the performers never changing roles. The female character always makes the call, while the response – marked in italics – is always performed by the male. The initial call of the poem is a literal one, with Hattie calling on Hammond upon his return, asking him "Where is that sugar / I sent you this morning to buy?" (Early 1-2). The poem's usage of the word "sugar" carries different implications and is open to interpretation. Firstly, there is the literal interpretation that Hammond was indeed sent out exclusively to purchase sugar, although it may be more apt to see the sugar being discussed as an image representing love. The images provided by the poem synergize well, as the image of sugar may be used to represent sweetness on in multiple ways, as a grocery item, kisses, and general sweetness in life. This image works well with the other primary metaphor of the poem, that of coffee. The lines "Coffee without sugar / Makes a good woman cry" (Early 5-6) may be interpreted with coffee being a representation for the life led by Hattie, with the sugar being the image for sweet things in life.

This metaphorical usage of sugar is to be perceived as some form of relief or alleviator of the blues. Coffee on its own is bitter, and it may be understood as a metaphor for life in this context – life without sweetness, or some form of relief to balance out the bitterness, “makes a good woman cry” (Early 6) Likewise, the coffee may be representative of the husband of the poem. The sugar implies some form of literal sweetness from Hammond – thus the interpretation becomes a man without kindness makes a good woman cry. This understanding comes across as the more substantial of the two, albeit neither contradicts the other. Hammond’s response, “*I ain’t got no sugar, Hattie*” (Early 7) builds upon the concept of his character as lacking love or kindness. Sugar is a colloquial term for kisses or love, turning Hammond’s line into a pun. Not only does he not have the literal product, he is also lacking in the emotional department. The husband’s character as one lacking love, or “sugar,” is reinforced in the response to his blues stanza: “*If you’s a wise woman, Hattie, / You ain’t gonna have nothin to say*” (Early 11-12). Thus the poem presents to us a male character who is not willing to enter into a conversation with his significant other, who recoils at being confronted with threats. It is clear by this point in the poem that the conflict triggered almost entirely by the character of Hammond. Hammond is portrayed as a character flawed by both addiction and an inability to handle criticism. While the poem’s wording inclines the reader to sympathize with the female character, its rationale indicates that Hattie as a narrative construct is a weak woman, putting up with her emotionally abusive counterpart. It may be easy to consider the two characters of the poem as weak when seen in this manner. The emphasis, however, should not be on their individual weakness, but on the situation in which they find themselves as ‘low-down folks.’ The poet does not want these characters to be seen as archetypes of their social class, nor as examples of African Americans that will “heighten the race.” They are merely to be understood as ordinary human beings.

Following the first response, the structure of the poem changes from mimicking a twelve-bar blues to a more ambivalent and unclear pattern:

as the poem continues, however, the stanzas switch to four lines apiece, and we need to confront the question of whether the stanza influence is eight-bar or something else. Something else seems more likely: Hughes may be resorting to a common device of comedy dialogue blues. These lines may be spoken lines, each lasting one bar, the whole three stanzas lasting twelve, but merely drawing upon a common popular device of comedy blues dialogues. (Tracy, 1981)

Regardless of the structural change, the poem continues with a second call without missing a beat. Hattie's second call reinforces the sensation of the characters as ordinary people;

I ain't no wise woman, Hammond.

I am evil and mad.

Ain't no sense in a good woman

Bein treated so bad. (Early 13-16)

Hattie, by her own admission, is "evil and mad" (Early 14). Rather than acting wisely by rising above the emotional tension of the argument, she pursues it, influencing her with the blues. The blues stanza in time directly manifests into the characters, modifying their moods. In this second call, Hattie's character may initially be perceived as angry. By the time the third call is made the blues has taken root in the argument, and the feeling conveyed by the final stanza is moreso an emotion of despair than fury. Hammond, on the other hand, in his second and final answer, becomes a character seemingly consumed by fury:

I don't treat you bad, Hattie

Neither does I treat you good.

But I reckon I could treat you

Worser if I would. (Early 17-20)

Replying to Hattie's call that he treats her bad, Hammond's stanza opens with his denial of treating her poorly, in spite of the previously addressed gambling issue being confirmation that he indeed does, before moving on to what is in all likelihood a threat of physical violence. Hammond's personal indifference towards his gambling addiction posits an interesting opinion. These two characters are, as discussed, 'low-down folks.' If Hammond's perspective is in any way an indication or reflection of society at large, it would indicate that the poem is attempting to highlight ignorance around gambling and the consequences of addiction. Within the narrative of the poem, the act of gambling has very clearly had a negative influence on the two central characters, despite the male character's denial that he treats the female character poorly. Hammond as a character works not only as commentary on the potentially devastating effects of gambling, but also on the individual unwillingness of seeing one's own faults. Thus, the poem employs the blues to reflect on issues relevant the poet finds to be relevant to the 'low-down folks.'

It is interesting to see how the poet employs the blues stanza in different narratives. As was seen in "The Weary Blues" the blues stanza tells the story of a life-weary musician. In poems such as "403 Blues" and "In a Troubled Key" Hughes uses the blues stanza to tell of love. In "Early Evening Quarrel" the blues stanza is employed structurally to tell a fairly simple story. While the blues stanza is the key structure around which the poem revolves, it is utilized in such a way that "by changing to the shorter form in his later stanzas, Hughes is able to keep up the staccato pace of his arguing couple and still make use of a blues format. This is one of the most original uses of the blues form in Hughes's works" (Waldron 145). The poem's impressive structure notwithstanding, there is little in the way of aesthetic politicization in this work, at the very least of the subversive kind as was seen in "Saturday Night," in which the poem uses its the origin of its aesthetic and thus police to comment politically on an opposing, dominant police. Instead, the politics of the aesthetics presented in

“Early Evening Quarrel” is of a type that may be argued to break the boundaries of the poem’s police – the running theme is that of humanization of the poor. For better or for worse the characters of the poem are to be considered active agents of their own existence, with the joy and pain this agency brings. In this particular case, the freedom of Hammond has brought despondency to Hattie, and while the poet is clearly intending this to be a reflection of the African American ‘low-down folks,’ the poem becomes a reflection of any impoverished police across the world.

Dream Boogie

The final of Hughes’ poems discussed in this project is “Dream Boogie,” the inaugural poem of his 1951 collection *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. *Montage* also includes “Harlem” – popularly known as “Dream Deferred.” “Harlem” in all likelihood Hughes’ most famous poem, as well as the single poem which best encapsulates the theme of *Montage*, posing the simple question: “What happens to a dream deferred?” (Harlem 1). The concept of the “dream deferred” is the central theme running throughout *Montage*, and within the context of the collection, the phrase “dream deferred” is to be understood as the African American dream for equality. The collection presents a central focus on musicality, “the low-down folks,” and the theme of the “dream deferred.” It is important to acknowledge that the theme of the “dream deferred” appears to greater or lesser extent in a large amount of the poems of *Montage*, for example poems “Tell Me,” “Dream Boogie,” “Deferred,” and, as has already been mentioned, “Harlem.” Of the mentioned poems, “Dream Boogie” is the most appropriate poem for a discussion centered on jazz, as it is a poem with explicit jazzification in theme, structure, and language. Furthermore, “Dream Boogie” relies on its jazzification – its aesthetics – to communicate a political statement, thus making its inclusion into the discussion all the more apt. The poem’s aesthetic of musical influence is immediately communicated by means of its title; “Dream Boogie.” Defined as “a style of blues played on

the piano with a strong, fast beat” (“Boogie”), “Boogie” instantly conveys an essence of musicality to the reader. The “dream” on the other hand, has two core meanings embedded within it. Firstly, the “dream” is a very literal aspect of the narrative, as physicality and locale are negatives in the poem. In discussing how the narrative of “Dream Boogie” relates to modernism and realism, Professor Anita Patterson of Boston University argues that the poem avoids familiar reference to historical contexts; it twists away from language toward abstract sequences of sound; and it brings us into a discursive world in which speech and perception have been broken down into fragments. Insofar as the speaker touches on realities, his treatment of them is almost wholly nondescriptive. (Patterson 680)

In this sense the presentation of the locale of the poem mimics that of a dream. It is loose, unbound, and difficult to pin down. No physical location is stated, merely hinted at through very loose references, and the structure of the poem likewise supports a level of “dream-like” narrative. On the other hand, the presence of the word “dream” works with the theme of the rest of the *Montage*, referencing the “unrealized one: the singular, African-American ‘dream deferred’” (Brown 2012).

There exists extensive literature around Dream Boogie and various interpretations of its narrative. Several readings, such as Rick Brown of Cumberland University’s 2012 article “Bitter jazz in Langston Hughes’ Dream Boogie,” interpret the poem to be having two separate voices who eventually “merge into syncopated jazz scatting” (Brown 2012). While many such readings approach the poem as two voices holding a conversation, marked by standard format and italicization, this discussion will instead consider the poem as a polyphonic narrative in which we as readers are only exposed to one of the voices, with the cursive text being instances of monophony. The monophony of the poem is marked by dashes; “–” which enable breaks that “let a single musician shine with a monophonic passage” (DeVeaux 28). There are two characters who drive the narrative – the conversation

of the poem – however, one of these characters within this reading of the poem is to be understood as mute – censored. “Dream Boogie” contains the presence of two characters, yet only one voice. The readers of the poem are not indulged in precisely what the second character of the poem says, only the effects of their words. Regardless of this, the poem should be considered an experiment in polyphony, wherein one of the voices, which would ordinarily be on equal footing with the other voice “competing for our attention” (DeVeaux 28), is rendered mute. While this *is* an instance of arguing for a negative, the negative in question synergizes with the political message of the poem – jazz’ ability to speak in multiple voices is what lends it its power, and the removal of one of the voices, as is according to this argument the case in “Dream Boogie,” renders the poem partially mute – resulting in fragmentation.

“Dream Boogie” opens with four lines which introduce several of the poem’s core aspects. The first line, “Good morning, daddy” (Dream 1) signals jazz through the usage of the phrase “daddy,” a general way of addressing another person whilst denoting familiarity within jazz circles (“Daddy-o”). This aesthetic is further reinforced by the third line, which is dedicated to creating an awareness of jazz as “the boogie-woogie rumble.” This boogie-woogie is not only employed referentially but also structurally as the poem continually swings and syncopates, lending jazz to both its visage and rhythm. The entire opening collectively poses a question, “Ain’t you heard / The boogie-woogie rumble / Of a dream deferred” (Dream 2-4), separating in this instance the poetic listener from the reader. The poetic voice speaks directly to character within the narrative, who is separate from the reader of the poem. The poetic persona invites a response, prompting both the poetic listener and the reader to reflect upon the nature of a tune’s beat. The speaker attempts to elicit a deeper understanding of the tune from both listener and reader with the lines “Listen closely: / You’ll hear their feet / Beating out and beating out a–” (Dream 5-7). The word *listen* provides

a hint to the unspoken setting of the poem. The two characters being together and being able to listen to jazz as it is happening, not reflect upon it afterwards, implies that the two are in a jazz club of some description. The speaker is interrupted mid-sentence, and the question goes unanswered as the poetic listener is willfully or blissfully ignorant of the true nature of not only the speaker, but of jazz itself, as revealed by the poetic persona's monophonic response: "You think / It's a happy beat?" (Dream 8-9). The speaker attempts once again to prompt reflection and thought in the poetic listener. In this interaction the politics of the poem present themselves, as jazz itself by means of stop-time is employed to prompt reflection in jazz and its capabilities.

This prompt falls flat to the poetic listener, and in his failure the poetic persona surrenders himself not only to the musicality of the surroundings, but also the poetic listener – "Sure, / I'm happy! / Take it away!" (Dream 15-17) – as the poem concludes in bebop: "Hey, pop! / Re-bop! / Mop!" (Dream 18-20). In spite of the speaker and listener appearing to have an ongoing conversation, they do not directly speak – although responses to the actions and thoughts are reflected through the poetic speaker, the poem does not recite any of the remarks made by the poetic listener. The speaker is seen attempting to directly address the listener, however the prompts are deflected – ignored – and the listener gives no indication of being interested in *listening*, continuously failing to see the true nature of not only the music but the conversation in which he is supposed to participate. The poem presents two characters of separate polices, the speaker and the listener, who thus have an inherently different distribution of the sensible. This is the core cause for the failure to communicate. The poetic listener's *inability* to comprehend comes from exactly his police's filtering of the sensible: He is uninitiated in the world of jazz.

This failed understanding and staccato conversation is reflected by the shape of the poem. The poem is fragmented throughout, abruptly breaking lines and interrupting itself

when changing speaker, even if the poem does not divulge what is said by the poetic listener. The shape of the poem, the way it looks, is key to how it communicates not only its jazz, but its narrative and underlying politics. Keeping in mind the collection's central theme – a dream deferred – the uninitiated listener's unwillingness and inability to hold a conversation with the poetic persona becomes a reflection of race politics at the time. The echo of the listener displays an unwillingness to listen, shown by the poetic persona's response to their interruption "*You think / It's a happy beat?*" (Dream 8-9), and the inability to understand with the line "*What did I say?*" (Dream 14). This jazz performance ultimately shapes itself into a comment on White America. Similarly to what was seen in "Saturday Night," the poem's second character represents the generic white American – a person uninitiated in the jazz tradition. The messages conveyed by these uninitiated characters are nearly identical. Whereas the character of "Mr. Charlie" in "Saturday Night" acted as an avatar of cultural consumption, the unnamed listener presented in "Dream Boogie" personifies the threat of cultural appropriation. This aspect of appropriation is seen in the manner in which, as the poem goes on, the poetic persona eventually concedes with the statement "Take it away!" (Dream 17), leaving the right of way for jazz and its message with the uninitiated listener – the characterization of white America. The manner in which this uninitiated character is employed by the poem is also similar: the character does not directly speak, but is rather spoken *to* by the poetic persona. In doing this, "Dream Boogie" exposes to the reader a jazz experiment. Jazz, which is fundamentally structured around a multitude of voices, is left purposefully singular; a lone voice communes with the reader, and only the repercussions of the poetic listener may be witnessed. The voice of the second character is rendered mute, resulting in a fragmented and syncopated narrative, which is in itself what signals the jazz.

The shape of the poem acts to reflect the politics and rhythm, but it also signals how physicality and locale play a role in "Dream Boogie." Of the four selected Hughes poems,

“Dream Boogie” is the one in which physicality is the least central, which works to display what may prove to be a developing trend in jazz poetry. “Early Evening Quarrel,” “The Weary Blues” and “Saturday Night” all held aspects of spatial cognition as they all carried some level of physical locale inherent to their narrative. “The Weary Blues” was set very explicitly on Lenox Avenue, “Saturday Night” is by implication connected to both the physical and cultural Harlem – set in Harlem and thematically centered on Harlemites culture – and “Early Evening Quarrel” is clearly set in an unspecified home. These poems all have very clearly defined narratives which occur over some duration of time. Rather than be tied to a spatial context, the narrative of “Dream Boogie” is fragmented, focusing entirely on three elements: the speaker, the listener, and the jazz. Time is played with in a similar manner. A sense of time is difficult to grasp, as the syncopation leads to fragmentation both literally in the structure of the poem and narratively in the sequence of events to which the reader is exposed: the events appear to occur chronologically, yet their duration is difficult to measure or comprehend as the syncopation adds undefined measurements of time. Particularly in the space between the lines “something underneath / like a–” (Dream 12-13) and “*What did I say?*” (Dream 14) a series of events, which the poem does not indulge the reader in, appears to have occurred. There is no specificity to the narrative presented by “Dream Boogie.” This presentation of an unspecific narrative, bound to neither space nor time, is something that will be encountered further in the discussion surrounding Yona Harvey and her collection *Hemming the Water*, in which many of the poems present themselves in a similar manner as “Dream Boogie.”

The narrative of the poem indicates that the setting is in a jazz club of some sort, although the opening line of the poem suggests otherwise; “Good morning, daddy!” (Dream 1). The line as stated works to present the jazz nature of the poem through the word “daddy,” but it also working to displace a sense of secure spatial location, a consequence of the

“*Dream Boogie*.” The particular phrasing “Good morning, daddy” works contrary to what one would ordinarily associate with an outing involving jazz music, something that would typically be set during the evening. Thus the line signals not to an awakening of the physical, but of cognition. The speaker is attempting to wake the listener to the true nature of jazz.

Good morning, daddy!

Ain’t you heard

The boogie-woogie rumble

Of a dream deferred? (*Dream* 1-4)

With these opening lines the poetic voice prompts an awakening in the character of “daddy” through a question. This character is to be understood as a twofold one; “daddy” represents both the poetic listener and the reader of the poem, as the poetic persona attempts to awaken both the cognition of reader as well as the second character. The following lines tie jazz, here represented as “boogie-woogie,” (*Dream* 3) together with the motif of the “dream deferred” (*Dream* 4). The “boogie-woogie” is represented as a “rumble” (*Dream* 3) “*of a dream deferred*” (emphasis mine), which signals a connection between the two. The dream deferred creates a low, continuous, underlying rumble, and this rumble is the boogie-woogie. It creates that “something underneath” (*Dream* 12). It is here that *Montage’s* aspect of the “dream deferred” once again becomes visible, being a central theme in not only the collection “*Dream Boogie*” was published in, but also much of Hughes’ poetry. Thus by tying together the concepts of “boogie-woogie” and the “dream deferred” the poem announces the capability of jazz to speak for and represent the dream for equality. By extension this announcing of jazz’s ability to speak also proclaims the aesthetic’s ability to comment on social matters. The question posed by the opening section is a rhetorical one, prompting no simple response, thus prodding both the reader and the poetic listener’s cognition of jazz. Through this prodding the poem lays the foundation for confronting how the White American

listener is incapable or unwilling of hearing how the art of jazz communicates emotion. The repeated prompts given to the listener through the lines “Listen closely” (Dream 5) and “Listen to it closely” (Dream 10) signals the poetic persona’s attempts at making the listener realize the difference in *hearing* jazz and *feeling* – understanding – it. Hughes’ depiction of White America’s inability to comprehend the language of jazz is paralleled in Zora Neale Hurston’s “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” (1928). A quarter of a century before Hughes published *Montage*, Hurston confronted the very same inability to understand and to *feel* jazz that is seen in “Dream Boogie.” Displaying an interaction between an unnamed “white person” (Hurston 942) and herself, Hurston recounts:

‘Good music they have here,’ he remarks, drumming the table with his fingertips.

Music. The great blobs of purple and red emotion have not touched him. He has only heard what I felt. He is far away and I see him but dimly across the ocean and the continent that have fallen between us. He is so pale with his whiteness then and I am *so* colored. (Hurston 942)

The similarity in portrayal is uncanny, and it is probable that Hughes took inspiration in writing “Dream Boogie” from Hurston. Assuming this is the case, “Dream Boogie” itself enacts jazz by the manner in which it acts as a reformulation of “How It Feels to Be Colored Me.” The manner in which the two portray the same issue in such a similar tone works to reinforce the impression of the dream deferred. Both the poetic persona of “Dream Boogie” and Hurston in “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” display a level of exasperation at the inability to understand. In the 23 years that have passed since Hurston’s publishing of “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” white America’s understanding of jazz, and with it the African American Dream, has not improved, and the fact that the same issue is relevant 23 years later may be part of what causes the eventual exasperation and surrender of the poetic persona of “Dream Boogie.” This unwillingness is put on full display in the third section of the poem.

With the second passage, the poetic voice further attempts to prompt reflection from the poetic listener. This prompt is interrupted by some form of off-hand remark or action, to which only the poetic persona's response is visible: "*You think / It's a happy beat?*" (Dream 8-9). The interruption which the speaker was subject to works to syncopate the poem, interrupting itself as it speaks through the poetic voice, and within his response to this interruption lies the key to understanding jazz. In some form to which we as readers are not exposed to, the poetic listener has suggested that jazz is happy, and the manner in which the speaker responds clues the reader in to the fact that jazz is to be understood as anything but. Discussing how the line breaks of "Dream Boogie" clue the reader into the tone and mood of the poetic persona, Patterson states that "The rhetorical question "*You think / It's a happy beat?*" has the visual effect of stretching, tonally inflecting, and thereby extending the meaning of the trope to include its own correct response" (Patterson 681).

The poetic speaker recomposes himself after some undefined period of time, and attempts to once again engage with the poetic listener. The speaker prompts further engagement with the music, asking both the poetic listener and the reader to "Listen [...] closely" (Dream 10) and look for the *subtext* of the music, quite literally, by indicating that there is something "underneath" – some hidden meaning to that perceived "tom-tom beating of joy and laughter" (Hughes 1994, 58). The poetic persona pleads for the listener to realize that the "tom-tom beating of joy and laughter" is also the "tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile" (Hughes 1994, 58). By this point it is clear that the interest of the poetic listener is long gone, and as was the case with the second section, the fourth section ends abruptly. The interruption of the speaker presented in the lines "something underneath / like a—" (Dream 12-13) syncopates, or breaks, not only the poem but the thoughts of the speaker. This syncopation occurs "just before one would expect the

critical phrase ‘dream deferred’” (Brown 2012). As with the last syncopation some remark to which the reader is not privy is passed, causing the poetic persona to lose their composure: “*What did I say?*” (Dream 14). The speaker becomes fragmented, falling wholly into the narrative – an agent of jazz – and losing track of the conversation. By means of this fragmentation the speaker can no longer be separated from the overt text of jazz, acting out that beat of joy and laughter which he was attempting to awaken the meaning of in the listener. The speaker is reduced from active agent to acoustic voice following the lines “Sure! / I’m Happy! / Take it away!” (Dream 15-17). The interjection which finally shattered the will of the poetic persona represents “the speaker’s inability to say [dream deferred] [...] constitutes a literal, aural deferral of speech that metaphorically echoes the disenfranchisement of his people” (Brown 2012).

Communicated by the speaker descending into bebop, acousticity ensues. This descent is signaled by the duality of the phrase “Take it away!” (Dream 17). Firstly, the poetic voice’s role as the leading performer of the poem’s jazz is taken away. The lead is passed to the poetic listener, and the salience of words is pushed to the back in order to promote mindless, happy bebop – the “tom-tom of joy and laughter” (Hughes 1994, 58) without “something underneath” (Dream 12). In doing this the poem’s musicality is highlighted. In the usage of musical terminology, the poem rapidly changes its own method of presentation, in a similar manner to how different musicians having the lead influences the presentation of a musical piece. In this surrender jazz’s subvert text is completely erased. Jazz’s ability to be more than just the tom-tom of joy and laughter, its ability to be the “tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world,” – “pain swallowed in a smile” (Hughes 1994, 58) – is all but removed in its entirety. The salience, the commentary, the meaning of jazz, which lies underneath and at its very core, becomes expelled and replaced with pure acousticity – “‘Good music they have here.’ [...] He has only heard what I felt” (Hurston

942). The lines with which the poem prompts understanding enact a jazz statement and subsequent repeat; “Listen closely” (Dream 5), “Listen to it closely” (Dream 10); however, an understanding fails to be reached. The pleas of the poetic persona are lost upon the listener, and as such there is no final reformulation. The jazz revision of “Dream Boogie” is lost, mutated into surrender and be-bop. Within the fragmented narrative of the poem, bebop signifies an elimination of cohesion – an abolition of that “something underneath” of which the poem was striving to enlighten both the reader and the poetic listener. The bebop also implies a sense of temporal progression. The phrase “*Hey, pop!*” (Dream 18) harkens back to the opening line of “Good morning, daddy!” (Dream 1), and may be interpreted as signaling an aging, or deterioration in the person being spoken to. The expression “daddy” establishes the person being spoken to as a young person, however by the end of the poem he is reduced to a grandfatherly figure who has disintegrated into nonsensical bebop – a “pop.”

The idea of jazz as pain swallowed in a smile, as music with that “something underneath” thus becomes the politics of the aesthetic of “Dream Boogie.” The poem ultimately attempts to do to the reader what it has failed to do in the narrative: to awaken a sense of jazz as art, and to build a foundation of understanding of the music. The manner in which “Dream Boogie” utilizes its aesthetic and its themes is interesting when compared with the other Hughes poems that have been discussed. In “The Weary Blues” the poet used the aesthetic of the blues to comment on its authenticity as an artform – its ability to speak, to comment, to engage with the reader and create emotional response. In “Saturday Night” on the other hand, jazz was used both thematically and aesthetically to present an interaction between polices with the underlying threat of white appropriation of Harlem culture. “Dream Boogie” unifies these politics into a single poem, speaking for the authenticity of jazz and imploring reflection, all the while presenting the ignorance of the representative of another police. Furthermore, “Dream Boogie” is far more stylistically influenced by its jazz aesthetic,

than “Saturday Night” proved to be, incorporating breaks as well as syncopation into its structure. This signals a development in jazz poetry which will prove to be salient when examining contemporary jazz poet Yona Harvey’s poetry collection *Hemming the Water*.

Chapter 3: *Hemming the Water*

Hemming the Water is a collection of poetry published in 2013 by Professor Yona Harvey of the University of Pittsburgh, winning the Kate Tufts Discovery Award the following year (“Previous Winners & Finalists”). The collection demonstrates strong ties to jazz, with Harvey herself stating that “I attempt to redirect the disruptions of motherhood and domestic life by employing them through sound and rhythm” (“Artist Statement”). Sound and rhythm are focal points of the collection, but it is worth stating that the collection puts an equal emphasis on silence as well as a breaking of rhythm. *Hemming the Water* balances the fine line of sound and silence – rhythm and breaks – in order to revise the jazz from which it is itself inspired. The connection to jazz is made explicit to the reader through, amongst other factors, poem titles such as “Communion with Mary Lou Williams” as well as “Notes on Polyphony.” Apart from the themes of “motherhood and domestic life” mentioned by Harvey, *Hemming the Water* also carries strong tones of social justice, and it uses its aesthetic to convey this message. It is worth reflecting upon the publication date of the collection – April 9th 2013 (“Hemming the Water (Stahlecker Selections)”). This places the date of publication mere months before the recognition of the Black Lives Matter movement as a social movement, which gained traction in the summer of 2013 following the acquittal of George Zimmerman of the murder of Trayvon Martin (“Timeline: The Black Lives Matter Movement”). Despite preceding the movement, *Hemming the Water* displays a highly conscious connection with its core concepts, visible in for example “The Riot Inside Me,” which speaks of an unnamed son killed by gunshot, prompting civil response. Thus there is an inherent political relationship between the Black Lives Matter movement and *Hemming the Water*, and the affinity between the two will be most forthcoming in the discussion around “The Riot Inside Me.”

There are superficial similarities between much of the collection and Hughes' "Dream Boogie," such as a lacking spatial focus and distinctive usage of breaks and syncopation. The loose style of "Dream Boogie" does indeed signal a jazz development that remains visible in *Hemming the Water*, and jazz as an aesthetic is an intrinsic part of *Hemming the Water*. This jazz, however, remarkably different from what has been examined thus far, including Hughes' later works. Jazz is an art which relies on statement, repetition, and revision, and *Hemming the Water* goes out of its way to demonstrate a revised jazz poetry inspired by a multitude of jazz statements. What is crafted by the collection is jazz poetry composed from a spectrum of jazz influences, which it repeats and revises throughout to form its own message. This statement of jazz working throughout *Hemming the Water* may be seen most clearly in "Communion with Mary Lou Williams." This poem employs several different styles of writing, which will be talked about in depth in this chapter. The reason for these different styles is communicated by the poem with the phrase "Dear Live at the Cookery." "Live at the Cookery" is one of famed jazz musician Mary Lou Williams' (1910-1981) live albums, an album which, according to reviewer Scott Yanow, "essentially takes listeners on a trip through the history of jazz" (Yanow). This approach is similar to what is done by "Communion with Mary Lou Williams," and by extension, *Hemming the Water*, ultimately enabling the collection as a whole to encompass jazz. *Hemming the Water* makes statements in its initial poem, which it repeats and reformulates throughout, until finally they are revised by the final poem of the collection. While this internal jazz is occurring, the collection as a whole is in itself acting as a revision of jazz, replying to the statements made by those who came before, most visibly Mary Lou Williams.

The aesthetic of jazz is used to communicate a pro-social justice stance, as well as the power of speech filtered through jazz. The jazz of *Hemming the Water* is such that it participates in the shaping of individual poems as well as the collection as a whole. Drawing

on the inspiration of Mary Lou Williams, the structure and style of the collection changes on a poem-to-poem basis, and even within poems themselves, as seen in “Communion with Mary Lou Williams.” *Hemming the Water* with its jazz-influenced structure experiments with both the concepts of the voice as well as its own narrative structure, and through this experimentation is born both polyphony and even polyrhythm. Polyphony is a common thread throughout, weaving into the collection a reinforced focus on the aspect of the voice. This focus on vocality is particularly visible in the collection’s final piece – “Notes on Polyphony.” In terms of structure, many of the poems have sudden line breaks or long pauses, emulating stop-time. Likewise, one may examine emphasis on phrases and words which endeavor to contradict the previously established pattern, working to convey a sense of syncopation. Once again, “Communion with Mary Lou Williams” is an apt example to bring up, with an ample supply of line breaks as well as strong accents that do not correlate with the basic meter. An instance of this occurs in the lines “*parts of me you / hip cats, you wannabes, you running men*” (Communion 25-26). In this example, the line break preceding the phrase “*hip cats*” allows not only for stop-time, but when combined with the comma following the phrase it becomes stressed. It is worth noting that while jazz is argued to be the central aesthetic of *Hemming the Water*, it is not the focal point of every poem in the collection. The first and final texts of the collection – “Notes on Polyphony” and “(Girl With Red Scarf)” (henceforth “Notes” and “Girl” respectively) – exhibit minimal structural and stylistic input of jazz. Instead, these poems work as frames for the remainder of the collection, establishing fundamental statements that are repeated and revised throughout *Hemming the Water*.

With the acknowledgement that several of the poems speak polyphonically, with structures influenced by jazz, the following poems have been selected: “The Riot Inside Me,” “Communion with Mary Lou Williams,” and the frames of the collection; “Notes on

Polyphony,” and “(Girl With Red Scarf)”. “The Riot Inside Me” has been selected based on its structure: the form of the poem is strikingly uneven and fragmented. Hidden within this fragmentary structure is a polyphonic narrative, representing two different angles of interpretation for the same story of social justice. “Communion with Mary Lou Williams” presents several unique sections which incorporate varying structure, as well as a theme centered around jazz and the famous jazz composer Mary Lou Williams. In addition to this, “Communion with Mary Lou Williams” acts as a focal point for the poem’s model of divinity, a concept which is originally presented in “Girl,” the frame of the collection. Lastly, the frames; “Girl” and “Notes” have been chosen due to how they address not only the collection as a whole, but the reader as well as the poet in a unique attempt to communicate the jazz of the collection. The focus of the discussion around the two poems will be on “Notes on Polyphony” due to the manner in which it “responds” to the collection and the call made by “Girl With Red Scarf,” with the discussion around “Girl With Red Scarf” being focused on the imagery of the poem – its statements.

(Girl With Red Scarf)

Resembling poetic prose, “Girl With Red Scarf” opens with an image of four girls, characterized by their scarves of different colors. The girl with the red scarf, who “stood apart from the others” (Harvey 3) is as the title puts it the focus of the poem. She is the titular character. The girls “stood laughing wildly together” (3), and when the poem proceeds to list the topics of conversation, we as readers are illuminated to the age of the girls; “there was talk of toads & talk of kissing & many gowns & much ceremony, but mostly talk for talk’s sake” (3). The conversation topics, when unified, form fairy tales – stories of kissing toads who become princes. Based on the nature of the conversation topics, we may conclude that the girls in question are young, likely pre-pubescent. This, in turn, gives the narrative of “Girl” a sense of temporal progression, as the focal point of the latter part of the poem is

moved from fairy tales to sexuality. Prior to this however, a more significant shift of focus occurs: “Though listening is what the girl with the red scarf did most” (3). When the spotlight returns to the girl with the red scarf, the emphasis is moved from speech to listening. With the focus shifted from speech to listening, an aspect of silence is insinuated to by the stillness of the girl with the red scarf, who would “from a distance seem still” (3). With this the poem immediately puts an emphasis on *sound*, a central aspect of not only “Girl With Red Scarf” but also the whole of *Hemming the Water*. Sound remains the focal point of the rest of “Girl,” and the protagonist creates it herself with “fingers on books. On bellies. On windows. With a boy pressed against her, she attempted music, a collaborative first” (3). By means of this drumming, the theme of sound is expanded beyond speech and listening to rhythm. Moreover, a layer of jazz is also added to the character of the girl, as through her creation of rhythm she herself improvises and experiments with sound.

With the revelation that “Sound was God, as she understood it, always poised to listen” (3), sound, and with it, music, is raised to the level of divinity. Looking at the appearances of sound allows an understanding of what the metaphor of divinity signifies. The girl with the red scarf creates rhythm – sound – by drumming, recreating what is found at “the center of the ear: a drum” (3). Responding to the rhythm created by the girl, the poem poses the questions: “What was that sound? The naught-girl signal? Womanish gardenia opening?” (3). In addition to signaling that the girl has become a woman, these questions prompt not only reflection around what the source of the sound was, but also the significance and experience of the sound. The poem highlights the process of making meaning out of sound. This, in turn, is what the girl with the red scarf does herself. The equation of sound to God may be interpreted as the ability of music, named in the poem as speech, rhythm and listening, to not only carry influence and meaning, but *create* it. In having sex, the girl engages in the creation of sound and of life. This form of sound has the power to create life,

making it divine indeed. Yet sound is not only music, for it is also speech, and the statement that “God is good. (Sometimes)” (3) may be an image for how words carry weight, ultimately highlighting the power of speech – of the voice, which in turn proves to be a core theme in *Hemming the Water*.

The poem concludes with a call for the rest of the collection; “Fierce fragmentation, lonely tune” (3). Signaling the poems to come, the fragmentation is enacted by individual poems, while the lonely tune becomes the entirety of *Hemming the Water*. In accordance with its title, *Hemming the Water* stitches the individual poems – fiercely fragmented – together to form a “lonely tune.” The fragmentation is reinforced by the fact that “Girl” in itself is merely one in four parts, collectively referenced as “Sound.” Inspecting briefly some individual poems, the fragmentation is visible not only in the scattering of “Sound,” but also structurally in individual poems such as “Theory of the Unheld,” “Hearing My Daughter’s Heartbeat the First Time,” and “The Riot Inside Me.” Lastly, there may be another layer to the final sentence of “Girl With Red Scarf,” as it may be a reference to the overarching aesthetic of *Hemming the Water*. In “fierce fragmentation, lonely tune” (3) one may see evidence of jazz – the fragmentation is the polyrhythmic nature of the art, with the lonely tune symbolizing the jazz soloist.

Notes on Polyphony

As with “Girl,” “Notes” echoes poetic prose, opening with the sentence “At first I felt my head was too much with me.” (Harvey 72) This opening line in part works to suggest one of the themes of the poem through drawing attention to the head: rationale. While the poetic persona is neither named nor specifically gendered by the poem, it is appropriate to describe them as female on the basis of the theme of motherhood. Focusing on the themes of rationale, speech, and motherhood, “Notes on Polyphony” tells the story of a woman who, upon the prompt of an unseen voice, screws off her head, which thus far had inhibited her speech.

With her now uninhibited voice, the poetic persona observes “a bored shark coloring the water” and a “girl cradling her head somewhere” (72). This girl is likely the girl with the red scarf presented by the first poem of the collection. The clearest indication of this is the presence of “her siblings” (72), which, along with the girl with the red scarf, have been reduced to blood. The theme of motherhood comes to light as the speaker proceeds to “place her in my throat” (72), essentially taking upon herself the responsibility for what is shown as a dead child. This enables a symbiotic relationship in which the poetic persona merges with the girl with the red scarf, giving her a body with which to move, and a voice with which to speak. This unification of the characters in effect becomes an “unbirth,” a revision of a concept initially shown in “Girl” – “A collaborative first. An unsex” (3). This shapes a rather literal image for polyphony. The body of the poetic persona now hosts two clearly defined individuals who are still separate entities: “she can move now as my body moves, my neck, my head nodding” (72). The girl with the red scarf is not consumed, but absorbed, and the two entities are unified.

The image of the two characters merging into one participates in the poem’s theme of polyphony, yet it is not a theme which is shaped by the structure of the poem as a self-contained piece – to find this polyphony, one must examine “Girl” – the other end of the frame. That is not to say that “Notes” does not contain value as a standalone poem. “Notes” is unique in that it is a poem which acknowledges the reader, and the poet, all the while explicating the poem’s overall core aesthetic of jazz. The elucidation of jazz is particularly communicated by the poem’s title – “Notes on Polyphony” – in which the presence of polyphony is stated. While there are several poems which rely on jazz to present itself, “Notes” is a meta-poem, addressing and acknowledging not only itself, but the whole of *Hemming the Water*. Through a brief thank you note – “I want to thank you for hearing this small trickle in a sea” (72) – the poem directly acknowledges the reader, all the while acting

as a repetition, or revision, of “Girl.” “Notes” is a poem which focuses primarily on the aspect of speech, or rather difficulty in speaking and being heard, as well as what speech may bring. The speech has three central functions. The presence of the voice brings joy – “my hips, torso, & upright arms trembled at that sudden a capella” (72); concern – “I am trying to steady myself as I wait” (72); and perhaps, most importantly, it gives a voice to those who can not speak for themselves – “You have placed her in my throat. & now I can reattach my head. & the girl is inside me; she can move now as my body moves, my neck, my head nodding” (72). What is shown is in essence the power of speech. The poem relies on the deification of speech and sound that took place in “Girl.” With this image manifested, “Notes” employs speech as something which brings joy as seen in the dance, and which has the power to represent and give life as shown by the integration of the dead girl. This speech, however, is not easily attained – “*Your head, you got to take it off*” (72) – and the ripples created by speaking carry their own risk: “I am trying to steady myself as I wait. There’s a bored shark coloring the water” (72). The removal of the head symbolizes a removal of “reason,” or perhaps of weighing the consequences, while the presence of the shark as well as the character waiting is a metaphor indicating the risk of speaking up. Alternately, this may represent the poetic persona waiting to see if her words will hold any weight. These images convey *Hemming the Water*’s overarching philosophy of speaking up, of conveying your thoughts, and perhaps more radically, of abandoning fears or rationale which would inhibit speech. “Notes on Polyphony,” as part of the frame for *Hemming the Water*, provides the lens through which the rest of the collection is read.

The poem’s role as a framing device is in part communicated by its title. The acknowledgement of the term “polyphony” alerts the reader to the poem’s polyphonic nature, and by extension, the remainder of the collection. Furthermore, as polyphony is a central trait of jazz music, the use of the word works to further disambiguate *Hemming the Water*’s

connection to jazz. Previous poems in the collection whose titles act similarly are “Communion with Mary Lou Williams” as well as “Mary J. (Upswing).” “Notes” differs from these poems with the sentence “I want to thank you for hearing this small trickle in a sea” (72), which addresses the reader directly. The title, when put in the context of the poem, makes explicit the presence of jazz, acting as a kind of afterword to the collection, all the while playing its role as frame. “Notes” operates as a reflection upon Harvey’s own writing of her poetry, embedded within the collection. The poem illuminates the collection to the reader, and its placement as the final poem of the collection is no coincidence. “Notes” acts as a flashlight to the reader, with which they should go back and reread the collection in order to comprehend not only what the aesthetic of the collection is, but also how it is used. In essence, the poem enacts jazz in how it is the final revision, with which the reader is intended to reflect upon the initial statement of the poem.

The first line of the text introduces three aspects that are central to the poem: A poetic persona, another speaker, and the head as a metaphor. The speaker begins with the feeling that her “head was too much with me” (72), to which a second speaker, marked by italics, says “*Take it off [...] Your head, you got to take it off*” (72). Following this interaction, the speaker does indeed take off her head, which enables her mouth “which all before had been sewed shut—to open & sing” (72). The removal of the head may, as has been touched upon, symbolize in essence a removal of reason. The head itself symbolizes thought, and when it is removed song and dance takes its place. This interaction also conveys the power of the voice. The voice which prompts the removal of the head is merely “a voice” (72). As such, one may deduce that there is no relation between the poetic persona and the unnamed voice, yet in spite of lacking an established relationship, the speaker follows up on the prompt given by the unnamed voice. This gives the impression that, in spite of the head being the source of reason, it is not the end-all-be-all of conveying oneself. It is only by the power of a

voice that the poetic persona gains her own voice – speech enables speech. It is contagious and empowering. Her voice, in turn, allows her to give voice to the “girl cradling her head somewhere” (72). The remainder of the narrative, after the voice of the poetic persona has been established, encompasses the effects of this voice and how it is critical to the being of the poetic persona. Once the speaker gains this power of the voice, her body follows suit in responding to the song: “my hips, torso, & upright arms trembled at that sudden *a capella*” (72). What is seen in this response is the speaker’s physical compulsion, or desire, to enact the music she is now performing – to dance. There is a display here of an intrinsic link between song and dance – voice and emotion, and the dance comes to represent a sense of freedom. Prior to this compulsion coming to light the poem poses the questions “*What have I to dread? What have I to fear?*” (72). The immediacy of the dance following these queries exhibits the thought or *rationale*’s ability to inhibit dance, but more so than this, if the dance is to be interpreted as freedom, the question may communicate how *fear* restrains *freedom*. When put into the context of the unscrewed head, the ensuing dance sheds some light on the nature of the head in this narrative. The head represents reasoning as well as self-restraint, and the unscrewing is in itself a pun – her head was screwed, and the only way to amend the situation was to unscrew it. This self-restraint should not be understood as positive, as it restricts the speaker’s ability to sing, dance, and *speak*. In the removal of the head – the dropping of rationale – what is left is the speaker’s physical and emotional compulsion. A removal of that which would inhibit song and dance – fear – is what ultimately frees the poetic persona to express herself. The poem thus consciously moves its own focus from comprehension to emotion. Before she had unscrewed her head, the speaker did not have the ability to sing or dance, which had been inhibited by her own head. Having undone reason and rationale the poetic persona is free to surrender to emotion, song, and dance; through

which she unifies with another being – the girl with the red scarf – and performs a polyphony, becoming an enactment of jazz.

Having released its previous inhibitions, the speaker addresses the reader: “I want to thank you for hearing this small trickle in a sea” (72). This voice addresses both any potential listener, likely the unnamed voice, as well as the reader of the poem, thus speaking in two voices: one voice within the poem, one voice without. Through this interaction the reader is made aware of the polyphonic nature of not only the whole of the collection – represented as a “small trickle in a sea” of poetry – but also this poem. In directly addressing the reader, further context is provided to the poem, and particularly the previous questions – “*What have I to dread? What have I to fear?*” (72) – are put in a new light. With the knowledge that the poetic persona speaks not only within the confinements of the page, but also outside itself, to the reader, the dread and fear may be interpreted as the poet’s own fears in publishing *Hemming the Water*. Working with this interpretation, the questions posed in the poem become Harvey’s own reflection upon her poetry and its publication. The speaker becomes the voice of both the narrative as well as of the poet herself. The dread and fear become the poet’s own insecurity over speaking – over letting her own voice be heard.

With the reader alerted to the poem as one that speaks both internally as well as externally, a familiar character is reintroduced: a girl – likely the girl with the red scarf. While the connection is not made explicit, the presentation of poetic prose as well as a theme focused around speech enables the reader to make connections between “Notes” and “Girl.” The “girl cradling her head somewhere” (72) is likely the very same one which the first poem spoke of, and her incorporation into this poem builds into the aspect of the voice. She is “cradling her head somewhere. She is lost & someone has left her at the shore without a song, without a whistle” (72). The metaphors of song and whistle signify this girl’s lacking voice, similarly to how the poetic persona had no voice until the removal of her head. Rather than

prompting the girl to also remove her head, the poem's "you" places "her in my throat" (72). This placement of the girl in the speaker's throat seemingly absorbs her person – "the girl is inside me" (72). This absorption is symbiotic as the girl "can move now as my body moves, my neck, my head nodding" (72). This metaphor suggests polyphony, a concept made explicit by the title of the poem. No sense of competition or dominating position is communicated by the movement and nodding that occurs with the unification of the characters. Instead what is seen is an instance of "two or more melodies of equal interest [...] played at the same time" (DeVeaux 27). The placement of the girl in this final poem is a judicious one. In pointing the reader to "Girl," "Notes" suggests that they revisit the collection to seek out other occurrences of polyphony. The implicit intent is to make the reader acknowledge not only the voice they witnessed upon a first reading, but other voices present within the collection. In essence, "Notes" acts as a signpost of the aesthetic of *Hemming the Water*, yet the manner in which it responds to the presence of "Girl" may indeed be an occurrence of polyrhythm – "Notes" relies on the presence of "Girl," and it responds to and revisits the statements previously made by it.

The Riot Inside Me

As shown by the framing devices, *Hemming the Water* contains an essence of jazz and polyphony. This polyphony, by nature, provides multiple voices – multiple readings – of any given poem. In the case of "The Riot Inside Me," the polyphonic nature of the poem is enabled by its fragmented structure, which creates a narrative mirrored in presentation. As such "The Riot Inside Me" is a poem with *two* stories; one with a thematic focus of the Civil Rights Movement, as well as another which relies on the presence of the first narrative to draw attention to contemporary social issues. The poem shapes the narrative by means of its form. Throughout there are short bursts of words, while spacings of different sizes, as well as line breaks, are used to fill in the gaps between the words themselves. The lines along with

the spacings between words vary in length, which creates a reading inflected by pauses and breaks. What this creates is “an unexpected combination of interruption and continuity” (Barnhart 171) – “this is syncopation” (Barnhart 171). The syncopation of “The Riot Inside Me” provides the reader with such tremendous pauses that the effect becomes time to reflect, to fill in the gaps, and consider the purpose of each individual pause. The narrative is fragmented, and the spacings suspend it, leaving the reader with the task of filling in the gaps. Using the words on the page a narrative may be pieced together, albeit a limited one. The key to “The Riot Inside Me” lies in the spacings and line breaks – in the unspoken.

What is made explicit is the naming of one “King” (Riot 1) – Martin Luther King Jr. – which implies a connection to the Civil Rights Movement, and the subsequent release of a spirit due to a bullet. The body “grazes the earth” (Riot 4), collapsing to the ground.

Following this the poem leads with further metaphors, with the lines “every black hand

reached someone said an / incurable urge to fly” (Riot 5-6), after which the presence of “a weapon” (Riot 7) “in the neighborhood” (Riot 7) is affirmed. Returning to the aspect of the spiritual seen in the “a black / boy’s spirit” (Riot 1-2) the poem asserts the existence of “something / sacred” (Riot 9-10) before confronting the consequences of the death which the poem opens with: “some of us took our future / sparks / the streets live again even in / flame” (Riot 12-15). What is directly spoken of by the narrative of the poem is a series of events in which the death of a young black boy leads to people taking to the streets “in flame” This flame likely represents the torches held by protesters marching, or alternately the flames of riots. The presence of these protesters further indicates some level of connection between the poem and the Civil Rights Movement or the budding Black Lives Matter movement (henceforth BLM).

This is where polyphony comes into play. The syncopation leads the reader to make the connection on their own, and which connection is made, whether it be the Civil Rights or

BLM lies within the reader themselves, with both interpretations being canon. Already at this level of presenting the narrative it is necessary to try to piece together what is omitted – the unsaid. The essence of the poem is completely fragmented, with long spacings and abrupt line breaks interrupting any and all fluid reading or speech, with which it creates syncopation. Leaning on this syncopation, the poem shapes a duality within its own narrative – a dual narrative. Thus, the poem presents a polyphony. The dual narratives work in such a manner that the first narrative becomes a statement, with the second being a reformulation of what has been said; a repeat of “a pattern they have executed in the past” (Barnhart 163). The first of the two voices tells of the Civil Rights Movement. The second voice however, which tells of BLM, is reliant upon the existence of the first voice, referencing the historical person King, and pointing to historical events surrounding the Civil Rights Movement. As such the second voice becomes a revisiting of the first narrative, in a sense acting as a comment – a response to a call. These two voices, set in distinctive timeframes, create two unique *rhythms*. “The Riot Inside Me” plays with time in both narrative and structure to the point where it is no longer apt to say that it is merely polyphonic – it becomes polyrhythmic.

When applied to literature, polyrhythm becomes a revisiting of narratives, similar to how “the past is operative in jazz music” (Barnhart 163). A different way of discussing this polyrhythm may be to consider the first narrative, set during the Civil Rights Movement, to be a call, with the second, holding the context of BLM, acting as the response. Beginning with the name “King” the poem makes a concrete reference to the Civil Rights Movement, signposting its theme. This concrete reference is the basis for considering the timeframe of the Civil Rights Movement to be the call. The narrative proceeds to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., which results in a string of metaphors – “incurable urge to fly” (Riot 6), “maybe / clutched something / sacred” (Riot 8-10), “sparks / the streets live again even in / flame” (Riot 13-15). These metaphors describe the African American

plight for equality with “incurable urge to fly,” and the subsequent response to King’s death – the spark – which resulted in the flame in the streets. The second voice – the response – tells a parallel tale, moved forward fifty years into the contemporary BLM, describing not the physical Martin Luther King Jr., but his will, or spirit. With the context of both of its narratives, the poem effectively draws a parallel between BLM and the Civil Rights Movement. For the purpose of this discussion, the two movements will be collectively referenced as “social justice.” Through syncopation of its narrative, combined with call and response, “The Riot Inside Me” creates not only polyphony, but polyrhythm, culminating in jazz. This jazz works to tie together two social – BLM and the Civil Rights Movement – for the political purpose of highlighting issues in today’s United States, displaying how the fight for equality has not yet come to an end. Thus the poem’s aesthetic of jazz becomes political in purpose.

The connection to civil rights is made by the poem’s opening lines; “King’s body swallowed then released a black / boy’s spirit / a bullet a son” (Riot 1-3), with which the poem immediately references its theme of social justice. In this opening the dual narrative of the poem also becomes apparent, by merit of the manner in which the poem parallels “King’s body” with “boy’s spirit.” This opening enables two different readings and interpretations of the poem. The first reading allows the body’s swallowing of the spirit to be interpreted as Martin Luther King’s birth, with the release being his death by gunshot. The phrasing of what has been released – “a black / boy’s spirit” (Riot 1-2) – combined with the following line’s “a son” work to humanize Martin Luther King. King’s death was extensively covered by media following his assassination, and protests ensued as the news broke (Holder). One such demonstration is in all likelihood what is depicted by “The Riot Inside Me,” and the focus on King’s spirit being depicted as a boy humanizes his heritage. This reading of the poem attempts to alter the image of King as a glorified martyr of the Civil

Rights Movement, and instead focusing on his character as a human, fighting for his rights and dying doing so. The alternative reading of the poem suggests the “boy” – “a son” (Riot 3). In this reading, the narrative does not focus on the person of King and his death, but on his memory. The memory of King and his legacy have lived on within the “boy,” the spirit of King being “swallowed” by the boy by means of his culture. With the boy’s death, shown by his collapse as he “grazes the earth” (Riot 4), the legacy of King is “released” (Riot 1).

Working with the alternative reading, the line following the introduction of “a black / boy’s spirit” (Riot 1-2) reaffirms his existence as “a son.” Within this line there are two core subject matters which make up the whole of the line: “a bullet” (Riot 3) and “a son” (Riot 3). The two subjects are separated, spaced apart from one another. The two subjects are kept separate by the form of the poem. This spacing signifies distancing between the topics, contrasting the subjects from one another. In doing this the poem utilizes its style to communicate something – to assert that “bullets” and “sons” *should* be kept apart. The empty spaces of “The Riot Inside Me” are by no means vacuums, void of meaning or matter. Instead, this becomes an instance of how silence can communicate. The syncopated form becomes part of the overall picture of the poem. With the spirit “released” (Riot 1). the body, now vacant of spirit “grazes the earth” (Riot 4) which produces a response from the corresponding movements. In the understanding of this movement as the Civil Rights Movement, what is seen by the following lines “every black hand reached
 someone said an / incurable urge to fly” (Riot 5-6) is the emotional reaction to King’s death, swelling throughout the African American Community – “every black hand” (Riot 5) responding to an established, singular historical event. In the more contemporary timeframe however, the death and the ensuing response, is far more ambiguous. What is perceived in this context is a black boy, killed by firearm. His death is put parallel with that of King, and this death – the death of an unnamed son – prompts an enormous response: “the

streets live again even in / flame” (Riot 14-15). The community response is equal – parallel – with that of the Civil Rights Movement. The movements being presented as parallels establish to the contemporary reader the poem’s core theme: the legitimacy of BLM.

The empty space reflects the same meaning when put in the context of the Civil Rights Movement albeit its message is somewhat clearer in the context of BLM. When associated with King and the Civil Rights Movement, the phrase “a son” is given another layer. While retaining the effect as the opposite of “a bullet,” the line also works to deepen the poetic effort to humanize Martin Luther King Jr. by means of defining him as a son. The narrative with the temporal placement of the Civil Rights Movement, and the contemporary one aligned with BLM, are equal in value to the poem. Neither narrative is weighted or favored. What is shaped is a poem in which “two or more simultaneous melody lines compete for our attention” (DeVeaux 28). “The Riot Inside Me” speaks of two equal parallel stories with similar outcomes, thus speaking polyphonically. King and the boy are interchangeable characters. The distinction between these characters – these sons – come by means of time. “The past is present as repetition” (Barnhart 163).

The existence of the unnamed son is shifted from the singular to the plural with the lines “sacred / blades of grass” (Riot 10-11), an allusion to line 105 of Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself;” “the grass itself is a child” (Whitman 105). The sacred blades of grass come to mean the sanctity of not only life but the importance of protecting children – sons. In the final lines of the poem this dream is manifested through “flame,” with the lives lost – both King, as well as the countless unnamed sons – acting as the “sparks.” These sparks, this flame, enables the streets to “live again” (Riot 14). This is in all likelihood a metaphor for social justice. There is a sense of bitterness surrounding this flame. Bearing in mind the previous metaphor for children – grass – the bitterness of the flame becomes further

emphasized by the preceding words “even in.” Fire burns grass. The poem acknowledges the irony of how the death of a person brings about the life of the streets, or rather, the bitterness of how only death brings change. Within both timeframes it is death that sparks social justice, but it is an equal flame which is brought. The polyphonic voice contends that the black boy – the unnamed son – is equal in value to Martin Luther King. Thus, the poem asserts the value of all black lives, stating that *black lives matter*.

By means of polyrhythm, enabled via syncopation and polyphony – jazz traits – the poem’s aesthetics communicate a political alignment with BLM. This polyrhythm is of a different breed than what was seen in the connection between “Girl With Red Scarf” and “Notes on Polyphony.” Whereas the two may be argued to be polyrhythmic by means of a direct call and response that acts as a framing device for *Hemming the Water*, “The Riot Inside Me” is a self-contained response to itself. What is ultimately displayed by “The Riot Inside Me” is a willingness, or perhaps even a desire on behalf of the poet, to stray from the conventional and make her voice heard. This desire to stray – to innovate – may be what decisively makes “The Riot Inside Me” a jazz poem. “Jazz cannot be only material or content, for it is itself a radical innovation in form” (Barnhart 15). The aesthetic of the poem is such that it leans on the voids left by its own syncopation to shape its narrative and theme, as well as its political ideology.

In spite of how the style of “The Riot Inside Me” shapes its narrative – its duality – it should be stated that while the poem by merit of its structure enables its aesthetic, the execution is not consistent. The poem uses line breaks to create connections between lines, as seen in the first and second lines, “King’s body swallowed” (Riot 1) and “boy’s spirit” (Riot 2). This line break equates King with the boy, and body with spirit. This method of line breaks drawing parallels is also seen in the three final lines: “sparks” (Riot 13), “the streets” (Riot 14), and “flame” (Riot 15). Similarly, the poem uses spacings of different length to

contrast specific objects such as “a bullet” (Riot 3) and “a son” (Riot 3), as well as “a weapon” (Riot 7) and “neighborhood” (Riot 7). However, this method of contrast and parallels does not occur consistently – A contrast is not made between “every black hand” (Riot 5) and “reached” (Riot 5), nor “some of us took” (Riot 6) and “our future” (Riot 6). Instead of contrasting, these lines supply continuity, tying the lines together into one. This makes the structure inconsistent in how it communicates meaning. In these cases it seems that the poem is tripping over its own aesthetic. Utilizing these spacings and line breaks more spuriously, and making their usage consistent to draw contrasts and comparisons would in all likelihood leave the poem far easier to comprehend and work with. Instead, what is seen is a poem so caught up in its own jazz-bound structure that part of its voice is lost, instead becoming white noise. “The Riot Inside Me” ultimately acts as an example of the difficulty in translating music into written form.

Communion with Mary Lou Williams

A form similar to what is seen in “The Riot Inside Me” is produced by the opening of “Communion with Mary Lou Williams,” the final poem of this discussion. The poem is divided into nine sections of different format and length, with separation marked by means of asterisks. The sections are all marked by narratives which are seemingly independent from one another, albeit the first seven sections are specifically related to either music, famed jazz musician Mary Lou Williams, or both. The marking of separation by means of asterisks is interesting, as it conveys an image reminiscent of something being stitched in place, and with the sections independent of one another in terms of narrative and style, it appears that “Communion with Mary Lou Williams” is a poem with independent sections *hemmed* together, signaling the title of the collection. The poem goes to great lengths to attribute musical affinity with the character of Williams, with her status being raised to the level of divinity by the poem. The title of the poem also works to establish this divinity, as a

communion within the Christian tradition is a re-enactment of the final supper with Jesus (Hazen 34). This imagery alludes to the metaphors *Hemming the Water* introduced in “Girl,” and the language of the poem is religiously colored to solidify the association to the divine. Prayer and “*Wooden crosses & rosary beads*” (Communion 57) shape an image of Williams as a person worthy of exaltation. The central theme of the poem is exactly Mary Lou Williams, and the majority of the sections give of impressions similar to that of a eulogy.

Together with the thematic focus on Williams comes a structural acknowledgement of her heritage as a jazz musician. The majority of the sections of the poem are stylistically unique, such as the first section. This may have been done in an effort to mimic how Williams herself played several different types of jazz and was not specifically connected to any styles.

As a pianist, Miss Williams was not locked into an identifiable style. ‘No one can put a style on me,’ [...] ‘I’ve learned from many people. I change all the time. I experiment to keep up with what is going on, to hear what everybody else is doing. I even keep a little ahead of them, like a mirror that shows what will happen next.’

(Wilson)

This aspect of experimentation while not being locked to any one style can be seen throughout the poem in how it consistently jumps between styles of presentation between sections. To exemplify, the first section uses spacings in such a way that it creates a syncopated story, which stretches and inflects its own words, similarly to what was examined in “The Riot Inside Me.” The first section is the only part of the poem to do just this, making its presentation unique relative to the others. None of the sections are explicitly connected to one another, save through the explication of Mary Lou Williams. Indeed, the title of the poem – “Communion with Mary Lou Williams” – is the only assertive connection provided by the poem to link each individual section. All of these sections may be understood as part

lovely coat” (Communion 7). This metaphor alludes to poet William Butler Yeats’ poem “A Coat” (1912), wherein creativity and song become a metaphorical coat “covered in embroideries” (Yeats 2), made “out of old mythologies” (Yeats 3).

Within the narrative of Yeats’ poetry, the coat crafted by his song and poetry is eventually discarded, finally stating that “there’s more enterprise / in walking naked” (Yeats 9-10). Within “Communion with Mary Lou Williams” however, this coat is not only not discarded, it may be interpreted as being stitched onto the physical body of the speaker as well as tailoring robes. The phrase “onto my sleeves” (Communion 6) may contain a duality to it, in the sense that a sleeve may be understood both as part of a shirt, as well as a tattoo covering one’s arm. The poetic persona may thus be understood as stitching the music of Williams onto her own body, which adds an aspect of permanence to the image. Compared with the narrative of “A Coat,” the enterprise of walking naked within “Communion with Mary Lou Williams” would still entail being wholly colored by the music of Williams. Thus, the speaker states that the music of Mary Lou Williams is an aspect of her person, hemmed into both body and mind. The image of stitching appears to be something which is central to the collection as a whole, and the image is further carried through the poem by means of the asterisks that separate the sections, visually mimicking a suture. This stitching of musical notes onto the person of the poetic persona carries a conceptual parallel with the title of the collection: *Hemming the Water*. In both cases something which can not physically be stitched together is conceptually tied together to form something new.

The first section ends with an ampersand leading into the second section, thus explicitly connecting the two otherwise separate sections. Consisting of two lines, the second section states “*I’ve learned to pray / through my fingertips*” (Communion 9-10). This line directly references a statement given by Williams to Time Magazine in 1964, where she said “I am praying through my fingertips when I play” (Williams, qtd. Rasmussen). Not only does

the poetic persona through this directly display a repetition of something done by Williams, the metaphor also synergizes with the statement made in “Girl” that “Sound was God, as she understood it” (3), which, as was discussed, established the metaphor of musical divinity throughout *Hemming the Water*. Given the context of “Girl,” prayer through one’s fingertips becomes a metaphor symbolizing playing music, but more so than this, it is in actuality the communion referenced by the title. Rather than consumption of the corporeal form, the communion spoken of by the poem becomes the act of playing music with the same level of spiritual intent as what was performed by Williams. This metaphor adds a layer of religious exercise to the performance of music, within both “Communion with Mary Lou Williams” as well as all of *Hemming the Water*. The third section lists and addresses several titles, all of which belong to Williams. One of these titles stands out when discussing the second section: “Dear Holy Spirit” (Communion 20). In this address, Williams herself becomes named as the Holy Spirit. With this brought into the context of the second section, prayer through one’s fingertips, that is to say playing music, thus becomes communication with this Holy Spirit – A communion with Mary Lou Williams.

The third section of the poem addresses Williams by her many names and titles, illustrating what she represents to the poetic persona, as well as raising her level of reverence. Several of these prove elusive on their own and appear to reference very specific events. It would not be beneficial to a project of this scope to talk extensively about every appellation given in this section. Instead, the focus will be on the titles that appear immediately relevant to the exaltation of Williams’ person in the context of the poem or the poetic persona. Examining Williams’ obituary, provided by the New York Times, lends context to some of the addresses listed by the poem. One observation one may make based on Williams’ obituary is that it lists who she is survived by, yet no children are mentioned. In spite of this, the speaker addresses Williams by “Dear Mother” (Communion 11). This may be a statement

that the relationship between the poetic persona and Williams was intimate enough that Williams represents a mother figure for the speaker. More in line with the analysis thus far is an interpretation that the address is consecrating Williams. Her role as Holy Spirit implies a role as matron to all life, thus making her “Mother.” Perhaps most significant to the whole of *Hemming the Water*, is the address “Dear Muse” (Communion 15). Mary Lou Williams, in all the exaltation of the poem, proves to be the muse of the poetic persona, and by extension, of the poet herself.

The fourth section is written entirely in cursive, likely an indication of a second voice, suggesting the presence of polyphony. The second section of the poem was likewise italicized, pointing to a connection between the second and fourth sections. The narrative is however altogether separate from the preceding sections in both style and voice. The voice of this section shifts the focus from Williams to the art surrounding her. In this section the “flat,” “bent” and “low” notes of the first section become a single concept: “*These down-home notes, these / parts of me*” (Communion 24-25). These two lines give the flats, bents, and low notes a relation to home while sustaining the image created by the first section that the music of Williams is part of the speaker. While the idea of Williams’ music as integral to the speaker is reinforced, it is also on one level changed. Rather than an amendment added later on as the act of stitching would suggest, these are notes that are part of the speaker’s concept of *home*. What becomes apparent is that Williams’ music is not a supplement to the speaker – it is heritage.

The section moves on to invoke jazz language – “*hip cats*” (Communion 26) – to add legitimacy to its claim that this music is its heritage, all the while working to construct an image of adversity in creating jazz. The poem unifies the musical and the physical with the lines “*with the stretch-marked sounds / of bass & trill, the labor / of music in a childless body*” (Communion 29-31), with which the poem constructs a concept of birthing music. The

stretch-marked sounds allude both to syncopated notes as well as the stretch marks left on a body that has gone through labor, an image which the poem itself makes explicit with the lines “*the labor / of music in a childless body*” (Communion 30-31). This laboring, both in the sense of difficult work and the sense of birthing is described by the poem as a “sacrifice” (Communion 32), which ultimately creates “*America’s Holy Music*” (Communion 33) – jazz. This image of jazz as “America’s Holy Music” is immediately connected with “*all / the ancestors with their rattling / of bones*” (Communion 33-35), adding a flavor of ancestry and heritage to the discussion. This impression of ancestry is capitalized upon with the lines “*cursing, / their voices nudging callused feet / forward two blocks, two blocks more*” (Communion 35-37) which, while not explicit, is an allusion to chattel slavery. Once again the power of the voice is the central player in the events that play out. What prompts these “callused feet” forward is no external power forcing them, but rather “*their voices*” (Communion 36) – “*the ancestors*” (Communion 34). Furthermore what is conveyed is no forced march, but rather a gentle “*nudging*,” which not only acts out how the power of the voice manifests, but works to display the gentleness and *unity* of a community come together. It is the voice of the ancestors, with their “*rattling / of bones*” (Communion 34-35) that pushes a community of “*callused feet / forward*” (Communion 36-37), but it is a heavy ancestry as the ancestors themselves are “*cursing*” (Communion 35). The poem with these lines remind the reader of the unjust price paid by the ancestors of the African American community – the slaves – and how this heritage, while heavy, may act as motivation, pushing tired, callused feet forward.

The section concludes with the birthplace of the blues – by extension jazz, and the poem’s Holy Music

to get right. To get right

is to get with Memphis & Mississippi.

If you wanna boogie

with me, you gotta get right

with the Giver of Blues (Communion 39-43)

which carries on the allusion to slavery presented in the previous lines. The lines acknowledge the origin of the blues as an art that sprung out of the Mississippi; however, the revelation of Memphis may initially come across as unfounded or arbitrary. Memphis is located along the Mississippi, making its naming redundant, and unlike New Orleans and Jazz, has not played a major role in the development of blues as this is more so something that occurred “throughout the rural South, from the Carolinas to the Mississippi Delta into Texas” (DeVeaux 59). The “*Giver of Blues*” does not reference Memphis, Tennessee, but Memphis, Egypt – a capital of ancient Egypt, located south of the Nile River delta (Mertz). These lines enhance the heritage of slavery built up earlier in the section and acknowledge the heritage of the blues and its roots in Africa. While doing this the lines also work to allude to Hughes’ “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” In “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” a poem thematically focused on the assertion of heritage, the poetic persona states “I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it” (Rivers 7). In Hughes’ poem, the Nile is used to assert heritage, legitimacy, and give a sensation of glories long since past, yet still standing. In “Communion with Mary Lou Williams,” the image of the Nile is not explicitly present, but rather intimated through the naming of Memphis. Rather than speak of glories long past as the Nile does in Hughes’ poem, in Harvey’s poem it is used to assert a glory very much still present. The Mississippi and the Nile make up the “*Giver of Blues*” – music – something which the rest of the poem works to not only asserts the legitimacy of, but also its power and, in the poetic metaphor, the divinity of.

The explication of music and its connection to religion is the primary focus of the fifth section. Williams, in this segment referenced as “Reverend Williams / what Miles Davis

called you” (Communion 44-45) has her religious personality presented as well as shifted. ““I got a sign that everybody should pray every day,’ [...] ‘I had never felt a conscious desire to get close to God. But it seemed that night that it all came to a head. I couldn't take it any longer. So I just left – the piano – the money – all of it.’” (Williams, qtd. in Wilson) This section appears to work more towards a justification of Williams’ religious endeavors in music than the previous unification of the two seen in sections two and four.

What you wanted was
a low-down connection.
Boogie-woogie promise
of call & response. Music
joined with spirit like the ball
& socket of a swinging hip (Communion 47-52).

The poem further invites an association to slavery with the images presented by the latter part of the fourth section, with the reintroduction of the Mississippi River, here shown as “muddy water” (Communion 54).

You listened to the music slip
further from muddy water like
a country man suffering
in a bright new suit (Communion 53-56).

Here we see the same image used to represent the Mississippi River as what was seen in Hughes’ “The Negro Speaks of Rivers:” “I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln / went down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen its muddy / bosom turn all golden in the sunset” (Rivers 8-10). Both Hughes and Harvey use the Mississippi as a representation of heritage. Unlike Hughes, however, Harvey uses the image of the Mississippi River to solidify an association with specifically the blues. Bearing in mind the context of the Mississippi as

the “*Giver of Blues*” (Communion 43) as stated in the fourth section, the development seen in the fifth section, in which music becomes further removed from the river, is likely a representation of the development of both blues and jazz.

The sixth section is similar to the second in its briefness and invocation of religious imagery; “*Wooden crosses & rosary beads / Jazz, created through suffering*” (Communion 57-58). These images are similar to what has already been discussed in the second and fourth section, however the repeat works to reinforce the imagery of jazz as a divine art and its creation as a labor – sacrifice. A parallel is seen here to the fourth section, in which there is a bodily sacrifice “*to the service of / America’s Holy Music*” (Communion 32-33). As a standalone section, however, the sixth section is the first to introduce specifically the specifically Christian images of “*Wooden crosses & rosary beads*” (Communion 57).

Shifting away from the thematic focus on religion, which was prevalent in sections five and six, the seventh section returns to heritage. The sections prior to this have all held minor, localized narratives, which are either italicized or written in standard format. The seventh section is the only to combine the two, every line changing the format back and forth. Ordinarily one may expect this to symbolize a unification of voices, or a polyphony of sort, but it is difficult to argue for the presence of such a voice in this section, as there are no two clear voices running through the poem to unify. Thus, one can only conclude that the choice is purely stylistic, with minimal effect on the local narrative of the seventh section. Instead of attempting to present a theme focused around unity or polyphony, the opening line recalls the fourth section: “*A lover nudges the ghost*” (Communion 59). In the fourth section, the nudge was used together with images of heritage, and this section alludes to that very same heritage, here transformed into a “ghost.” Here the heritage spoken of in the previous sections becomes heavy – haunting. The weight is revealed as it is transformed into something inescapable.

I can’t escape what lurks

beneath skin, further back

than blood & bone, this sex

this music & another (Communion 62-65).

The ghost of heritage is something that is part of the core of the poetic persona, beyond flesh, “*further back*,” it becomes her very essence. It is not to be understood as an essence which unravels the persona, but rather something that could not be avoided even if the speaker desired it. In this essence an aspect of unification does indeed occur, albeit as stated it is not the thematic focus of the section. The lines “blood & bone, this sex / *this music*” (Communion 64-65) rely on images shaped throughout *Hemming the Water* to once more show music as heritage, this time coded into both body and soul. The image of blood and bone refers to the first section, in which musical notes were made corporeal in their stitching, while sex creating music was showcased already in “Girl With Red Scarf.”

The final two sections return to the previously established formula of alternating between standard format and italicization. Section eight is among the more obtuse sections of the poem, with no explicit reference to Williams or Jazz. Instead of an explicit, up-front image, jazz in this section appears to be represented through the “girl defying her mother” (Communion 77). This interpretation is supported by two factors; the reference to a “devil’s deal” (Communion 76) combined with the fifth section’s statement that “you listened to the music slip / further from muddy water” (Communion 54-55). In the fifth statement, the “you” is explicitly made out to be the person of Mary Lou Williams, as shown by the statement “Reverend Williams – / what Miles Davis called you / behind your back” (Communion 44-46). The poem thus far has attempted to solidify an image of Williams as a divine mother figure, thus it is not unreasonable to make the argument that the mother figure represented by the eight section is to be understood as Williams. When discussing her approach to music and jazz, Williams reportedly stated that:

‘What I’m trying to do is bring back good jazz to you with the healing in it and spiritual feeling’ and ‘The blues was really important–this is your healing and love in the music.’ In her teaching and talking about jazz, she never tired of pointing toward ‘this feeling.’ She’d say, ‘It’s all spiritual music and healing to the soul.’ Part of this was in defiance of those who would call jazz ‘the devil’s music,’ and part was in defiance of those who would play music filled with technique but very little feeling.

(O’Brien)

Williams worked to defy those who would call jazz “devil music,” yet the poem states the presence of a “devil’s deal” (Communion 76), implying the presence of “devil music.” In fact, *Hemming the Water* itself contains a poem titled “Devil Music,” which references jazz as such. The little girl presented in the eight section becomes an abstract image for the collection itself, as it defies the conventions set up by Williams – the mother of jazz – so as to continue the tradition of experimentation and improvisation. Breaking away from “Reverend Williams” becomes the goal of the final section of the poem, in which jazz itself becomes the focal point. This section opens with a statement – “*Is to love / to be born in the name of*” (Communion 81-82) – which becomes repeated and developed as the poem goes on: “*to die in the name of,*” “*to be blessed in the name / of,*” “*to question love in the name of,*” “*to question the name in the name of,*” “*to name names in the name of,*” “*the name of naming love*” (Communion 82-84). For convenience sake, the citation has been broken apart such that each quotation signifies an individual reformulation. The original statement is repeated and shifted until ultimately it becomes a revision, shaping out the statement “*Is to love [...] the name of naming love.*” The final section acts as a microcosm of jazz, opening with a statement that is repeated and continued upon until it ultimately reaches a revision of the original statement.

Conclusion

The jazz poems examined in this project all share two aspects of their politics: a theme of social justice, and a voice declaring the legitimacy of aesthetics derived from African American heritage. In the discussion of “The Weary Blues” was uncovered a desire to showcase the blues as an aesthetic of cultural significance capable of emotional impact – as something that could speak. In this “The Weary Blues” speaks to declare the legitimacy of its aesthetics, however the layer of social justice visible in jazz poetry is absent. Further, with the poem “Early Evening Quarrel,” is seen the development of the blues as something which would speak both to and for the ‘low-down folks,’ which enables a discussion of social justice surrounding the poem, albeit the legitimacy of the blues is not a subject of the poem. The motif of cultural significance is capitalized upon with Hughes’ 1951 poem “Dream Boogie,” which focuses wholly on enlightening both the reader and a secondary poetic character of the capability of jazz to speak in multiple voices. Through this the poet incorporates both legitimacy as well as social justice. Through the examination of Harvey’s *Hemming the Water*, the staying power of jazz poetry is seen. Thus, the mere existence of *Hemming the Water* and the manner in which it uses jazz to speak confirms the legitimacy as well as the cultural significance of the aesthetic. Within *Hemming the Water*, jazz is not something for which legitimacy must be fought. Instead, the use of jazz is a given. It is a genuine, significant part of the poetic persona’s heritage. The framing devices of the collection establish metaphors and motifs that solidify the heritage presented in *Hemming the Water*, working to lay the foundation for a reverence of practitioners of jazz.

As shown in Hughes’ jazz poetry, the translation of a musical art into static paper proves challenging. Hughes developed methods of emulation when it came to both blues and jazz, such as a simulation of the blues moan and line breaks which would imitate stop-time. Particularly “Dream Boogie” presents a loose form specifically intended to emulate the

aesthetic of jazz through stop-time as well as polyphony. “Dream Boogie” incorporates syncopation not only into individual lines, but the whole of the narrative, shaping an unclear, ambiguous narrative which is left open to interpretation. In these interpretations, the poet found the ability to create multiple voices, thus emulating polyphony without the explicit presence of a second voice. What is ultimately conveyed by the polyphony of “Dream Boogie” is the ability of jazz to be not only polyphonic but also multi-layered in commentary, mimicked by the poem itself by an underlying theme of social justice. This style of break-time and syncopation shaping the narrative is very heavily implemented by Harvey’s poems “The Riot Inside Me” and “Communion with Mary Lou Williams.” What is seen in these poems is a revised variant of the format presented by Hughes, and specifically in “The Riot Inside Me” this form is used in shaping, more so than polyphony, a polyrhythm.

The collection’s structure works hand in and with its themes to ultimately create jazz. What is seen in *Hemming the Water* is a jazz surprisingly far removed from what is visible in Hughes’ poetry. *Hemming the Water* is fundamentally reliant on its framing devices – “Notes on Polyphony” and “Girl With Red Scarf.” These frames provide the key with which the reader may decode the politics of the collection. Ultimately, the role of the framing devices is to disclose the aesthetic inspiration of the collection. This clarification of the aesthetic source is similar to what was seen in the early publications of Hughes – specifically “The Weary Blues” – in which the nature of the aesthetic was made explicit so as to ensure that it was not lost on the reader. Yet Hughes does not supply poetic prose with *Montage of a Dream Deferred* intended to make explicit the idea of the “dream deferred” or its accompanying motifs. In this is seen, perhaps, a difference of confidence in performativity. Beyond this, the poets employ language differently. Unlike Hughes’ works the focus of *Hemming the Water* lies not in the acousticity of the poem; instead, throughout there is a focus on the salient – meaning – and its potential duality. *Hemming the Water* does not shape its jazz by means of

vocabulary signaling. Rather than this, the jazz is found and created entirely within the structure and themes. Although vocabulary signaling does occur in *Hemming the Water* with the inclusion of “*hip cats*” (Communion 26), it is used to lend legitimacy to its own voice more so than as an act signaling the aesthetic. With jazz established as a central aesthetic, the theme of social justice comes naturally. Just as Hughes used jazz to reflect upon society with “Saturday Night” and “Dream Boogie,” so too does Harvey, most notably with the poem “The Riot Inside Me.” Jazz is an aesthetic of social justice.

In the introduction, the political jazz heritage was defined as a “set of traits of African origin acting as a form of coping mechanism, formulated in the vernacular, providing praise and critique to both internal and external societies, that is to say, African American society, and white society.” Having examined the poetry of Hughes and Harvey, a conclusion must be made that there is a divide in how applicable this preliminary definition is. Reflecting upon Hughes’ poetry, which incorporates the blues moan and stanzaic format as well as jazz-bound language and structure, this definition does indeed seem apt. To Hughes, his jazz heritage was exactly this; a culmination of a vast arsenal of African techniques melded into a new form – jazz. This definition is not, however, applicable in the context of Harvey’s poetry. Following the discussion and examination of her poetry, the conclusion posited by this project is that Harvey, without question produces jazz poetry. Yet *Hemming the Water* does not present blues moans or stanzaic forms mimicking the blues – it does not masquerade as a coping mechanism – nor does it resort to vernacular language, something that would serve as “a sign of black difference, blackness of the tongue” (Gates 92). Harvey is pushing the rhythmical and the musical away, attempting to develop new methods of staging and presenting jazz poetry. Thus, a revised definition is necessary. The political jazz heritage visible in Harvey’s poetry is one that provides critique to internal as well as external factors, all the while asserting the history, and heritage, of jazz.

This vernacular – the sign of difference – is used by Hughes to signify heritage, a heritage in which he sees pride and joy and the essence of the ‘low-down folks’ whose songs “had the pulse beat of the people who keep on going” (Hughes 1993, 209). Vernacular to Hughes was the primary method with which to proclaim heritage – to loudly and clearly, unequivocally, proclaim that jazz belongs to the African American community. Harvey, instead, conveys heritage through jazz poetry itself. Rather than a culmination of individual traits and aesthetics found in the African American heritage, the jazz with which *Hemming the Water* speaks is *itself* part of the African American heritage. Extrapolating on this one may discover how jazz poetry has shifted over the past fifty years from being an aesthetic speaking *for* the police; seen in the manner in which Hughes attempted cross-police communication with his poems; to being an aesthetic *of* the police. The jazz poetry of *Hemming the Water* is a revision reliant upon the countless of jazz statements that came before, which ultimately came to be embalmed into the essence of the police from whence *Hemming the Water* draws its aesthetics.

With this revision comes a significant difference: the aspect of pain swallowed in a smile. This, to Hughes, was the essence of jazz (Hughes 1994, 58). On the superficial level, this concept is all but gone in Harvey’s work. It is present, yet heavily revised. Pain is a prominent theme in *Hemming the Water*, particularly tangible in poems such as “The Riot Inside Me” which deals with the loss of black lives. Yet there is no smile. The pain remains swallowed, but it is instead focused into a source of power and resistance. *Hemming the Water* takes the fundamental tenets of jazz, and uses them, not as coping mechanisms, but a method of empowerment. “The Riot Inside Me” presents the reader with pain turned into power, as the death of both a young boy and Martin Luther King Jr. become fuel for the fire that was the Civil Rights Movement, and is the Black Lives Matter movement. Likewise, “Communion with Mary Lou Williams” presents the importance and influence of jazz, yet

nowhere is the pain of the heritage the poem presents swallowed and turned into a smile. Instead, those who channel jazz become divine figures of exaltation, such as Mary Lou Williams.

By the inspection of the jazz shaped by the poetry of Hughes and Harvey, the politics of their poetry has come to light. This thesis has aimed to argue that in the selected poets' politics of aesthetics is found "the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile" (Hughes 1994, 58). This has not been the case. Discovered in the poetry of Hughes and Harvey is no "eternal tom-tom," but an ever-changing, dynamic aesthetic forever reliant on statement – repetition – revision, until what is revised is no longer compatible with Hughes' original vision. If the fundamental concept behind jazz is the statement that it is "pain swallowed in a smile" (Hughes 1994, 58) then what *Hemming the Water* presents is no jazz. And yet, this thesis would claim that it is jazz. It is the vocal power of jazz employed to empower. It is a reformulation of jazz that says the time of swallowing pain has long since past, that there has been enough pain. *Hemming the Water* is proud of the pain found in its heritage. This pain of the past is used to confront the pain of the future. *Hemming the Water* is a revision of jazz which seeks to look to the past with pride; to the future with dignity; and to fuse these two into a voice which empowers as-of-yet dream deferred in the contemporary – *Hemming the Water* is the "tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world" (Hughes 1994, 58).

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